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Bruce Guadalupe Community School;
and The Accelerated School.

Charter Schools

*Are They
Reinvigorating
Public
Education?*

Parents, neighborhoods and new developments are gaining choices when it comes to educational opportunities for their children.

by Jason Miller

Public education in the U.S. started off on the right foot. Schools and classes were manageable, students received adequate attention, curricula were flexible and innovative. But somewhere along the way, public education got complacent—and the students suffered.

"Conventional public schools are doing a woeful job of educating kids," says Jeanne

Allen, president of Center for Education Reform (CER) in Washington, D.C. "They're helping the few, not the many. They've become too big, too impersonal. And they've become ineffective."

Enter the charter school, arguably the solution to a problem that doesn't seem to be fixing itself. Funded largely with private donations, grants, loans and public money, charter schools follow many of the same regulations in their respective states, but add a level of accountability and fervent dedication to the hard work of education that seems to be the exception—rather than the norm—in the conventional public school arena.

Charter schools got their start after numerous studies demonstrated that the U.S. school system was falling behind most other industrialized nations. In 1991, the first charter school law was enacted in



Minnesota. In 1992, that state built the first charter school. Today, upwards of 3,300 charter schools have opened their doors for the 2004–05 school year. By most accounts, this movement to reinvigorate the U.S. education system has legs and is here to stay.

Path to performance

Typically founded by parents, teachers and/or community groups who see a real need in their community, charter schools are controlled by a contract—a charter—between an approved authorizer (e.g., a state university or a state school board) and the governing board of the charter school. This board is similar to a conventional school board; it is publicly accountable for performing at the level the state requires. The regulations that define those expectations vary from state to state, and usually are more stringent for charter schools. Typically, a charter school will

have a five-year contract, during which time the school must prove that it's succeeding. This is serious education: If a charter school doesn't deliver the goods, it could go out of business.

For this reason, charter schools tend to test their students aggressively. According to a report from CER titled "Charter Schools: Changing the Face of American Education," 94 percent of charter schools reported administering at least one standardized test, with 91 percent administering at least two.

What's the difference?

"Charters help parents get back to basics," says Allen. "They provide choices, more personalized learning environments—and they shake up the conventional public school system."

"They offer flexibility that is not generally able to be implemented in a conventional public school, specifically in available instruction methods (direct instruction or exponential learning or Montessori, for example) used to create an environment that's good for children. Parents can see what their options are and what would work best for their child. Charters serve kids who have not been well-served by the system in the past."

Those children could be gifted, at-risk, minorities, low-income or special-needs—just to name a few groups. The point is that charter schools reintroduce choice into the equation, then they educate with a zeal that most parents would ascribe to the good old days.

If education were a sport, most charter schools would belong to the "extreme" category. Pushed to perform and dedicated to excellence, most charters offer extended school days and an extended school year, for starters.

At KIPP DC/Key Academy in Washington, D.C., a stringent teacher-training program starts the process. Every teacher then gets a cell phone and the number is given to the students so if they have a problem while doing their homework, they can call the teacher and deal with it. School is in session from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day, plus two to three Saturdays every month.



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The personalized approach pays off, says Raymond Rivera, youth development coordinator with Bruce Guadalupe Community School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His children, Raymond Rivera, Jr., 12; and Jiselle, 9, attend the Bruce Guadalupe middle school and elementary school, respectively.

"I've noticed the staff's passion," he says. "They want to not only teach, but build a relationship with the kids. My son tells me the school is different, that it's more personal. My daughter thinks of it as another kind of home. There's a culture of high expectations here; everyone wants the kids to succeed."

The benefits spread to charter schools' immediate communities, too, says Vicki Cox Golder, CRB, a REALTOR® with Vicki Cox & Associates in Tucson, Ariz., and a former school board chair and Governor's Education Task Force member.

"Charter schools improve a neighborhood's quality of life mainly because [their residents] have a choice. If parents are given a choice that's affordable for them, that improves the quality of life in a community. That's why charter schools got started in Arizona, because the parents and kids were stuck because of geographics and socio-economic situations. A parent should have a choice, but they didn't.

"In Arizona, they were given a choice to use public funds that were allocated to charter schools. And they took advantage of that opportunity. We now have the second-largest number of charter schools in the nation."

Charter challenges

Not surprisingly, funding comes into play when the subject of charter school hurdles arises. State by state, each charter school is responsible for obtaining its funding and securing a site and a building suitable for its efforts. Common financial sources include banks and credit enhancement organizations—private/public bodies that provide



what amounts to a second mortgage for the school. Some lending entities, such as National Capital Bank, are both lenders and credit enhancers. Sallie Mae and the Charter Schools Development Corporation also fund charter schools.

The challenge of funding cannot be understated, however. Because charter schools are not a "education as usual" effort, they often face difficulty when trying to get a loan. That's when they get creative—sometimes with help from their individual states. In Minnesota and the District of Columbia, for example, facilities funding is available for charter schools on a per-pupil basis. California offers a charter school revolving loan fund, which makes low-cost loans to charter



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schools for facilities. Grants, private and corporate donations, and other government funds are often combined to meet a school's funding needs.

Sometimes advocacy is in order. Financial consulting firm Charter FS Corporation of Westerville, Ohio, pursues all manner of funding solutions for charter schools. Its president, Peter Svahn, serves as a liaison between charter schools and potential lenders, such as banks. Since many charter schools don't have equity to secure a traditional loan, Svahn educates bank officials so that they're more comfortable with the prospect of lending to a charter school.

