

Final faceoff on schools

THE ISSUE:
Charter schools gain final approval

OUR VIEW:
Make way for innovation

The stubborn troops of the educational establishment had been hoarding a last round of powder, hoping to blast the charter-school bill to kingdom come during the final vote at the legislature Tuesday. But lawmakers held their ground and chose the public interest over special interests — and repudiated the most powerful, well-heeled political lobby in all of Colorado.

The bill they voted on Tuesday is a compromise between two versions passed previously in the House and Senate — and closer to the Senate's model, which was the more cautious of the two.

To cite one example: The Senate bill capped the total number of charter schools at 48, while the House set no limit at all. The compromise: a cap of 50 on the experimental schools.

Not that the bill is all it could be. Rarely willing to open a window all the way, lawmakers have predictably limited charter-school funding per student to 80% of a district's average per-pupil expenditures.

In short, the schools are expected to be more efficient than the facilities in the rest of the district. Hmmm. Haven't the same stalwarts of the educational status quo been telling us how grossly underfunded our classrooms are?

Now charter schools are to do more with less?

But never mind. They probably *will* do more with less. Liberation from bureaucra-

cy and the freedom to innovate have a way of making the impossible commonplace.

Meanwhile, the essential virtues of the charter-school concept remain: 1) Individual districts are not the tribunal of last resort for charter-school applicants; applicants can appeal to the state board of education if turned down by a district; 2) the charter school funding base is guaranteed, even if it is only 80% of the district average; 3) stifling rules can be waived — in fact, there is a presumption in favor of waiver.

In short, the bill should provide concerned parents and teachers, not to mention educational entrepreneurs, with sufficient leverage to create the sort of classrooms many say they want but cannot find in their local districts.

Another "fundamental" academy in Denver and in Jefferson County might be in the offing. Or perhaps a school based on Montessori or Summerhill principles, or an academy with a special emphasis on the arts or math or history; or a facility boasting a longer school day; or one that demands that the commitment by teachers to pupils extend beyond the classroom; or perhaps even one that . . .

The imagination stirs to the possibilities.

Coloradans now owe a tribute to several officials, including Rep. Peggy Kerns, D-Aurora, Sen. Bill Owens, R-Arapahoe County, and Gov. Roy Romer, who rallied several House Democrats to the cause in an 11th-hour plea last week over a blitz from education lobbyists. Now a majority of lawmakers, forever accused of kowtowing to money and clout, may be poised to prove that the little guys can still prevail.