



The Charter School Update Task Force presents the following report based on an evaluation of five charter schools. There is no recommendation to change the LWVNJ existing position which "supports the intent of the charter school legislation to encourage innovation within our public schools."

The Task Force will present a workshop in the fall of 2007 to train local Leagues in the procedure for visiting charter schools with the goal of expanding the Task Force's data collection.

The League of Women Voters of New Jersey

Charter School Task Force

Introduction and History

In 1999, after a four-year study, the League of Women Voters of New Jersey adopted a position on charter schools. The 1999 position supported charter schools as a way to stimulate innovation within K-12 public education; an underlying premise of the League's position was that charter schools, which are public schools funded primarily through local property taxes, had the flexibility to develop innovative approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, and school management, including parental involvement. A key provision of the League's position was that the New Jersey Department of Education should disseminate successful innovative practices developed by charter schools to all school districts and other charter schools throughout the state. Another key provision of the League's position was that charter schools should not drain resources from local school districts since local school districts educate the majority of students.

At the League of Women Voters of New Jersey bi-annual convention in May 2005, the Education and Fiscal Policy Committee agreed to investigate the current status of charter schools. To launch its study, the Education and Fiscal Policy Committee asked Jennifer Langer, Executive Director of the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association to speak at the League's fall 2005 workshops. Ms Langer focused on the funding of charter schools. She mentioned that that charter schools receive only 90% of the "Thorough and Efficient" (T&E) amount determined for the sending district's funds; she also stated that while there is a fiscal impact on local public schools, the fiscal impact was not as great as believed, because many districts spend more than the T& E amount that is allotted on a per pupil basis to charter school students.

Between late fall 2005 and the spring of 2007, the Education and Fiscal Policy

Committee visited six charter schools, spoke with four superintendents of the host districts, attended charter school board meetings and attended two statewide conferences of the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association. In addition, the LWVNJ Education and Fiscal Policy Committee reviewed documents from the New Jersey Department of Education.

This report summarizes key findings and discusses possible implications for the LWVNJ position on charter schools.

Key Findings

Basic Facts: In 1999, there were over 67 charter school applications received by the New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Vocational, Technical and Innovative Programs. As of November, 2006, there were 57 operating charter schools serving over 14,000 students in grades Pre-K through 12. Charter schools were operating in 13 of New Jersey's 21 counties. (See list by county at the end of this report.)

The average enrollment in a charter school was 193 students, with an average class size of 17 students. The average school year was 186 days and the average length of the school day was just over seven hours.

Most charter schools select students by a lottery entered by the child's parents. Siblings are accommodated if the parents so choose. Students may continue to attend the charter school even if the family moves out of district.

In New Jersey, like most of the 40 states that have charter schools, charter schools are more likely to serve poor, minority students than traditional public schools. However, New Jersey's charter schools are much less likely to serve children with disabilities and children with limited English proficiency as compared with traditional public schools. (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter3rdyer/Chtml> retrieved November 6 2006).

Perspectives of Charter Schools: Reasons parents choose a charter school include:

- Students have a longer school day and year to increase learning;
- Parents perceive that charter schools provide a safer environment;
- Parents want a smaller class size for their children;
- Parents are impressed with the innovation or theme of a particular charter school;
- Parents believe that charter schools have a high expectation for academic achievement.

Financing of facilities continues to be a major issue for charter schools. State funds are not allocated for facilities, but some funding is provided through start-up grants and private sources. Many schools acquire funds for facilities from their operating expenses.

Charter schools' conduct of board meetings follow protocols used by Boards of Education. The meetings attended by the LWVNJ Education and Fiscal Policy

Committee demonstrated that minutes of meetings were recorded, agenda items were approved, and correspondence was acknowledged, and there were reports from the Treasurer and Chief Educational Administrator.

Workshops held during the 2005 and 2006 annual meetings of New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association indicated that charter schools have a keen interest in developing valid assessment of student successes and business oversight. At one 2006 workshop, a panelist asked charter school representatives how many had good working relationships with their host district, and only two raised their hands.

Perspectives of Host Districts: Charter schools serve fewer than 10% of the district's students, so concerns about decimating the school population of local schools districts seem unwarranted. According to one superintendent, while there had been concern of a charter school "brain drain" in the past, there a fewer students leaving and many have returned from charter schools to their host district.

Districts reported that little or no sharing of innovative programs occurs. Two superintendents said they would welcome dialogue with charter schools about innovative practices.

One superintendent expressed dismay that there is a lack of control over charter school funding and educational policy.

