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Charter Schools: Boon or Bust?

by Leslie Garisto Pfaff
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They rode in on a tide of hope. A decade later, the promise of New Jersey's charter schools is only partially fulfilled.

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North Star Academy cofounder and principal James Verrilli flanked by his uniformed students.
photo by John Emerson

Broderick Boxley, formerly principal of the Joyce Kilmer Elementary in Cherry Hill, began his tenure as head of school for the Princeton Charter School in July.
Photo by Jon Roemer

It's a not-in-Kansas-anymore moment: Dozens of fresh-faced kids in green polo shirts and neatly pressed khakis file into the gym, where, center court, two boys intently pound out a rhythm on a djembi drum. Meanwhile, the kids form a neat circle around the gym's perimeter. Then the drumming stops, and a call-and-response begins, led by a teacher in the center of the room. "What do we do?" he prompts. "We work hard!" the kids call out. "We take care of each other! We give back!" "Are we all going to college?" the teacher asks, and the response is unequivocal: "Yes!"

This is a public school? In Newark?

Yes, and yes. North Star Academy is one of 11 charter schools now operating in the city—there are 62 in the state—part of an ongoing experiment to transform public education that began with New Jersey's initial charter legislation in 1996. In New Jersey, a charter school is defined as a free public school, financed with public funds, independent of the local school board and accountable to the state; each charter is responsible for its own curriculum, teaching staff, and budget, but must meet all state standards.

The state's first charters rode in on a tide of hope. Advocates believed that charters would afford parents and students, especially in hard-pressed urban areas, something that, up to that point, had largely been absent in the public school system: choice. In doing so, the reasoning went, they would also exert competitive pressure on conventional public schools, effectively lifting the entire system.

But there was also anxiety about the new schools. Opponents—including public school administrators and members of the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA), the state's primary teachers' union—claimed that charters would drain funds from district schools and skim off the most talented students.

More than a decade later, the hopes have been tempered and the anxieties have been at least partly allayed. The charters, as it turns out, have not made paupers of the conventional public schools, nor have they stolen away the best and the brightest. As the state's charter law is written, charter schools receive 90 percent of what other district schools receive in per-pupil funding from state and local sources, leaving the district schools with slightly more money on a per-pupil basis than they received before the law went into effect. And because acceptance to the charters is based almost exclusively on a lottery system (with some preference afforded siblings of enrolled students), the schools do not siphon off star pupils. In fact, according to Jessani Gordon, executive director of the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association, the opposite may be occurring. "It turns out that many of the kids going to charter schools are students who haven't been doing well in district schools," she says. That means a significant percentage of charter students may be several grade levels behind when they transfer in.

As for the charters, their performance has been mixed. A 2007 study conducted by the Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers University determined that, on fourth-grade standardized tests for language and math, New Jersey's charter schools performed worse on average than other public schools in the same district. On the other hand, there is a definite learning curve at work. At the state's oldest surviving charters, performance has tended to improve after a decade or so.

The study also found that the predicted competitive effect on district schools is actually occurring, but minimally. Unfortunately, the effect is not being felt where it is most needed. According to Jason Barr, the study's author, "Some districts, like Newark, don't appear to be affected by charter school performance. Since a number of charter schools in the state's big cities are floundering at the moment, their ability to force district schools to be more competitive is limited."

Given these apparently modest results, it is tempting to dismiss the state's charter movement as a promising idea that has not lived up to its potential. "I wouldn't say that their impact has been entirely negative—I think you've had some success stories in charter schools, certainly," says Steve Baker, a spokesperson for the NJEA. "But they're not a panacea." Charter advocates believe it is way too early in the process to write off the schools as a mere blip on the state's educational radar. "When you look at the statistics, you might be looking at some schools that are only one, two, three years old. They may not have had enough time to catch

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up," says Gordon.

Many schools do catch up with other district schools in student performance, but more than a few charters have failed to make it beyond their first few years. While the state's charter law granted the schools greater freedom than their district counterparts—including the freedom to control their own curricula and to hire non-union faculty—that freedom is balanced by greater accountability: If the state deems a charter unsuccessful for academic, financial, or administrative reasons, it can close it down. Since 1997, that's been the fate of fifteen charters, most of them shuttered after three years of operation or less.

Ten of the state's original thirteen charters have endured beyond the decade mark, some emerging as among the best schools in the state, others still struggling to overcome obstacles. Together, they offer an opportunity to examine what's gone right—and wrong—in the state's charter movement to date.

