

Proliferation of Charter Schools Signals Their Growing Success

By Laurel Shaper Walters

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

ST. LOUIS

IN his 25-year career as an educator, Joe Nathan has seen plenty of education reforms come and go.

"But I've never seen one that challenges the existing power structure as the charter-school idea does," says the author of the just published "Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education."

The creation of tax-supported schools that are free from most state and district regulation is a fundamental shift for public education. Yet it appeals to people, Mr. Nathan says in a phone interview from Minnesota, because it "taps into three strongly held American values: opportunity, choice, and responsibility."

Today, nearly 500 charter schools are operating in the 25 states with charter-school laws. Nathan predicts there will be up to 700 charters by fall.

One reason for the galloping pace of the charter-school movement is the widespread frustration with poor public schools. For public-education believers like Nathan, charter schools are more appealing than providing publicly funded vouchers for private schooling. "The discussion about vouchers has certainly made this seem like a more reasonable approach," Nathan says.

While he is convinced that the current education system needs to be challenged, Nathan says that challenge must be constructed carefully.

"This is not just about creating new schools or conversion of existing schools," Nathan says. "It's also about encouraging the existing system to improve by providing fair and thoughtful competition."

In many places that is already beginning to happen. Nathan cites examples of school districts

across the nation that have responded with Montessori preschools or other special programs after parents and teachers began the process of opening a charter school to meet that interest.

He is convinced that charter schools offer a more fair and constructive choice than the magnet schools now popular in many cities. "We have some extremely elitist [magnet] schools in the United States that go by the name of public but actually are, in my opinion, quasi-private, elite schools that are publicly supported," Nathan says.

More than half of the secondary magnet schools in the United States today have admission tests, and many spend more money per student than other public schools. Charter schools are not allowed to have admission

tests and spend exactly the same per pupil as other public schools.

"It's important to talk about not the rhetoric of public education but the reality," Nathan says. "The reality, as I see it, is we have an intensely unfair choice system. We don't have common schools anything like what Horace Mann talked about."

Nathan is convinced that the charter-school movement can bring the country back toward Mann's original ideal of providing a high-quality education to a diverse student body.

"This is no longer just theory," Nathan says. "There is very clear evidence conducted by outside evaluators that these schools are helping kids. Several studies have

found that charter schools are more racially diverse than the other public schools where they operate."

After spending many years working in alternative schools, Nathan is not surprised that charter schools are attracting a diverse group of students with many special needs. "Parents don't move their children if the kids are doing well," he says. "The kids who are not making it in traditional schools are looking for an alternative to dropping out."

Nathan wrote his book for the parents and educators who had been calling him every week by the dozen. They were attracted to the possibilities of a new approach to education. "This is really a movement about hope and possibility," the author says. "It focuses on using people's best ideas."

Charter Schools In Limbo Under New D.C. Board

Officials Are Renegotiating Previous Regime's Agreements

By Debbi Wilgoren
Washington Post Staff Writer

A proposed charter school for District special education students will not open this year and may be scrapped altogether because the new people in charge of public education in the city are renegotiating a six-month-old agreement between the school's founders and the D.C. school board.

KIDS 1 Inc., a well-regarded company that runs four schools in New Jersey and Florida, wants to teach D.C. students with severe learning disabilities, a population chronically neglected by the public school system's special education branch.

The company spent six months and \$200,000 to lease a former middle school building, correct fire code violations, buy equipment and hire staff. It found more than 50 students willing to enroll and in January said it was ready to open the High Roads Public Charter School, which, like all charter schools, would operate with public funds but would be largely independent of the public school bureaucracy.

By then, however, the alleged assault on a reporter by the director of the Marcus Garvey Public Charter School had brought notoriety to the city's year-old charter school program. School board members conceded that they knew little about any of the five proposed charter schools they had rushed to approve last summer after Congress authorized their creation.

In addition, the D.C. school administration had been taken over by an emergency trustee board and a chief executive, Julius W. Becton Jr., who in early February hired a former congressional aide to oversee charter school activities. And a newly elected member of the D.C. Board of Education, Robert G. Childs (At Large), had been named chairman of the committee that approves charter schools.

The two officials now have launched a review of all five charter schools, only two of which opened in the fall. They have concerns about High Roads' educational program, per-pupil spending and transportation—issues not addressed when the old school board approved its charter—and won't give the school the go-ahead to open.

"We had to go back and start from the very beginning," said Childs, who is chairman of the school board's education committee. "We're moving as quickly on this as we possibly can. We want them to open, but we have to make sure that it's done correctly."

But after a two-hour meeting Friday with D.C. school administrators, KIDS 1 Chief Executive David Winikur said through a spokeswoman that he can no longer afford to wait. Last week, he laid off staff he had hired for the

school, had decorations removed from classroom walls and told parents of students he had hoped to enroll that he was sorry it didn't work out.

"Every day that our school is open . . . without having students, it's a tremendous drain on our resources," said a company spokeswoman, Janet Beales. "We're just at the point where we can't continue diverting our time from all the other special education students" at the company's other schools.

