

BIPARTISAN

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if this incentive was not included.

Slots for the children of charter school founders would only be reserved for the first year of the school's existence, Oldham added.

But as the House and Senate bills move into conference, there remain provisions in the House bill that trouble some Black Legislative Caucus members.

One point of contention is the debate over retirement and other benefits. Some legislators don't feel that state benefits should follow educators who leave the traditional school system to teach at charter schools.

Oldham distinguished between what he called public charter schools and private charter schools. He is opposed to benefits following teachers who leave the traditional public school system to work at charter schools that have

private funding sources, in addition to the state's pupil-by-pupil allotment.

"My feeling is that as long as it is a public charter school, then the teachers who are public school teachers should be allowed benefits," said Oldham. One example of a public charter school, said Oldham, would be a traditional public school that has been granted a charter. He also included Winston-Salem's LIFT Academy in the description of a public charter school.

Formerly a private, not-for-profit institution geared toward students who have been suspended or expelled from the public school system, LIFT is expected to receive much of its funding as a charter school from the state.

Charter schools are independent, deregulated public schools that operate outside the school district. Parents, teachers and

community members may start up a charter school, or existing public or private schools may apply for a charter.

Charter schools are funded per pupil. Seventy-five percent of a charter school's teaching staff must be state-certified.

The original charter school legislation allowed teachers a leave of absence from the traditional system to work in charter schools without jeopardizing their accumulated benefits.

The Senate's version mandates that teachers who leave the traditional public schools can keep their benefits only if the charter school allows the local school board power over hiring and firing.

"That's more power than what [school boards] have over schools now," said Wood. Public school principals are responsible for employing and dismissing their

school's faculty and staff.

"In my opinion, it was a conscious effort by some to hobble the charter school movement," he added.

Though Rep. Larry Womble, D-Winston-Salem, supported Wood's bill, he agreed with Oldham's evaluation of charter school status, and said a charter school is "not really a public school in the truest sense."

"Public schools cannot deny anyone," Womble stated. He remains worried that the bill's provision guaranteeing placement for students of existing schools that have been granted charters will promote elitism.

Womble is also suspicious of opening the charter school cap to schools with a majority at-needs population.

"I'm just wondering what the rationale behind that is," he mused. This provision, said

Womble, may further separate students classified as learning disabled, who are predominantly minority, from those classified as gifted, the majority of whom are white.

Regardless of remaining reservations, charter school proponents are heartened by the bipartisan support. The minority-party support from the Republican-controlled House could sway sentiment in the Senate, which is predominantly Democrat.

"Because of [the Black Caucus] support, there's a chance the bill could become law," said Vernon Robinson, executive director of the North Carolina Education Reform Foundation. Robinson and his organization led the statewide charter school movement.

LEARNING

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es as a result of poor vocabulary skills.

Ray's children, growing up with more advantages than he had known as a child, began to experience similar problems in education.

"My kids were coming away with gaps in their education," said Ray. His elementary school-aged daughter came home one day with a spelling list that included the words "hour" and "our." The youngster received a perfect grade on the spelling test, said Ray, but her mother noticed that when the girl wrote the words in a sentence, she used them incorrectly.

"She wrote, 'Hour house is on Willow Street,'" said Elaine Valentine-Ray.

After studying similar gaps in the education of their other four children, the Rays launched an assessment of the manner in which their children were taught.

"We started to realize the whole educational system was the problem," said Ray.

The result of their study is *The Processes of American Education: What Every Parent Should Know*. The Rays formed their own publishing company, Praxis Publishing Group, and expect the book to be available for sale by spring 1998.

The book is intended as a guide for parents to navigate their children through the rough waters the Rays call the public education system.

"Just as Adam Smith hypothesized that an invisible hand guides

and directs the free market, I posit the theory that an invisible hand also guides and directs the institution of public education," Ray writes. "As indicated in the text of this material, it has a proclivity toward preserving the traditional American values and institutions — the status quo."

Some of the conclusions drawn by the Rays are as follows:

- Exit exams for high school seniors should not be necessary, if the students have truly completed 12 years of education.

- Teachers say they want parents involved at school, but balk at parent involvement in education.

- Since parents are products of the education system, they have built-in insecurities about challenging the system.

- The movement to raise standards in schools is simply political rhetoric without practical application.

"Standards aren't where the problems lie," said Ray. The problem lies in the high numbers of students who aren't meeting existing standards; thus, said Ray, it makes no sense to raise these standards even more.

"We need to say to teachers, 'we're going to raise the standards on you,'" he added.

And beware of being pacified by good grades, the Rays warn parents.

"[Children] can come home with an A, but go back and ask them to explain to you how they got to an answer," said Ray.

The Rays feel that far too much

responsibility rests on children for the quality of their education.

"[We] expect doctors to provide the best medical attention possible in the hospital for the mildly ill or terminally ill patient, regardless of who was responsible for the existence of the condition," the Rays write.