Implications for the LWVNJ

The underlying premise of the League's charter school position is that charter schools have the potential for stimulating innovation that can be helpful to all K-12 public school students. Results from the qualitative study conducted by the League's Education and Fiscal Policy Committee indicate that to date, there are no systems in place to ensure dissemination of successful innovations; moreover, at the informal, grassroots level of local school districts, there does not seem to be any processes for discussing successful approaches to pedagogy, curriculum, or overall school management between the host district and the charter school.

Findings from this qualitative study raise several questions:

1. Does the Department of Education Office of Innovative Practices and Vocational Studies provide adequate supervision to make sure the wide range of special education and ESL state requirements are being met?
2. Is there any empirical evidence of academic success among charter school students? If so, might the higher performance among some charter schools be correlated with parental self-selection?
3. Does the LWVNJ need to update its position on charter schools based on the lack

of evidence of innovation based on this report?

Given these findings, however tentative given the small sample size, the LWVNJ might well support efforts to:

1. Define what criteria constitute innovation in K-12 charter schools; these criteria should be the basis for awarding and evaluating each charter given to a charter school.
2. Develop a system whereby charter schools can regularly disseminate their successes with all public school educators.
3. Support efforts to promote safety in schools. It was disheartening to members of the League's Education and Fiscal Policy Committee to learn that some parents choose charter schools, because they perceive that these smaller schools will provide a safe environment for their student. In the League's judgment, school safety is a basic right of all students, and is not a sufficient rationale for awarding a school charter.
4. Continue to support funding for traditional public schools. Given that the superintendents did not express concern that funding for charter schools posed hardships on their districts, the League should continue to monitor funding arrangements for charter schools so that traditional public schools are not shortchanged in the future.

Appendix A: Report of Visits to Five Charter Schools

Great Brunswick Charter School was begun in 1998 and is a regional school with students from Edison, Highland Park, and New Brunswick. Of the 208 enrollment, most students live in New Brunswick. The city of New Brunswick provides bus transportation within the city limits; students from the other towns are responsible for their own transportation. Pull-out sessions with certified special education teachers and in-class support is given. No ESL or bilingual classes exist, but language immersion is incorporated in the Basic Skills program. Thirty teachers have an “affiliated union” membership with the state NEA, and bargain collectively with the administration.

There is an Executive Director and part time Education Director and Business Administrator. The school was founded by parents and many volunteers who serve on the Board of Trustees. Rutgers University has a co-op student teacher training program and their students work in the classes. An observation of a 3-4 grade class included four adults: teacher, teacher’s aide, Rutgers student teacher, and a Special Education instructor. Students are divided into a class that encompasses two grades each.

Twenty students were having a math lesson. Students worked cooperatively on math packets with few manipulative. Personal Educational Plans are developed for each student and are project based. Fifth to eighth grades have electives. Discipline guidelines involve home instruction, suspension, counseling and following 504 requirements (which are mandated). It is believed that no drug problems exist.

Princeton Charter School opened in September 1997. It is located in a quiet neighborhood on a “campus” consisting of an administration building, a school for students from K-4 and a third building for students from grades 5-8. Their school day and calendar year mirror the district schools. The average class size is 20. There are after school activities including tutoring, chess, French and instrumental music. The school scores highly in academic achievement and has been designated by the Federal Government as a Blue Ribbon School. The median faculty experience is five years. The median administrative salary is one of the state’s highest. There is a two year algebra program in grades 7-8. There is no “on-going dialogue” between the district and the Princeton Charter School.

Red Bank Charter School is an example of a charter school in a non-Abbott district. Red Bank sends its students to the regional high school with students from Little Silver and Shrewsbury, wealthier communities than Red Bank. The idea for the charter school came from civic-minded community members concerned by a lack of academic achievement by students from Red Bank elementary schools. Only one board member has a child in the Red Bank Charter School. Parents are active volunteers. The school mission is “strength in academics, character development, and service”. Charter school leadership has made a strong attempt to create an innovative partnership with community businesses. Eighth grade students “intern” once weekly with local businesses, such as a stock brokerage, a

modeling school and a theater group.

Red Bank Charter School has had a difficult history. The former Superintendent of Red Bank schools, felt that the Charter drains money from the district and threatens the employment of a small number of teachers in the high school. RBCS was also fined \$1m because it let no-bid contracts in adapting its present building. The poor relationship between the district and RBCS prevent any “sharing of innovative methods”. The Red Bank Charter School principal states that the new superintendent may be able to improve the situation. Financial resentments remain unresolved.

Team Academy located in Newark, has a radically different school program from other public middle schools. It is a Kipp school, operated by this national organization that provides teacher development .It is also aided by Montclair Kimberly Academy, a private school. Montclair Kimberly Academy cooperates with Team Academy in their art program, provides tutors, and raises funds to purchase books for the Team library. Team Academy accepts students from grades 5-8, and has a total of 350 students. There are no special education classes; in-class support is given for students that need additional attention. There are nine hours of instruction daily. Saturday mornings are reserved for sports, art and music. The school year runs an additional three weeks beyond the Newark District School calendar.