Winikur said he does not believe the remaining problems will be addressed quickly, in part because his longstanding difficulties communicating and working with D.C. school system staff have not disappeared with the new administration.

He said he has trouble, for example, reaching Richard Wenning, the former congressional aide Becton hired to oversee charter schools.

Wenning spent his first two weeks on the job without a direct telephone number. Winikur still contacts him

through the school system switchboard, which is on another floor of the school administration building. Delivering messages can take hours.

Others involved in creating and running charter schools cite similar frustrations. Cathy Martens, director of the Options Public Charter School, the only other approved charter school besides Garvey that has opened, said school system staff members have scheduled meetings without notice and given her the wrong dates for appointments.

Martens and Winikur said they have struggled with the school system's special education branch, which Becton acknowledges is deeply troubled and which the charter schools must rely on for referrals and some testing of students.

At a Feb. 10 school board hearing, representatives of several charter schools said their requests for federal grants had not been processed by the D.C. school system, apparently because the person who had that job retired in December and did not pass on the applications. Childs said he hopes to get the process sorted out this month.

The bureaucratic tangle ignores youngsters such as Phillip Hull, 14, who is dyslexic and has been waiting since December to enroll at the High Roads school.

Phillip thrived in special education classes at Takoma Middle School, according to his mother, Norma Hull, but his learning problems were not addressed when he began ninth grade at Calvin Coolidge High School in the fall.

Hull withdrew her son from Coolidge in December after he told her a teacher had said he should learn a trade because he would never make

it in college. She has been teaching him at home and looking for a suitable special education program. Until last week, she thought High Roads was the answer.

"I'm doing the best I can to make sure he gets an education, but I want him in a school setting," said Hull, who has two years of college studying drama education and no training in teaching or in dealing with dyslexia.

Martens, whose Options school teaches 100 students who were at least two grade levels behind when they left D.C. public schools, said the High Roads school is desperately needed because there are so few good special education programs in D.C. schools.

"There's nowhere for these children to go, and that's the terrible tragedy of all this," Martens said. "The school would be a wonderful alternative for kids in the District."

gave details (not unlike some I remember from my own past). Then, like, it turned out that, the girl who had done the slapping, was like, right in the third row.

How unlikely.

The discussion that followed was a little like a roller coaster and a little like a storm. (Like some I've had with my own daughter at this age.) Then the roller coaster just stopped.

Could I get the kids moving again, to think beyond the facts, to liken a specific event to something general? Not likely.

So I tried talking music — what do you like? Then I tried the experience of being teased by a classmate or caught by a teacher, what's that feel like? I even critiqued some of the doodling I saw unfolding on papers in the front row — there were actually some pretty good likenesses. There was also the growing

likelihood — later confirmed by those doodles — that my effort was, like, boring.

I didn't like this because I like to think I can involve kids.

But like minds think alike. And these minds didn't like my effort.

These kids were not like the ones of younger grades I had visited or even much like themselves when they were in younger grades.

They were, like, almost teenagers, and their moods were changing and hard to read, and, really, who likes putting their feelings in the spotlight anyway?

My daughter is like that some days. And unlike that on the very next days. And sometimes like and unlike that in the same day.

So just when I thought there was no likelihood I had reached anyone, a girl

who hadn't said anything in this tough crowd offered to read a sketch of an experience she had just written.

It was not like anything I expected. She seemed to like it, for one thing. It used senses to explore feelings. It started with herself and in a few words reached out to include others. Just like my original plan.

"Early this morning I was walking to school. I had the strange feeling I was going to be late. As my thoughts rambled, I thought about the sun shining on my back and about the breezy wind. I felt lost and unprepared for the day. So I walked faster. And I felt better as I saw the other kids who were walking, as well."

I liked that.

Peter Landry is a writer and editor in Bryn Mawr. ■

55. Philadelphia Inquirer

May 27, 1997

Re-charting a course

A compromise between Gov. Ridge and lawmakers could finally allow charter schools in Pa.

After months of wrangling with state lawmakers, Gov. Ridge has softened his stance on charter school legislation — giving hope that a few such alternative public schools might actually open next year.

It's about time.

Charter schools are public schools that get state aid but are operated independently of existing systems, in hopes of spurring innovation and providing options to students of failing schools. They have begun in 26 other states (including Delaware and New Jersey) and total about 500 nationwide.

Since 1991, most charter pupils have gained ground academically, says Minnesota educator/charter expert Joe Nathan.

Gov. Ridge and lawmakers in both parties say they want to authorize charter schools. The struggle is over how free from existing state regulations charter schools should be, in terms of curriculum, staffing, facilities and other issues. The more free from regulation charters get, the more they seem to some like unaccountable private schools funded by the public dollar.

Senate Bill 999 includes reasonable compromises (due to concessions from Gov. Ridge) that should reassure skeptics charters aren't just a sneaky way to decimate public schools.

Under the bill, charters would have to abide by current state education rules on civil rights, health and safety, and attendance. But charters would get automatic waivers from program rules on matters such as scheduling and course offerings.

This is looser than in New Jersey, which requires schools to request such waivers, but much better than the blanket waiver of all rules that Gov. Ridge had sought.