"Likewise, it is the professional responsibility of the public school teacher to make whatever effort necessary to ensure the intellectual proficiency and well-being of their students in the classroom," they conclude.

Too many teachers give up on children who come to the class-

room at a disadvantage compared to their more affluent peers, said the Rays. And some of those who have not given up are falling victim to good intentions gone wrong.

Allowing ebonics or any other type of slang to be spoken in the classroom is harmful, the Rays asserted.

"Everything in our democracy is based on language," said Ray. "This culture is based on standard English language."

Ray used his own life as an example.

"I came from the projects to mainstream America," he said. "I embrace the English language —

it's a beautiful language."

To correct these wrongs, the Rays advocate a lobby for parents, or a kind of union for parents based on the national teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers.

In the meantime, said the Rays, parents need to become actively involved in their children's education. They recommend purchasing the best dictionaries as beginning tools, and using the materials with their children.

"A major key to improving the public education system is to gain a proper education and training perspective of your own," said Ray.

PRESENT

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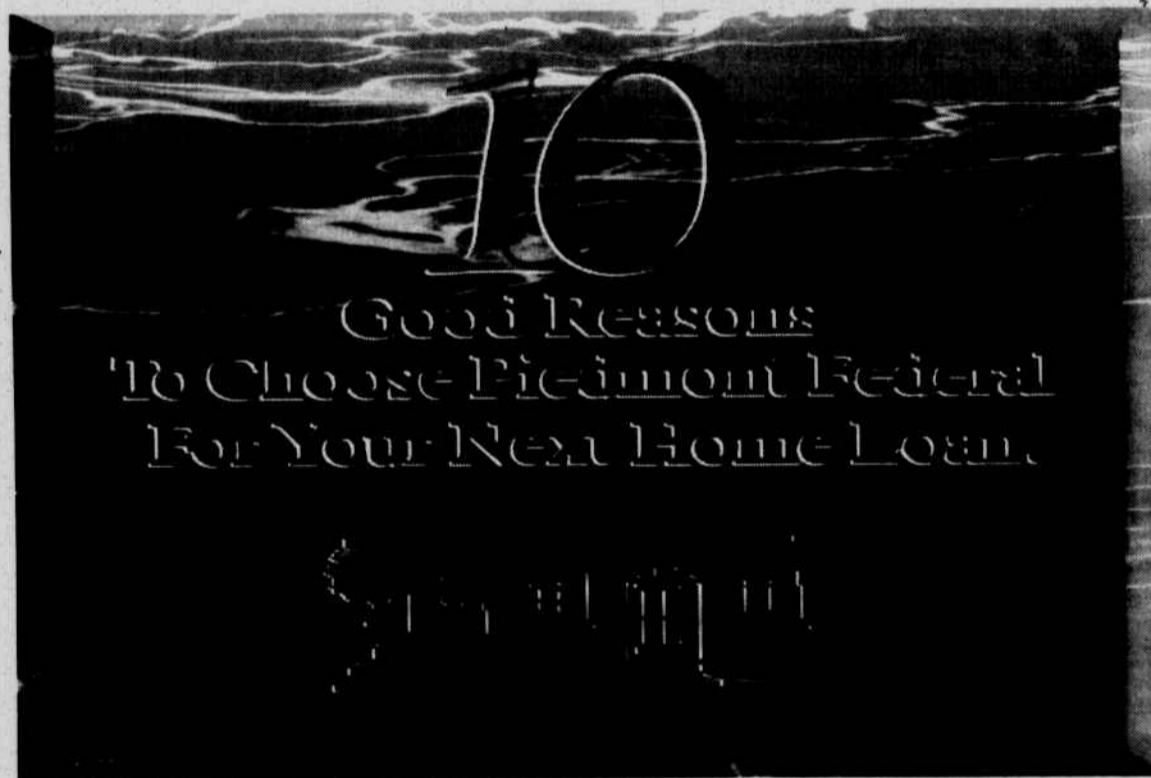
Rebecca and Mary Francis Ingram, has operated on Washington Drive for nearly 22 years. A March 1995 fire, however, left it without a home. Since moving into a new masonry building last November, business has been brisk. The 60-seat restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner to a hungry crowd.

Customer traffic is crucial to the successful revitalization of Washington Drive. To sustain a variety of businesses, the block must not only attract customers from the immediate area but from outside the community as well. Crime may be one reason some potential customers stay away.

A few years ago, the High

Point Police Department used federal grant money to establish a stronger presence in the Washington Drive area. Four police officers worked out of a resource office on Washington Drive. Neighborhood watch programs were set up and people began to trust the police. The information residents shared with the police increased law enforcement, says Capt. John Gregory, who heads the police department's investigation bureau and was formerly District I commander. The resource office, however, faces an uncertain future under the police department's reorganization.

Next week: Envisioning and investing in Washington Drive's future.



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