

NCLB

continued from page 1

cation students, it has also led to a number of schools being labeled as "failing."

Critics also say the law has had the unintended effect of encouraging instructors to teach to the test and has led schools to narrow their curricula.

Washington state schools chief Randy Dorn said the waiver will lift the requirement that all students pass both the state reading and math tests by 2014. It will also give Washington school districts more flexibility about how they spend some federal dollars.

In return, Washington will need to show improvement in test scores for subgroups of students who have historically had lower scores than average, such as those who qualify for free- or reduced-price meals.

In late May, Wisconsin officials said they were modifying

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some details of their waiver application and expected approval soon.

The federal Education Department earlier wrote to officials in that state, saying Wisconsin had a number of commendable proposals, but they were too short on detail.

Other waiver applications are still pending in 10 states and the District of Columbia. Six waivers were approved last month in Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri, South Dakota, Utah and Virginia.

In order to get a waiver, each state had to promise to show in other ways that its students and schools are improving, and they were required to more closely link teacher evaluations to student test scores, among other requirements.

Washington's waiver application emphasized its embrace

Park Jam



Ronald and Frank Brown joined other members of the legendary Seattle funk band Wheelie's Groove for the Jackson Street Jam July 7 in Lavizzio Park. The event celebrated the rich musical history of Seattle's Central District.

of new national education standards, the state's new teacher and principal evaluations, and its efforts to take a broader look at student achievement beyond reading and math by also testing for writing and science.

The waiver agreement requires that by 2018, Washington cut in half achievement gaps between various ethnic and economic groups, when compared with 100 percent passage rates. For example, if one group had 74 percent passing reading in 2011, that group would need to have 87 percent passing by 2018.

The agreement adds another requirement for Title I schools, which are high-poverty public schools that get extra money from the federal government to help students who are behind academically or at risk of falling behind.

It requires the state education office to annually identify priority schools, which are the 5 percent lowest-achieving of Title I schools; focus schools, which are the lowest 10 percent of Title I schools; and reward schools, the highest performing Title I schools or those making the most progress in a given year.

Charter

continued from page 1

"The fact that so many voters across the state stepped forward and signed our petitions in record time clearly shows that Washingtonians want another opportunity to vote on allowing public charter schools in our state," said Shannon Campion, executive director of the Washington chapter of Stand for Children, one of the groups supporting the initiative.

Dorn and Mary Lindquist, president of the Washington Education Association, expressed concern about the amount of money that they expect will be spent on the ballot campaign, after more than \$2 million was raised to collect signatures.

"We're going to be outspent 10- or-12-to-one," Lindquist predicted. She added, however, that the teacher's union has the strength of its members advocating for education in every community across the state.

Whether more dollars from the National Education Association, the WEA's parent organization, will come to Washington to help with this fight has not been determined, Lindquist said.

Robin Lake, director of the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education, and a national expert on charter school research, said a law is an important starting place for charter school quality, but there's no guarantee that every school will be excellent.

"It takes commitment and on-the-ground work after the law is implemented," she

said.

Finding a balance between regulations and freedom for creativity helped lead charters to success in other places. Lake cited success stories in Denver, New York City

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and New Orleans, and noted failures in states such as Arizona, which she says has weak oversight and accountability.

Lake said this proposal is big on accountability, starts out slow with a maximum of 40 charters over five years, would force the closure of unsuccessful schools, allows only nonprofit operators, prioritizes proposals that would serve economically and academically disadvantaged students, and limits who could authorize a new school.

That authority worried the superintendent of public instruction, Randy Dorn, who questioned the constitutionality of the proposal. He said it appears to set up an alternative state schools system to authorize and track the progress of charters.

"This bill circumvents the Constitution. There's no doubt in my mind," Dorn said.

Some research shows charter schools have been either OK, good or great for students in 41 other states and the District of Columbia. But a study of the impact of the charter school movement from Stanford University also found about half of charter schools were no better than traditional public schools, a quarter were worse and a quarter improved student achievement.

The results were different when schools were judged state-by-state, instead of across the country because individual state laws can be matched with their results, Lake said.

Other details of the charter schools initiative:

The state's largest teachers union says the privately run, publicly funded schools take money from traditional public schools and have not been shown to do a better job at improving student achievement

charter authorizer, but must meet the same requirements and have the same success to keep this designation. The other possible charter "authorizer" would be a statewide board.

— School districts could turn over low-achieving schools to a charter operator. These new schools would need to welcome every student from the old school who wants to attend. In such cases, the district would need to give the charter school a building with free rent. Other charters will get per-student funding from the state but will have to find their own building.

— If more students want to attend a charter school than the school has room for, the students would be chosen by lottery.

— Charters are not required to negotiate with the teacher's union or hire union teachers, but the teachers must be certified.

About 16 percent of charters across the country are unionized.

— Students of charter schools would still be required to take the statewide academic tests upon which their success will be judged.

— Although these new schools would be exempt from many state laws, they would have to follow all applicable local, state and federal health, safety, parents' rights, civil rights and

— Religious charters would not be allowed.

— School boards could apply to be a