Set at the southernmost end of an expansive, tree-fringed campus, the Princeton Charter School reflects the community it serves: comfortable, safe, and geographically removed from the turmoil of the state's urban communities and inner-city public schools. This is not your typical charter school, at least not in New Jersey, where the vast majority are in economically depressed urban neighborhoods. But it is proof that top-rated schools and stratospheric SAT scores do not necessarily guarantee community satisfaction. Even in Princeton, it appears, parents are hungry for alternatives to the status quo. Those who helped found Princeton Charter were frustrated by what they saw as experimental teaching methods in the district schools and a curriculum that emphasized the construction of dioramas over traditional book-learning. "The founders who wrote the charter wanted a more rigorous education for their children and felt that in some cases the education their children got was too dependent on which teacher they were assigned," says Charles Marsee, the school's retiring head of school.

The curriculum concentrates on English and math, with a strong emphasis on writing; this is the kind of place where kids still learn how to diagram a sentence and are expected to do long division without a calculator. Test scores bear out the program's success. For the past five years, the middle school has had the highest number of "advanced proficient" scores in math and science in the state.

For that, Marsee credits the curriculum and the school's quality of instruction. "We've been very good and very fortunate in bringing together an outstanding faculty," he says. Some charters experience high teacher turnover—in part because of an inability to keep up with district pay levels. "We're not paid quite what the regional district is, but our board works very hard to see that the salaries are the best they can be within our budget," says Norma Jean Byers, assistant head of school. "Only one teacher has left out of the original five that started there eleven years ago," Byers says. (There are currently 32 teachers on the Princeton Charter faculty.) She also attributes faculty loyalty to the supportive administrators, many of whom log regular classroom hours themselves.

It does not hurt that Princeton is among the wealthier communities in the state, with a median family income of about $123,000 (compared with about $70,000 for the state as a whole). Where many charters struggle to find and pay for facilities, which are not funded under the state's charter legislation, Princeton Charter owns its own building by the grace of a mortgage guaranteed by 30 of its well-to-do parents. Statistics bear out that budgets and expenditures do not necessarily equal high performance—the Newark district schools, for example, spend about $500 more per pupil than the state average. But attracting and keeping talented teachers is essential for charter school success, and Princeton can offer its faculty a safe, idyllic setting, a first-class facility, and highly motivated students—all thanks, in large part, to its upper-middle-class environment.

Last year, the Center for Education Reform, an organization promoting school choice, named Princeton Charter and the Hoboken Charter School among the best in the nation. It's probably not a coincidence that both schools serve a more affluent population than most other charters in the state. Camden's LEAP Academy University Charter School, on the other hand, serves the most impoverished population in the country, according to 2006 Census Bureau data. Half of all adults in Camden have not graduated from high school, and 50 percent of the city's students routinely fail the state's fourth-grade math and language arts proficiency tests.

All of that adds urgency to Gloria Bonilla-Santiago's already challenging job. As chair and founder of LEAP Academy, she has worked for eleven years to offer parents and students an alternative to conventional schools. Unlike many other charters in the state, LEAP has two top-quality facilities, built courtesy of a purchase-lease agreement with the Delaware River Port Authority. But LEAP has had considerable difficulties, including sub-par test scores, high teacher turnover, and, in 2005, a well-publicized tangle with union organizers.

"They tried to destroy us; they tried to derail us," says Bonilla-Santiago, referring to the NJEA, which fought to unionize LEAP's teachers. What was at stake, she says, was one of the school's guiding principles: that teachers should be paid for performance and fired if they do not meet expectations. The NJEA and teacher-organizers saw it differently. This was, they claimed, a fight for economic parity. The dispute divided faculty, alarmed parents, and distracted the administration. In the end, the teachers got their contract, but the school maintained its pay-for-performance program—something that Bonilla-Santiago feels is "critical to our survival."

The school continues to grapple with low test scores, a problem that Bonilla-Santiago attributes in large part to the deficits students face growing up in extreme poverty. "For years, these kids have been left behind," she says, "and we've been trying to get them to catch up, and some of them have and some of them haven't been able to." Unlike the administration at Princeton Charter, which links success closely to test scores, Bonilla-Santiago has a different definition: "We started with trailers; now we have two beautiful buildings," she says. "We've graduated four classes with 100-percent college placement in each of those classes. The children who've graduated have been saved from getting killed or being in the unemployment lines or the drug lines in Camden. I have a waiting list of 500 kids. So we must be doing something right."

Look at the stats for North Star Academy, and it is evident that an inner-city charter can overcome deficits of poverty and the limitations imposed by the state's charter legislation. Founded in 1997 as a middle school (serving fifth and sixth grades), then expanded in 2000 to include a high school, then a second middle school in 2004, and last year an elementary school that will add a grade each year for the next four years, North

Star certainly has the scores. In 2007, middle school and high school students tested significantly above the state average in language arts and math. North Star claims that all of its graduates have gone on to four-year colleges, where they are closely monitored by a North Star liaison to help them stay in school. For another truly meaningful statistic, consider that the waiting list consistently hovers around 2,000 students.

