

CHARTER SCHOOLS AT 10-YEAR MARK

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U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Bill Hansen expresses little sympathy for the claim charter schools drain school district finances. "It's spending money differently, so school districts have a management issue on their hands. But it's also an issue of freedom" in education, Hansen said Thursday when asked about a Denver study on district costs associated with charter schools.

Though he doesn't want to dictate local decisions, Hansen did say "I don't have much sympathy" for a "bureaucracy" with management problems created by charter schools. Rather, districts should find ways to address them.

"We're not about protecting the system, but about helping kids."

Hansen was visiting the Center City charter school in Salt Lake City as part of the third annual National Charter Schools Week and the 10th anniversary of the nation's first charter school, which still operates in a St. Paul, Minn., low-income neighborhood.

He and other federal education officials have visited schools in six other cities, from Boston to Los Angeles. Center City School was chosen because "it is a picture of the passion of citizens."

Charter schools are free, public schools with a specialty, such as arts or technology. Governed by boards of teachers, community members and parents, the schools attempt to meet needs of underserved populations.

Nearly 580,000 students are enrolled in 2,400 charter schools nationwide, the Center for Education Reform reports. Thirty-eight states and Washington, D.C., have charter schools laws, most recently approved in Iowa.

Utah's 12 charter schools (three will open in the fall) must follow state core curriculum and testing programs, but have flexibility in teaching.

Some charter school advocacy groups have called Utah's 1998 charter school law weak. The first eight pilot schools received less than \$65,000 to start, plus half the money neighborhood school districts spent per student.

Things are a little different now, but not everyone is happy.

The state pays the other half of the local-student funding for charter schools. But it's a statewide spending average instead of the actual amount spent, and the building's portion isn't included.

On the other hand, some small school districts say charter schools hurt them financially.

Carbon School District, for instance, is losing state per-student money due to enrollment declines and to the local charter school, Pinnacle Canyon Academy. It has vehemently opposed the academy's bid to double its enrollment to accommodate a waiting list; the state school board votes on the request Friday.

A Denver consulting firm studied charter schools' costs to local districts, and results were published in the Denver Post last month.

It found Jefferson County schools this school year lost \$1.2 million to declining enrollment, \$3.5 million when they couldn't pare expenses to keep up with enrollment changes for children leaving for charter schools, and more than \$3 million for staff time and resources devoted to charter schools.

But Hansen noted the bulk of other research shows charter schools work well. A 2001 U.S. Department of Education study, for instance, found public schools work to improve when a charter school moves into the neighborhood.

Utah State University's Center for the School of the Future is evaluating Utah's charter schools, and is expected to report in August or September.

Meanwhile, charter school officials hope Hansen's visit shines the spotlight on the reform efforts. Gov. Mike Leavitt said more schools will be coming soon.

"When demand outstrips supply, that tells us there will be more of them, and . . . they will forge improvements in all the schools around them."