The bill also forbids special admissions or IQ tests for prospective pupils but does allow organizers to set reasonable criteria that mesh with a particular school's mission (similar to how public magnet schools work now). So a student interested in a science charter may be required to take biology before applying. A reasonable stance.

The bill says at least 50 percent of parents and 50 percent of teachers must approve the conversion of an existing

school into a charter. Again, a fair standard.

A potential deal breaker — how many noncertified people could teach in a charter — has been neutralized. The bill sets the minimum number of certified teachers at 75 percent, not the 60 percent Gov. Ridge originally sought.

States vary widely on certification, ranging from requiring that all charter teachers be certified, as in New Jersey, to allowing none to be, as in Massachusetts.

This bill finds a solid middle ground for Pennsylvania.

The charter debate sheds light on the separate, but vital, issue of whether, and how, the state should certify teachers who lack the traditional training.

The teaching certificate is a credential that supposedly connotes quality — but defines quality mostly as the number of graduate courses taken. Particularly at the secondary level, the fear is this approach excludes high-quality candidates who have mastery of a subject area, but no taste for grinding through several years of graduate education classes.

A side benefit of charters might be as a setting to test the notion that subject

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mastery and life experience are at least as solid a foundation for good teaching as theory classes. ■

56. New York Daily News

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Cut Student Aid, Lose Fine Minds

By E.R. Shipp

Bill Cosby had them rolling in the aisles at George Washington University during graduation. President Clinton used his turn at Morgan State University to rev up the nation's scientific engines to find a cure for AIDS in the next decade.

But, in my book, Antonio Freitas had them beat hands down as a commencement speaker last week.

Who is Antonio Freitas?

He is a 28-year-old survivor of the school of hard knocks, who, with personal drive and the help of a state-supported financial aid and tutorial program, finished No. 1 in his class at Columbia University's School of General Studies. Indeed, the five A's he earned his last semester — instead of his usual A-pluses — actually brought his average down to 4.14!

Freitas, class valedictorian, hails from a family that, as he put it, "never really had that much." When he was 4, his mother was stabbed to death by a mugger near the family's lower East Side apartment. His father, a struggling jazz musician with a substance abuse problem, was away a lot.

Still, despite the unstable home life, he did okay in school until his sophomore year at Bronx Science, when a rebellious streak kicked in, he dropped out and his family hastily moved to Philadelphia to hide from his father's enemies. Father-son battles escalated; son turned to the bottle.

One day, he said, neighbors called the police in the midst of a loud argument between the two. The younger Freitas, drunk, "got belligerent" with the cops and found himself under arrest for assault. After a month in juvenile detention, he said, he escaped during a court appearance and made his way back to New York City.

After living with friends for a couple of months, he snared a construction job that came with a room in an SRO, "a depressing kind of place for a 15, 16-year-old kid to be," he said. His drug problem worsened. Fisticuffs became more routine.

"Then I hit rock bottom. I had to sell my tools," he said. "That's when I realized I couldn't go on like that."

Freitas cleaned himself up and spent the next few years turning his life around. A former girlfriend of his father told him about a program at SUNY-Purchase, where she worked, that would cover his tuition.

He enrolled and did well. Then, in a chance conversation in the gym, he learned about a similar program at Columbia. He came to investigate the Ivy League campus he had visited before as a bicycle messenger.

"So, climbing the Lewisohn steps to apply here," he said at graduation, "I wondered: Whom am I kidding? How could I have believed that this elite institution would want an uneducated,

unwealthy someone like me?"

The rest is summed up thusly: He has his bachelor's degree, is Phi Beta Kappa and is on his way to Yale for a Ph.D. in a clinical psychology program that accepted five applicants out of a pool of 400.

He now counsels at-risk kids, trying to help them "picture a life different from the one that exists for them now." But even he knows that conveying that message — and persuading kids to act upon it — is but one piece of the solution.

Another piece involves reshaping the thinking of lawmakers who see higher education for all New Yorkers as a luxury the state can no longer afford. While raising tuition at SUNY and CUNY, Gov. Pataki has presided over cuts to financial aid programs that benefit students at both the public institutions of higher learning and private ones like Columbia. But this year, unlike in past years, there's a revenue surplus, and the pressure is mounting on lawmakers to increase spending for higher education.

As Freitas accepts his accolades, he makes it clear that state-supported initiatives like the Tuition Assistance Program and Higher Education Opportunity Program "allowed me the chance to pursue a life I previously never could have imagined for myself."

That's a lesson for the governor and legislators to add to their subtraction. ■

57. Washington Times

May 27, 1997

My life as a plebe

By Richard Grenier THE WASHINGTON TIMES

was marching somberly in ranks — we marched everywhere in those days — on my way back from a plebe course in engineering. My platoon came to a

halt by the Fourth Battalion wing of Bancroft Hall, the huge dormitory lodging Naval Academy midshipmen of all classes. But just before falling out, my platoon encountered "my" First Classman.

Unfortunately, there he stood on the Fourth Battalion terrace, and more unfortunately, he smiled at me. Obliging I smiled back. But the most unfortunate thing of all was that just a few steps further on stood the Battalion