"Typically, charter schools are formed by educators who tend not to focus on the business issues of running a school," he says. "We help schools develop an appropriate business plan and strategy to help them present their case to the financial community."

Even with adequate funding, resistance to charter schools can still arise, says Jeanne Allen. "Some school districts welcome the competition; others make life difficult for [charter schools]. Sometimes it's the local school board with the power to authorize a charter school's creation;

they might create obstacles because they're concerned about the competition with the conventional public school, and they might think they'll lose the children to the charter school.

"But there need not be tension. The tension tends to come from people who feel threatened. And the reason they're threatened is the reason that charter schools came to exist in the first place: The conventional public school is doing a poor job of educating its kids."

But the same can be said of charter schools as a whole, says the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In their report released in August 2004, the AFT contended that charter school students nationally performed worse in math and reading than their regular public school counterparts. The claim is based on charter school achievement results from the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, which, according to the AFT, showed that charter school students mostly underperform and sometimes score about as well as regular public school students.

"These NAEP data reinforce years of independent research that show charter schools do no better and often underperform comparable, regular public schools," says F. Howard Nelson, lead author of the AFT report, quoted on the Wisconsin Education Association Council Web site.

Resistance can also come in the form of entrenched legislation. Local regulations, such as zoning codes, can make life difficult for new charters. During the inception of the Basis Charter School of Tucson, the school's original planned site was occupied by a house and not zoned for commercial, which is how schools are often incorrectly categorized. The zoning board and the local community fought the school on the basis of increased traffic and delayed the school's preparation process to the point where school officials finally had to look elsewhere for a suitable site.

Even after a charter school is up and running, the funding issue usually continues. While charter schools receive some public financing, it is never at the same level as the conventional public schools. According to the CER report, the average per-pupil support from the public coffers is \$813 less than that given to conventional public schools.

Why the disparity? "That's the way charter school laws were enacted in the early 1990s," says Mary Kayne Heinze, CER media relations director. "Charters are supposed to be leaner and meaner, expected to do more with less. I think that was the initial logic behind putting the funding so low. Now we realize that while they tend to spend less than the schools in their host district, they still need more money than that, in order to have quality teachers."

Bright future

Charter school success stories are numerous, but there are standouts. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Bruce Guadalupe Community School (BGCS) serves preschoolers, elementary-school age, and middle-school children. Since receiving its charter school status in 2000, the school has expanded to nearly 600 students, about 97 percent of which are Hispanic and about 80 percent coming from low-income families. The school boasts a 96 percent attendance rate and a 97 percent retention rate of returning students from year to year. Ninety-five percent of students who graduated four years ago completed high school in 2002.

Principal Mary Beth Kuxhause attributes the school's success to a strong curriculum, good parent background, an extended school day, and mandatory summer school, among many other efforts. "This is a community-based school that doesn't stop at 3 p.m.," she says. "We have an after-school program that runs till 6 p.m. Our emphasis is education, education, education. It helps to keep education right at the front of [our students'] heads. We expect our kids to do their very best."

Similar stories are found at the Arizona School for the Arts in Phoenix, The Accelerated School in Los Angeles, and the Henry Ford Academy in Dearborn, Michigan; all three schools were part of a select list of "Best Bets" compiled by CER.

What's next for charter schools? More integration into new traditional neighborhoods, suggests Jeanne Allen. "When building a new neighborhood, why not offer to build a school or two? Or even three? One could be a charter school, one could be a public school, and the third could be a private school or some kind of hybrid. You'd end up with more personalized choices, a better neighborhood, more diversity, and more parent-power over the education process. You'd end up with better schools."

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CHARTER SCHOOLS AND BUILDING FACILITIES: WHERE DO YOU LOCATE THEM?

The successes of charter schools go hand in hand with a common challenge: How do you address the issue of facilities? Monetary issues prevent many schools from buying a building or building in a new location—but not always, says Jeanne Allen, president of Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C.

"Take Franklin Academy in Wake County, N.C., for example," she says. "They were able to secure land and break ground on a new building. They've paid off their first bank loan and they're expanding. They've done this within their operating budget. They involved themselves with savvy business people to guarantee their loan, but they never needed [additional funds] beyond what most people need for buildings. Now, their scores are unbelievable; they have one of the better charter schools in North Carolina."



Where land is plentiful, funding for new facilities is generally easier to secure. But where real estate is more difficult to find, charter schools have been obliged to get creative—renovating and reusing existing structures. Too often, a bureaucratic morass must be navigated to use existing public schools, so charter school officials look to other buildings. They renovate church halls, storefronts, and office space. They fill out old homes and community centers. In Washington, D.C., Cesar Chavez Public Policy Charter High School is in a former laundromat.

"In the last couple years, charter schools have begun to make use of REALTORS®," says Allen. "That wasn't always a natural move, but now they're going to REALTORS® to help them find something—which makes sense."

The path to securing facilities is almost as varied as the number of charter schools. Schools with a proven track record, or a school that is a "replication" of an existing school, typically start by identifying the property they want to renovate or the land on which they want to build. They then sign a formal contract with their authorizer.

Once this authorizing partner is identified, the search usually begins for a credit enhancer to supplement the primary lender's loan. Once these two entities are found and contracted with, the renovation or new building usually begins.