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Fertile Soil for Charters



Students sing "we read, we read, with all our might," during a morning gathering at the elementary campus of North Star Academy, a charter school in Newark, N.J. —Emile Wamsteker for Education Week

With backing from foundations and a mayor who champions choice, Newark, N.J., may emerge as a model for other cities seeking to strengthen and expand their charter school sectors.

By **Erik W. Robelen**

Newark, N.J.

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Mayor Cory A. Booker strides into a classroom at Marion P. Thomas Charter School here during a tour the second week of school, and delivers a quick pep talk.

"I really need your help this year," he tells the 2nd graders. "Your success is going to help our whole city be successful. OK? All right? Good!"

Mr. Booker, a rising star in the Democratic Party nationally, has high hopes for the role education in general, and charters in particular, can play in efforts to revitalize this long-struggling city. He says that, eventually, he would like to see one-fourth of Newark's public school students attend high-performing charter schools.

The mayor is not alone in seeing potential for his city's charter schools. Just last spring, several prominent national philanthropies **announced plans** to create a \$20 million **Newark Charter School Fund**, aimed at helping to support and expand the small but growing charter sector here.



Kindergarteners listen as their teacher reads aloud at North Star Academy in Newark, N.J., a city whose charter school sector is enjoying rising political and financial support.

—Emile

Wamsteker/Education Week

Stig Leschly, a partner at the Newark fund and its founder, said the city has a set of “fundamentals” that make it especially fertile terrain for developing a local charter sector of what he calls meaningful size and consistently high quality that not only would benefit Newark, but also could serve as a national model for the charter movement.

“Newark jumps off the map,” Mr. Leschly said. Its assets, he said, include a “very strong” and stable public funding formula for charters under New Jersey law, the aggressive political leadership of Mayor Booker, and what Mr. Leschly argues is an unusually large proportion of high-performing charter schools. The city is home, for instance, to **North Star Academy Charter School of Newark**, which operates four campuses and has won national acclaim for its success in serving disadvantaged students.

Meanwhile, some local charter schools and networks, including North Star, are working on their own ambitious growth plans.

Charters’ Impact Questioned

Not everyone in Newark is so enthusiastic about charters, however. **The Newark Teachers Union**, for instance, has long been critical of the autonomous public schools. The union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, contends that oversight and regulation of the schools is inadequate, that they generally have not delivered satisfactory academic results, and that many selectively skim off those students least likely to experience academic problems, leaving the rest to the regular public system.

Wilhelmina Holder, the chairwoman of the Secondary Parent Council, a Newark parent-advocacy group, said Mayor Booker and philanthropies would be better off helping the city’s 42,000-student school district. “The charter school movement in a sense is kind of like a diversion,” she said.

“To me, the resources and time and effort should be spent in the traditional public schools,” she added. “This innovative stuff is good, but it doesn’t impact most of the kids.”

Newark is New Jersey’s largest city, with some 280,000 residents. Long viewed as one of the nation’s most troubled cities, it has wrestled with all-too-common urban ills, from high crime, poverty, and unemployment rates to poor-performing schools and low levels of educational attainment. More than one-third of adults over age 25 in the city lack a high school diploma, and only 12 percent have a college degree.

The city also has a history of political corruption. Five of the last seven mayors have been indicted on criminal charges. Last spring, former Mayor Sharpe James, a Democrat who decided not to seek re-election in 2006

How the Scores Stack Up

A comparison of the percentages of students who scored “proficient” or “advanced” on New Jersey state reading and mathematics tests shows that the levels were higher in charter schools than in district-run schools in most categories.

Percent of students who scored proficient or advanced on the 2006-07 state tests		
Grade	Charter Schools	Newark Public Schools

Notes: “Charter Schools” includes 10 of Newark’s 12 public charter schools. Two are excluded because they were K-2 schools in 2006-07 and did not administer the state tests. “Newark Public Schools” excludes certain vocational, behavioral, and multiple-disability programs in the Newark Public Schools.

SOURCE: Newark Charter School Fund

after two decades in office, was convicted by a federal jury of five counts of fraud.

Newark's school system has not been immune from such troubles. In 1995, the state seized control of the district after investigators concluded that it was rife with mismanagement and waste, financial improprieties, and instructional shortcomings.

Only months later, New Jersey enacted a charter school law, and charters soon began setting up shop in the city.

Today, Newark has 12 of New Jersey's 56 charter schools, with 17 campuses in all. The city's charters enroll roughly 4,000 students accounting for about 9 percent of Newark's public school population. Nearly all the charter students are African-American or Hispanic, and most come from low-income families.

