

By [Linda Borg](#)

Print Page

March 31, 2016 9:56PM

At State House, charter schools assail change in funding formula

PROVIDENCE — A new wrinkle emerged Thursday night in the ongoing debate over whether charter schools are siphoning education dollars away from traditional school districts.

Governor Raimondo's proposed education budget includes revisions to the school funding formula — changes that allow districts to keep \$355 per student to cover expenses, such as high-cost special education students, that are not borne by charter schools. In addition, six districts that have been hard hit by charter enrollments would receive \$2.6 million in state aid or \$300 per student.

Charter schools were expected to contest this revision at Thursday's House Finance Committee hearing on Raimondo's budget. Instead, they objected to a little-known change to the way charter school aid is calculated, a change made by the state Department of Education without the knowledge of the K-12 education council or the General Assembly.

Rather than object to the governor's proposed cuts, Tim Groves, executive director of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools, urged lawmakers to restore the original funding formula, arguing that RIDE manipulated it to tip the scales in favor of district schools, a move that he said has stripped a total of \$3.7 million from charter schools.

Groves said RIDE credits districts for the local money that follows students to charters without crediting charters for educating those students.

"This," he said, "is bad math and bad policy."

RIDE agrees that it tweaked the formula in 2014 but said the change was totally within the agency's authority. State education officials said the change was made once the department realized that the formula double-counted charter school students at the expense of districts.

If the formula isn't restored, Groves said, a dozen independent charters will face structural deficits in three years or less.

Several members of House Finance also objected to the way in which RIDE handled the change to the way charters schools are funded.

"When did this come to light?" said Rep. Greg Amore, D-East Providence. "We heard nothing about it."

Amore said this information would have had a significant impact on the findings of the special House committee to establish a fair funding formula, which concluded that districts received disproportionately less money per pupil than charter schools.

Rep. Joy Ahearn, R-Barrington, said, "It concerns me greatly that a change was made to the formula without our notice."

Sarah Friedman, co-director of the Learning Community, a charter school in Central Falls, said she understands that traditional districts are making tough financial choices but she said the independent charters are facing the same decisions.

Friedman said it is the mayoral academies that are stripping districts of much-needed dollars, not the mom-and-pop charters. Blackstone Valley Prep, a network of mayoral charter schools, has expanded rapidly in northern Rhode Island, leading critics to call the charters a parallel school district.

Friedman urged the legislature to "recognize that mayoral academies and independent charters are legislatively different and have different expense profiles."

Friedman also asked the Board of Education to make sure that all future charter growth is moderate in pace and scale "so we don't end up here again in two years."

lborg@providencejournal.com

(401)277-7823