“There’s a crying need for free, high-quality public schools,” says James Verrilli, North Star’s cofounder and principal. Marilyn Lovett, a parent of two students at the charter, agrees. If her kids had not gotten into North Star, they would have gone on to Newark’s Camden Middle School, which she characterizes as “very bad.” “It’s a tough school,” she says. “My kids aren’t tough, so I don’t think they would have fared well, especially my son, Juan.” At North Star, however, Juan “got a lot of one-on-one attention; they helped him, built him up,” she says. When he entered North Star in the fifth grade he was getting C’s and D’s; now, says his mother, he sometimes makes it all the way to the honor roll.

How has North Star succeeded where other charters in the state, especially in urban settings, continue to struggle? Stand outside the North Campus–Middle School early in the morning and you will get an inkling. Three faculty members wait just beyond the cafeteria entrance to greet incoming students. The students smile, shake the adults’ hands, and wish each of them a good morning. Michael Mann, the middle school’s principal, admonishes a student whose shirt is untucked. It’s almost quaint—a scene you might have witnessed at a nineteenth-century boarding school—except that this is Newark’s North Ward and the students are almost exclusively African-American and Latino.

Mann explains the importance of what some might consider regimentation: “If we allow a random school culture,” he says, “we’re in danger of it becoming something negative.” To see what he means by “negative,” you only have to look at the vast majority of Newark district schools, bedeviled by gangs, truancy, and 50 percent dropout rates. So teachers and administrators at North Star keep the culture tightly controlled: Missed or sloppy homework assignments earn students same-day detention, and drills like the call-and-response of the school’s “morning circle” remind students of their goals and their worth.

And then there’s, well, love. “We’ve gathered people who care deeply about our children, and when you care deeply about someone you’re willing to commit and sacrifice for them,” says Verrilli. It is one way the school has been able to avoid the high rates of faculty turnover that have plagued other charters. But can you systematize love? And can any of North Star’s achievements be replicated elsewhere? In fact, Verrilli maintains, they are being replicated in nine other schools in the Uncommon Schools network, a nonprofit charter-management organization that includes Bedford–Stuyvesant Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn and True North Rochester Preparatory Charter School in upstate New York. He even cites a formula: “longer days; a longer year; extraordinary focus on instruction; a highly structured, safe, disciplined environment; and—this is where the love comes in—a commitment by the faculty to put the needs of children before the needs of adults.”

Lovett might add one more element to the formula: “They teach the kids what their roots are and understand what their future can be. They help them see beyond the four blocks they live in and let them know they’re bigger than that.”

North Star’s experience underscores the theory that charter success depends on hard work and a commitment to be different, but it also points to the fact that charters face obstacles district schools simply do not. Inevitably, most of those obstacles boil down to economics. Heather Ngoma, director of the Charter School Resource Center at Rutgers University, believes that the state’s charter schools on the whole are making significant strides—but, she adds, “We have miles to go.” She lays part of the blame on the charter legislation itself. “Overall, there was an underestimation of how absolutely critical equity in funding would be for these schools,” she says.

The inequity begins with 90 percent per-pupil funding. But add to that the fact that, until new legislation last year, the charters had no access to special state funding—and even now their access is limited. In fact, some charter advocates estimate the figure at closer to 80 percent. Then consider, says Ngoma, that charters have had to dig into their program budgets in order to pay for their facilities, and the percentage is whittled down even further.

Given the economic handicaps, charters can only survive, says Verrilli, if they have an administration that combines creative teaching strategies with strong business acumen. “Charter schools are both educational enterprises and organizations, and sometimes you get people who are only on one side of that coin,” he says. Charters also need a clear vision that sets them apart from the competition.

At Hoboken Charter, for instance, the school’s mission is based on the concept of “service learning,” a combination of strong academics and community awareness. Issues of social justice are not just embedded in the curriculum, they are tackled in the streets; students raise funds for homeless shelters and run an annual community health fair. Like Bonilla-Santiago, Hoboken principal Alfred Huereca looks at more than academics to measure his school’s performance. “You see kids honestly making a difference,” he says. “You see them growing up truly engaged and aware of issues of social justice, discrimination, global warming.”

Economic disadvantages may explain why fewer charters are being founded in the state. Last year, the Department of Education only granted a charter to one school. But if money is part of the problem, it can also, of course, be part of the solution.

In April, seven foundations—including the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—pledged a total of $19 million to help strengthen Newark’s charter schools. Newark mayor Cory Booker, long a booster of charter schools, continues to believe they are an essential element in the city’s educational landscape. “They bring innovation and new educational options that our city desperately needs to ensure that every child receives an excellent education,” Booker tells New Jersey Monthly. Charters, he is convinced, “will play a critical role in raising the bar for all our learning institutions.”

For Verrilli, it all comes down to a single, crucial concept: “The poor don’t have choices,” he says. “The actual, beautiful thing about charter schools is that they offer choice to parents who haven’t really had options in the past”—which may be reason enough to hope that the state’s charters continue to surmount the obstacles.

Herbert Ruth: A Charter School Success Story

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