Village Charter School is a K-8 charter school located in West Trenton. As is true with all charter schools, Village Charter School is required to take state mandated tests and is subject to No Child Left Behind review. It has met NCLB standards and has increased its scores in math from those in 2003-2004 to 2004-2005. Enrollment is 332, which gave an

| Charter School | Grade level | Number of Students | Student /Teacher Ratio | County | High Schools Students Attend |
|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|--|
| Greater New Brunswick | K-8 | 208 | 20/2** | Middlesex | New Brunswick HS North Brunswick HS* HSHHS North |
| Princeton | K-8 | 290 | 10.7/1 | Mercer | Princeton HS- 80%.20%-other Private-20% HS-80%Other O |
| Red Bank | K-8 | | 18/2** | Monmouth | Red Bank Regional HS Private-HS 1% |
| Team Academy | 5-8 | 350 | 27/1 | Essex | Preparatory. Schools Other Private HS |
| Village | K-8 | 352 | 18/1 | Mercer | Trenton HS* Private |

*** All numbers are approximate

** The number 2 indicates that one teacher is a classroom aide.

* The majority of the students attend the district high school.

Participating Superintendents

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|---|
| Dr. Marion A. Bolden, Superintendent Newark Public schools 2 Cedar Street Newark, NJ 07101 |
| Dr. Richard Kaplan, Superintendent Public Schools of New Brunswick Baldwin Avenue New Brunswick, NJ 08901 |
| Dr. James Lytle, Superintendent Trenton Public Schools 108 North Clinton Ave. Trenton , NJ 08628 |
| Dr. Judith Wilson, Superintendent Princeton Regional School District Cherry Valley Rd. Princeton, NJ 08540 |

Appendix B: Approved Charter Schools as of November 2006

Atlantic County

Benchmark Academy Charter High School
chARTer~TECH High School for the Performing Arts
Galloway Community Charter School
Oceanside Charter School
PleasantTech Academy Charter School

Bergen County

Bergen Arts and Science Charter School
Englewood on the Palisades Charter School
Teaneck Community Charter School

Camden County

Camden Academy Charter High School
Camden's Promise Charter School
D.U.E. Season Charter School
Environment Community Opportunity Charter School (ECO Charter School)
Freedom Academy Charter School
LEAP Academy University Charter School (consolidated school in 2001)

Essex County

Adelaide L. Sanford Charter School
Discovery Charter School
East Orange Community Charter School
Gray Charter School
Greater Newark Charter School (formerly Newark, Greater Newark Academy Charter School)
Lady Liberty Academy Charter School
Maria L. Varisco-Rogers Charter School
Marion P. Thomas Charter School
New Horizons Community Charter School
North Star Academy Charter School of Newark
Robert Treat Academy Charter School
TEAM Academy Charter School
University Heights Charter School

Hudson County

Center for Responsible Economic and Technological Excellence Charter School (CREATE)
Elysian Charter School of Hoboken
Hoboken Charter School
Jersey City Community Charter School
Jersey City Golden Door Charter School
Learning Community Charter School
Liberty Academy Charter School
Schomburg Charter School
Soaring Heights Charter School
University Academy Charter High School

Mercer County

Emily Fisher Charter School of Advanced Studies
Foundation Academy Charter School
International Charter School of Trenton
PACE Charter School of Hamilton
Princeton Charter School
Trenton Community Charter School (consolidated school in 2001)
Village Charter School

Middlesex County

Central Jersey College Prep Charter School (Middlesex and Somerset County)
Greater Brunswick Charter School

Monmouth County

Academy Charter High School (Monmouth County)
Hope Academy Charter School (Monmouth County)
Red Bank Charter School

Morris County

Unity Charter School

Passaic County

Classical Academy Charter School of Clifton
Paterson Charter School for Science and Technology

Sussex County

Sussex County Charter School of Technology

Union County

Central Jersey Arts Charter School
Queen City Academy Charter School
Union County TEAMS (Technology, Engineering, Architecture, Math&Science) Charter School

Warren County

Ridge and Valley Charter School

*There were supposed to be 59 approved charter schools – Gateway has closed and TLC will not be opening as scheduled.

The following schools listed above are scheduled to open in the 2006-07 school year:

Benchmark Academy Charter High School
 Central Jersey Arts Charter School
 Central Jersey Charter School
 University Heights Charter School

The following schools listed above are scheduled to open in the 2007-08 school year:

Adelaide L. Sanford Charter School
 Bergen Arts and Science Charter School
 Foundation Academy Charter School