

Is CTU backing expansion of charters?

By George N. Schmidt

With charter schools now being the main thrust of privatization, union busting, and deregulation in Chicago's public schools, some observers are puzzling over whether the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) is actually supporting a bill by State Senator Martin Sandoval that would allow the unlimited expansion of charter schools in Chicago.

The failure of the CTU's powerful lobby to actively oppose the Sandoval bill is the reason for the puzzlement. The bill, which would lift a cap of 30 on the number of charter schools in Chicago, has been alive in the Illinois General Assembly during the entire legislative session, which ends this month. Originally, the Illinois charter school law permitted a maximum of 45 charter schools in the state. These were allocated as follows: 15 in Chicago; 15 in the Chicago suburbs (the six-county greater Chicago area); and 15 across the remainder of the state.

The total number of charters in Chicago was increased to 30 during the administration of former CTU president Deborah Lynch, who opposed the use of charter schools and Renaissance 2010 to attack union schools and teachers.

But the cap on Chicago charters has been sitting too tightly for the comfort of the city's charter school operators. There are now more than 35 charter schools officially operating in Chicago. CPS has gotten around the cap by creating "campuses" of existing charter schools across the city. The "Chicago International Charter School" had nine "campuses" — and more than 5,000 students — by March 2006. It ranges from an Edison school on the south side to Good Counsel High School (now "Chicago International Charter School — Northtown Campus") on the far north side. Although CPS attorneys have issued claims that the "campus" ploy is legal, officials at CPS have been worried about a legal challenge to the charter expansion. The Sandoval legislation, widely viewed as supported by Mayor Daley, is designed to remedy that by allowing Chicago to have an unlimited number of charter schools. Charters have already erased at least 1,500 union jobs in Chicago's public schools.