Frustration with the poor performance of the Newark school system has been a critical driver of the charter movement here. Although some analysts have pointed to academic progress in recent years—and the state just appointed a new superintendent for the city's system, Clifford B. Janey, a former schools chief in the District of Columbia and Rochester, N.Y.—the district is still widely viewed as struggling academically.

"Anybody who is satisfied with the performance of Newark public schools is savagely underestimating the ability of our children," Mayor Booker said in an interview last month.

That performance comes in a district that gets some of the highest per-pupil funding in New Jersey, and is on the high end nationally, thanks in part to the state supreme court decision in a case known as *Abbott v. Burke*. The original 1990 ruling ordered that New Jersey's poorest urban districts receive state funding equal to that of the state's wealthiest tier of school districts. For the 2007-08 year, the Newark district's total state and local funding per pupil amounted to nearly \$18,000, according to data from the state department of education.

A 'Critical Ally' for Charters

Mr. Booker, a former city councilman who was elected mayor in 2006 after an unsuccessful run four years earlier, has long been a champion of school choice and charter schools. He previously served on the board of North Star Academy and helped found [E3](#), a New Jersey advocacy group that promotes parental choice in education, including charters and private school vouchers.

The mayor said he sees charter schools as powerful venues for rethinking, and dramatically improving, the education of disadvantaged children.

"The great thing about charter schools is we've seen some of the best innovation in Newark that's happened in the charter school space," he said.

But Mayor Booker emphasizes that he's also been impressed by some of the best schools in the Newark district, and that his allegiance is to high-quality "seats," not any particular governance model.

"I'm not loyal to charter schools or traditional public schools," he said. "I'm only loyal to results."

Although the mayor has no direct authority over charter schools—or the city's public school system—local charter operators say his support has been vital. He's taken many steps on their behalf, including helping them get access to facilities or land, speaking at their fundraisers, and aggressively using his bully pulpit in Newark and nationally to promote charters.

"I think he's a critical ally," said Karen Thomas, who is the chief executive officer of Marion P. Thomas

Charter School and is not related to the school's namesake. "Knowing where Mayor Booker stands, first of all, is very helpful to the movement overall."

The mayor recently helped the school, which was founded in 1998 by leaders of the city's New Hope Baptist Church, with its effort to acquire vacant, city-owned property adjacent to its campus that the school needed for expansion. He also helped North Star Academy and **TEAM Schools**, a local network of KIPP—or Knowledge Is Power Program—schools, get free access to extra space in two district school buildings.

Nelson Smith, the executive director of the Washington-based National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said Mayor Booker is a gifted spokesman for charters.

"He's a charismatic figure who can tell the story better than almost anyone," Mr. Smith said. "The story of why choice is good, why investment in public charter schools is worthwhile, what you have to do to shake up a big-city system."

'No Genie in a Bottle'

Some observers, though, view the mayor as too caught up with charters.

"He's enamored, and the question is why," said Marion Bolden, a former superintendent of the Newark school system. "There is no genie out there in a bottle" to solve the city's education ills.

"It's hard work. ... It doesn't matter what kind of structure, what kind of school," she said.

Joseph Del Grosso, the president of the Newark Teachers Union, which has been one of Mr. Booker's strongest critics, said: "The mayor is interested in charter schools because he doesn't have a clue how to fix education."

Mayor Booker was one of the prime attractions for the four national philanthropies, including the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Bentonville, Ark.-based Walton Family Foundation, which together established the Newark Charter Schools Fund.

The effort will provide \$20 million over the next three to four years for the charter sector. Several local philanthropies are expected to spend another \$5 million to help Newark charters.

The Newark Charter School Fund will spend money on a range of activities to help support and improve local charter schools, as well as to assist in their expansion and the creation of new ones.

Fueled by Foundations

Four national philanthropies that support charter schools teamed up last April to launch a charitable fund specifically to help Newark's charter sector, an approach they may seek to replicate elsewhere. The grantmakers—the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the San Francisco-based Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, the New York City-based Robertson Foundation, and the Bentonville, Ark.-based Walton Family Foundation—pledged \$4 million apiece for the Newark Charter School Fund.

The fund issues grants to support and expand the city's charter sector, with an emphasis on promoting high quality. The fund aims to raise \$4 million more, for a total of \$20 million.

