

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| Business           | A31 |
| Editorials/Opinion | A26 |
| Flash!             | A18 |
| Health & Science   | A30 |
| Long Island        | A12 |
| Lottery            | A51 |
| Nation             | A36 |
| NYC                | A28 |
| Obituaries         | A38 |
| Reaching Newsday   | A16 |
| TV listings        | B18 |
| Weather            | A40 |
| World              | A37 |

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## TOP STORIES



Five charter schools operate on Long Island, including the Riverhead Charter School, pictured on March 12 in Calverton.

# Charter schools lose clout in NY Senate

**With Dems to gain control in Albany, state cap for such schools likely stays**

BY MICHAEL GORMLEY  
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ALBANY — One of the losers in Tuesday's election is the charter school movement, which lost a big and reliable advocate when Republicans gave up control of the majority to Democrats in the State Senate, both sides said.

"There's no question it's going to be challenging," said Robert Bellafiore, a consultant who works with charter schools. He also was part of the team under former Gov. George Pataki that authorized charter schools in 1998.

The strongest backer of charter schools now is Democratic Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who wields extraordinary power in crafting state budgets under New York law.

"What that means is you can stop bad stuff, but it doesn't mean you will see an expansion," Bellafiore said.

Advocates had hoped the legislature and governor in 2019 would lift a cap on the number of charter schools that can be created. The cap is 460, including a

limit of 50 in New York City where demand is strongest. As of September there were 358 charter schools approved to operate or already operating. Five are on Long Island. Charter schools must be renewed every five years by showing they are successful.

Since 1998, Senate Republicans continued to support the publicly funded, but privately run schools. Many Democrats say charter schools unfairly compete for students, and the state and local aid attached to them. Advocates of charter schools, including some urban Democrats, say they are a needed alternative to failing traditional schools. Charter schools, for example, are free of some regulations, which allows them to experiment with instruction models such as longer school days. Supporters point to long waiting lists for these schools as proof of their value.

"This is a moment for charter schools," said Andy Pallotta, president of New York State United Teachers, which has opposed expansion of charter schools and seeks greater transparency of their operations. "I think they lost their influence in the Capitol."

Senate Democrats wouldn't say what their plans are for charter schools or if the new majority would support any expansion.

"Senate Democrats care about providing a quality education for all New York's children, includ-

ing those attending charter schools," said Senate Democratic spokesman Mike Murphy. "A Democratic majority will seek expanded opportunities for all our schools to ensure a brighter future for students regardless of the type of school they attend."

There was no immediate comment from Cuomo or the Senate's Republican conference.

NYSUT takes credit for part of the Democratic wave that ended Republican control of the Senate. Pallotta said the union's more than 600,000 members were galvanized when Senate Majority Leader John Flanagan (R-East Northport) said the union was among groups acting "almost like the forces of evil," spending millions of dollars to create a legislature led by Democrats.

"There was a red-hot reaction to that," Pallotta said. "I believe it was a very bad move on his part."

The charter school movement has also been a big contributor to Republican senators, until this last campaign, records show.

New Yorkers for a Balanced Albany is a major funder of pro-charter school candidates. Two years ago in the final critical month of the legislative elections, the group spent \$2.8 million on TV ads and mailers and in direct campaign contributions, state records show. In the same October period of this year, according to the latest fil-

ings, the group spent \$69,950.

The group supports Students-FirstNY, a charter school advocacy group.

"Charter schools give parents in low-income neighborhoods school choices like parents have in affluent communities," said executive director Jenny Sedlis in a prepared statement. "In New York City, we don't have enough great school choices. We look forward to working with legislators to ensure all kids have access to high-quality schools."

Wealthy supporters of charter schools are also big funders of Cuomo's campaigns, but he has come under increasing pressure by liberal Democrats over his support of the schools. Teachers' unions, which are also major campaign contributors, argue that charter schools reduce state aid for traditional schools.



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