

THE GIRARD PRESS

November 15, 2006

Charter Schools Offer a Variety of Options, Possibilities

By John R. LaPlante

One of the more exciting changes in education in the last 15 years has been the growth of public charter schools. Charter schools are governed by an explicit contract between a school and an authorizing agency, and overseen by the state department of education. In exchange for a contract (the charter) that sets out academic and other goals, the school receives some freedom from the regulations that can cause bureaucratic headaches. If a charter school lives up to its contract, it continues; if not, it is closed.

There's been some discussion of charter schools in Kansas this year, and it has been easy to think that all charter schools are the same. But they are as different from each other as they are from traditional public schools.

For example, some public charter schools draw on the resources of companies wishing to address the serious educational challenges of the community. In an inner-city neighborhood of Chicago, where the dropout rate reaches 50 percent, the law firm of Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal overcame the resistance of the education establishment. It helped start a charter school and has pledged \$1 million in equipment and professional services over a five-year period. Not only do the school's teachers earn more than they would in other city schools, they can receive bonus pay for meeting student achievement goals.

Closer to home, two-thirds of the students at University Academy in Kansas City, Missouri, are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. But as its name suggests, this public charter school has very high expectations. Twelfth-grade students take a class called senior seminar, which offers special guidance on entering college. The school even offers a college coach for alumni. Like all public charter schools, University Academy has an open-enrollment policy.

In Florida, the Okaloosa-Walton Collegiate High School brings college to the high school years: it offers students the chance to earn a high school diploma and a two-year college degree at the same time. In Kansas, a charter school run by USD 490 (El Dorado) offers a similar program, though it is much more focused on vocational training.

Like magnet schools, public charter schools often have a particular emphasis in the curriculum. In Glendale, Arizona, the International Studies Academy is a 7-12 school that focuses on international relations and foreign languages. In Spring Lake, Michigan, the West Michigan Academy of Arts & Academics integrates the arts into the academic life of students. A few magnet schools in Kansas have similar curriculums.

A public charter school is free to use whatever approaches that its founders and chartering authorities agree to, as long as it continues to meet its goals. Some charter schools use a back-to-basics approach such as the Core Knowledge curriculum. By contrast, other charter schools use a progressive curriculum, which leaves more room for students to explore their own interests. Still other charter schools emphasize vocational skills.

Most public charter schools rely on traditional teacher-student interaction. But others, such as the Lawrence Virtual School, use technology to take distance education to the next level. The charter school movement, like the magnet school phenomenon before it, recognizes that a variety of approaches are needed to serve many different kinds of students.

So what's the difference between charter schools and magnet schools? Not enough, at least in Kansas. Under state law, charter schools, like magnet schools, are under the legal and financial control of the local school district. That's no surprise; this arrangement is written into the law, which requires charter schools to first get the approval of the local school district.

But the states that make the most effective use of the charter school concept, such as Arizona, Michigan, and Minnesota, take a more expansive approach. In those states, a variety of agencies can serve as chartering authorities, subject to the state department of education. So in addition to school districts, you will find public universities, charitable foundations, mayors, and other groups overseeing charter schools.

The charter school movement is a promising addition to the landscape of public education. Kansas has signed on, but only in a half-hearted way. There's still plenty of room to grow.

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Circulation – 1,467

Girard Press

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Opinion

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