The effort also involves local philanthropies, including the MCJ Amelior Foundation, the Prudential Foundation, and the Victoria Foundation, which all are based in New Jersey and have long worked in Newark. Those three donors have pledged \$1 million each for related support for the city's charters, and the Newark Charter School Fund is in talks with other local funders.

The goal is to secure \$5 million from local foundations, which will make grants independent of the Newark Charter School Fund.

The board of the Newark Charter School Fund includes representatives from each of the four national philanthropies. "We work for the national funders, who essentially created a subsidiary in Newark," said Stig Leschly, a partner at the fund and its founder.

Mr. Leschly, who serves on the boards of two Massachusetts charter schools, is a former lecturer at the Harvard Business School, where his work focused on entrepreneurship

The fund already has recruited national organizations, such as the New York City-based nonprofit New Leaders for New Schools, to cultivate new charter leaders in the city, and is working on similar efforts to draw more talented teachers. And it will explore steps to help charter schools gain more access to facilities; lack of readily available space is considered one of the biggest obstacles for Newark's charters.

Mr. Leschly emphasized that although the charter fund is interested in promoting growth in the charter sector, "we're far more interested in quality."

He said that while the charter sectors in some cities have grown fairly large, he's not aware of any city in which the charters are "jaw-droppingly good" across the board. And consistent high quality is the goal in Newark, he said.

The fund will focus considerable resources on offering Newark's charter schools tailored, one-on-one help—work that's already beginning.

It recently made a grant of \$160,000 to University Heights Charter School to pay for teacher professional development, craft interim student assessments, promote data-driven instruction, and support parental outreach.

"This school has struggled historically, but the board leadership of the school has put forward a compelling plan to transform the school, and we're committed to helping," Mr. Leschly said.

Peter G. Turmanian, the director of the Greater Newark Charter School, which serves some 175 students in grades 5-8, said he's been pleased at the early outreach from the charter school fund, which has also provided his school with targeted grant assistance.

"They seem to be taking painstaking efforts to get to know each charter school, which is important," Mr. Turmanian said, "to meet us where our needs are and support the real strong schools, and potentially have interventions with the struggling ones."

The fund also will put money into the collection of student-level longitudinal data on all the city's charter schools, with the goal of better gauging their results and promoting public transparency.

Some Newark charters are already showing impressive academic results with predominantly disadvantaged student enrollments, Mr. Leschly argues, and that record was an important factor to the private foundations in targeting Newark.

"There's a nucleus of very strong schools," he said.

He pointed to several stand-alone charters, such as Robert Treat Academy, which last month was recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education for its strong performance, as well as to North Star Academy and TEAM Schools, the two local networks affiliated with national charter organizations.

A recent report from the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association noted that five of the city's

and education reform.

Last month, the Newark fund hired another partner, De'Shawn Wright, who stepped down as Newark Mayor Cory A. Booker's chief policy adviser to take the job. Mr. Wright also has worked for the New York City school district's office of new schools and as a Teach For America corps member in that city.

James C. Blew, the director of K-12 reform at the Walton Family Foundation, said the national funders often invest in projects in the same cities, but without such "tight" collaboration. "We hope this is a model for future efforts," he said.

The fund is similar in some ways to other philanthropic efforts promoting charters, such as the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence. That center, funded entirely by foundations, provides services, training, and grants for the city's charter schools.

—Erik W. Robelen

top 12 performers on the state's 8th grade proficiency assessment for 2006-07 were charter schools, when literacy, mathematics, and science results were combined. At Robert Treat Academy, which had the highest scores, 93 percent of 8th graders tested as proficient or above in literacy, and 88 percent reached those scoring levels in math.

On the other hand, the analysis found that four other Newark charter schools were below the district average on their combined 8th grade scores, with fewer than half of students demonstrating proficiency.

Mr. Leschly acknowledged that the city has its share of charter schools that are not delivering strong academic results, but he believes it's a small enough number that it is a viable goal to expect that they will succeed.

"You've got a chance for remediation and growth there," he said. "The point is to do the really hard work of making sure every charter is great."

'Dying to Get In'

Donald Fisher, the co-founder of the clothing retailer Gap Inc. and co-founder of the San Francisco-based Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, a contributor to the Newark Charter School Fund, said he's hopeful that the work in Newark ultimately will not only help charter students, but also lead to changes in district schools.

If Newark's charter sector grows to serve a "substantial percentage" of the city's students, he said, and shows consistently strong academic results, especially for low-income students, "maybe that puts enough pressure on the Newark public school system that they start improving their own schools."

