

FEATURES

Revitalizing Public Education with Charter Schools

by Thomas G. Scullen and Carol Goelzer

It's been nearly a decade since Wisconsin's first charter school law passed in 1993, one of the earliest such laws in the nation, allowing 10 school districts to pilot up to two charter schools each. Thirteen charter schools resulted from that law. The Legislature expanded the program in 1995 when it authorized all school boards in the state to sponsor charter schools, with no cap on the total number. Today, 128 charter schools are operating in Wisconsin.

The charter school legislation allowed the creation of options that are flexible and effective. With the legislation came the hope that high expectations for performance; clearly articulated curriculums; committed, highly-skilled staff; motivated students; and involved parents would create a formula for successful new schools.

Some examples of this year's new programs include the following:

- TESLA Engineering Charter School in Appleton, which is designed to provide a solid foundation in established engineering practices, as well as expose students to the skills and knowledge they will need to further their pursuits of engineering degrees.
- Project Change Charter School in Waukesha, which is designed to provide students recovering from chemical dependency a temporary, safe haven where they can be with peers experiencing similar struggles.
- Health Academy Charter School in Eau Claire, which is designed to provide an opportunity to get ahead start on a career in the health field, while experiencing "hands-on" learning and using state-of-the-art equipment and labs.

Charter School Basics

A charter school is a public school financed by the same per-pupil revenues as a traditional school. The charter school law gives the school freedom from the traditional state mandates and regulations. In return for this freedom, charter schools are held accountable by contract (charter) for student performance, financial matters and effective school operations. With the freedom from state mandates comes great flexibility to design curriculums that meet the individual needs of all participating students so that none are left behind. The philosophy that we should give all students the best education possible is in keeping with the No Child Left Behind Act, which President Bush signed into law on January 8, 2002.

In April 1996, we both attended a conference, Charter Schools in Wisconsin, in Racine to determine if charter schools could fill needs in our school districts. The excitement among the presenters and other participants at the conference was contagious. The operators of existing charter schools brought stacks of information to share with those of us considering charter schools. The possibilities seemed limitless for school boards to sponsor schools that would offer innovative curriculums, delivered in nontraditional ways, to better teach students with differing learning styles. Charter schools could serve at-risk students for whom all other programs have failed; students who are homebound; students interested in

curriculums based on themes, such as fine arts or technology; or students needing more academic challenges.

We also learned of issues to be addressed in establishing charter schools, including those relating to public relations, governance, budgets and accountability. Good public relations are all-important for the successful establishment of charter schools. In setting a vision for the future, an effective superintendent and board of education should promote the use of all tools available, including charter schools, to pave a path to excellence. Leadership requires a strong sense of getting "ahead of the curve" to predict, offer and promote programs that are needed. The superintendent and board of education should involve the entire community in the establishment of charter schools because collaboration is the driving force behind any endeavor, especially educational ones. The federal government, through the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, provides charter school planning grants based on innovation, accountability, staff, and community and parental involvement.

The Role of School Boards

The primary charter school authorizers are school boards. They can accept petitions from groups interested in starting charter schools or they can initiate the schools themselves. Once a school board decides to sponsor a charter school, a charter (or contract) is drawn up to include governance, budget and accountability issues, among other issues. This charter is an important contract between the school board and the charter school. If the school does not live up to its terms, the school board may decide not to renew it, and the school can be closed. Therefore, it is very important to write a thoughtful and detailed charter.

Governance issues are probably the most sensitive ones. School board members are elected by citizens to educate their children in the best way possible. Superintendents are hired by school boards for the same purpose. It is hard to let go of control when so much is at stake. But, innovation requires giving up some of that control. Charter schools have their own advisory or governing boards. It is imperative that the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the district school board, district administration, charter school board, and charter school staff be carefully delineated in the charter. Some charter schools have reported feeling "swallowed up" by their school districts, their unique identities lost.

The budget may include money from implementation grants, also available through the DPI. Implementation grants are available during each of the first two years of charter school operation for up to \$150,000 per year. We can't state strongly enough how important it is to pay careful attention to detail when writing both the planning and implementation grants. The grant readers pay special attention to the research cited in applications, and we will see a significant focus on research-based initiatives for improved student achievement over the next five years. Some charter schools use fundraising as a means to supplement their budgets, often seating influential or wealthy citizens on their governing boards. That shouldn't be necessary if the charter school students are treated with financial equity. As stated before, charter students are included in the state school aid formula. In order for a charter school to have the flexibility it needs for innovation and creativity, the school board must allow the school to make as many of its own budgetary decisions as possible.

The last issue is accountability. Again, the charter (or contract) is the key to this issue. How student progress will be assessed should be written down in detail. Measures of success might include attendance, discipline, state test scores, grades and parent satisfaction. We strongly suggest pre-testing students before they enter the school, so that advancement can be verified at any time. The initial contract is for up to five years. At the end of that

time, the school board will look to see if the charter school has lived up to its charter before renewing it. Perhaps the ultimate accountability is reflected in parents and students choosing particular charter schools. Successful schools will attract students.

Charter schools have come a long way since the conference in Racine.

Then, as now, approximately half of the charter schools accepted the challenge of developing alternative programs for students not finding success in traditional programs. Educators, parent leaders and elected officials recognize the need to develop innovative programs targeted at dropouts and low-performing students. Our traditional programs have worked well for 90 percent of our students. However, we have not been effective with the other 10 percent in issues of behavior, health, family or learning.

The other half of charter schools, those for other than at-risk students, offer an amazing variety of curriculums.

Charter schools have, indeed, come a long way I but so much more is necessary to fulfill the hopes and dreams of the early charter school proponents. Superintendents and school boards have the power to change the course of public education by sponsoring charter schools that promise innovation and vision. After such charter schools are established, these same superintendents and school boards must allow as much autonomy as possible. Because of this autonomy, as well as freedom from most state mandates, charter schools can expeditiously address the needs of today's students in order to improve the quality of their lives for tomorrow. Our youth need to feel connected to the society they are preparing to enter. Charter schools are very important tools we can use to make sure that no child is left behind in the exciting future that awaits all of our children.

To find out more about charter schools and the school board's significant role as an authorizer of charter schools, please contact us. As directors of the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association, we can help you learn more about the exciting opportunities that are available to your school district.

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