

# Fighting every inch for charter schools

"We had to fight every inch of the way. From the outside it may have appeared as a love-in. But it was a five-month war."

That's the assessment of Sen. Bill Owens, R-Aurora, the Senate sponsor of the successfully passed charter school bill.

Through his scars, Owens was smiling. He likes the approved packet, which will allow parents, teachers and taxpayers to join forces, draw up a charter for a school to suit their needs and submit it to the local school district for approval. If the local district rejects it, the application can be appealed to the state Board of Education.

"That's key," said Owens of the state appeal. Supporters worried that some school districts might reject every application. The appeal will result in "better-faith negotiating," Owens predicted.

Also "key" is a provision that will allow waiver of state certification requirements for all teachers in charter schools. Owens had wanted the teacher certification requirements waived in all charter schools. But he settled for a provision that will permit a waiver to be negotiated. "Private schools don't require certification, and they are doing all right," he said. The purpose of the bill, which is supported by Gov. Roy Romer, is to bring innovation and change to public schools. State, local and contract requirements, Owens said, often prevent innovation.

To fund charter schools, students will bring with them ~~80%~~ of the per-pupil money from the local district. Twenty percent will stay with the local school district for administrative costs. "Eighty percent is a little tight," commented Owens. "But I'm convinced when you drop administrative overhead there are significant savings." He also pointed out the bill allows for the percent to be "negotiated up."

Will it make a difference in Jefferson County? Owens said yes. He said there are "several groups in Jefferson County ready to apply." Rumored to make immediate application from Jeffco are a Bear Valley group and people wanting a "fundamental (basics) school like Dennison Fundamental School," which is part of the Jeffco R-1 School District but has a lengthy waiting list.

Owens made a point of sending kudos Jefferson County's way. He said Jeffco lawmakers were vital in getting the bill passed. Owens said he went to Jeffco Sen. Al Meiklejohn, R-Arvada, before the session began to iron out their differences and to incorporate Meiklejohn's concerns in the Owens' bill. In the Senate Education Committee, chaired by Meiklejohn, it was the Meiklejohn version of amendments that made it out of committee.

In the House Education Committee, real problems cropped up, "despite the best efforts" of committee Chairwoman/Rep. Norma Anderson, R-Lakewood. "It was gutted," Owens said. To complicate matters, House sponsor Rep. Peggy Kerns, D-Aurora, was called out of state for the last, crucial three days of the session. "And Anderson and Vickie Agler (R-Littleton) got it through conference committee and passed on the floor of the House," Owens congratulated. "There was a lot of Jeffco input."

Owens is even pleased with the number of charters that can be approved the first year. During its gestation, the bill held a wide range of limits from 20 to limitless. But the end-product will allow 50 charter schools statewide, of which 13 must be for at-risk students.

"Nobody knows how popular charter schools will be. But the Legislature will be back in session in six months, and, if we need more, we can increase the number next session," sighed Owens.

It was a hard fight, a battle against well-armed lobbyist groups, including school districts, teachers, school administrators and school boards. But it passed. Now we have to wait and see if anyone will use it. We hope so.