Even without the help of the Newark Charter School Fund, the city appears poised to see its charter sector grow considerably, based on the plans of some of its school operators.

Marion P. Thomas Charter, which serves grades K-8, increased its enrollment by 120 students this fall, to 480, and intends to eventually double that number.

"I have a waiting list of several hundred families," said Ms. Thomas, the school's chief executive officer.

North Star Academy, whose four campuses now serve about 750 students, plans to start three more Newark schools and eventually serve 2,500 students in grades K-12.

"We've built up a team who we think can do the work," said Norman Atkins, the co-founder of North Star and the founder and board chairman of Uncommon Schools, the New York City-based nonprofit charter-management organization of which the school is now part. "We've earned the trust of a lot of families, and have a lot of others who are dying to get in."

In addition, TEAM Schools aims to add two elementary campuses, to grow from serving about 800 students this year to 2,500 eventually, spanning all grade levels.

"The first phase is five schools," said Ryan E. Hill, TEAM's executive director. "Should that happen successfully, and should we be convinced that that is going to work, ...we will open another cluster of that size, that will get us to about 10 percent of the district [student population]."



North Star teacher Andrea Somerville reads a Dr. Seuss classic aloud to her pupils, including 5-year-olds Courtney Davis, bottom left, and Janaza Baker.
—Emile Wansteker/Education Week

Mr. Hill said he hopes that charters and regular public schools will work together to serve the city's children.

"If that doesn't happen, I think what we can do is provide just almost another system," he said. " 'System' in a loose way."

State Agency Is Sole Authorizer

Other recent developments are likely to help Newark's charters grow and multiply. First, the federal Department of Education last spring awarded an \$8.3 million grant to Civic Builders, a New York City-based nonprofit organization, to help charters in both New York and Newark obtain financing for facilities.

And Newark's charters are seeing significant increases in aid under recent changes to the state's funding formula. On average, they are projected to get nearly \$2,000 per pupil in extra money this academic year, for a total of roughly \$12,500, according to a recent analysis by the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association.

Though the state charter group emphasizes that those funding levels remain well below what New Jersey districts receive, some national observers say the per-pupil amount is an attractive figure for charters compared with what many other states allot.

One potential barrier to the expansion of Newark's charter sector is the charter-authorizing environment in the state.

Unlike some other states, New Jersey has just one entity that approves the creation of charter schools: the state department of education. The agency has a reputation as being strict—some say rigid—in reviewing applications. Last year, of 22 applicants, only one was approved.

"They suffer from what all state agencies suffer from: budget cuts, lack of resources, not enough personnel, and too much paperwork," said Jessani Gordon, the executive director of the state charter school group. "It's an extremely rigid process that doesn't necessarily allow for much dialogue."

State Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy said she's aware of the concerns, and is looking into them. But she makes no apologies for the state's demanding approach to charter applications.

"It is important to have rigorous scrutiny," Ms. Davy said. "Opening a school is a big deal. If we're erring on the side of caution, that's on behalf of the state's children."

Mr. Del Grosso of the Newark Teachers Union said he's in no hurry to see more charters.

"I would hate to see us create too many charters without getting empirical data to see which ones are truly working," he said.

He advocates setting a statewide cap on the number permitted. Although he said some Newark charters are "well managed and well operated," he rates their performance overall as mediocre.

"I haven't seen anything to me that says they have the silver bullet," he said.

In addition to Mayor Booker's keen interest in charters, he has his eye on playing a new role with the local school district. He has long indicated, and reiterated in the interview, that he hopes to gain control of the city school system once it's returned to local control and a locally elected school board.

The switch is widely expected to happen in the coming months if the system meets certain state-established benchmarks.

"I desperately want it," Mr. Booker said of mayoral control, "but there will be massive political resistance."

"It may not be a fight he wants to wage right now," said Clement A. Price, a history professor at the Newark campus of Rutgers University, who headed the search committee to find the new superintendent, Mr. Janey. "As popular as [the mayor] is, the jury is still out as to how effective he is as a politician in the city of Newark."

In the meantime, Mayor Booker said he's pleased with what he's hearing from Mr. Janey.

"I listen to my new schools superintendent, and I'm charged up," he said. "He now sounds like one of the great educational innovators."

In any case, the mayor said he remains committed to doing all he can to help Newark charter schools play a bigger role in serving the city's students, even if he catches some flak for it.

"If we're going to be a city that thrives, we're going to have to increase options," he said. "There's always drama when it comes to trying to do things for charter schools."

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