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The Iowa Legislature recently passed a bill changing Iowa's charter school laws. Previous law in Iowa maintained a cap of 20 charter schools for the entire state. This was considered the most prohibitive charter school law for any state.

First and foremost, I support parents being able to make the choice of what school is best for their kids and therefore, I support charter schools. Charter schools are an acknowledgment our current system needs improvement. I believe it does. Not long ago, I recall Iowa's schools being ranked among the best in the nation. Now, for example, 28 states are equal to or beat Iowa in eighth-grade math.

According to the website, www.uscharterschools.org, "Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools." Charter schools are intended to make schools and administrators more accountable. Reform can be achieved easier, meaning more responsibility lies with the teachers and students. This is what all schools in Iowa should be about.

The federal government has become a recent proponent of charter schools by making \$4 billion available for states to apply for in a competitive grant process called "Race to the Top." Iowa's portion of this could be as high as \$175 million. This all sounds great, does it not? However, as is the case so many times, the devil is in the details.

First, the charter school bill contained a clause that brings collective bargaining into the mix. Student achievement decisions, retention and teacher terminations will have to be approved by the union in low performing schools. This goes against the very basis of a charter school. Further, this \$175 million is an unfunded mandate. When the money from the federal government runs out, how is the State of Iowa going to pay for these charter schools? If the State of Iowa really wants to reform schools, we should do so with existing funds and build it into our budget. Currently, this would obviously be very difficult, but adding another budget item to our balance sheet that we do not know how to fund in the future is reckless. I did not vote for this bill.

Both parties agree this bill was not written well. Due to time constraints (Iowa's grant was due on January 19th) the process was expedited and no amendments were added to the bill. However, a bipartisan committee (five Republicans and five Democrats) has recently been called to action to improve Iowa's charter school bill. I hope the next bill is truly bipartisan. Our kids deserve it.

