MAKING CHOICES

A GROWING NUMBER OF FAMILIES IN PENNSYLVANIA AND ACROSS THE NATION ARE CHOOSING NEW SCHOOL OPTIONS AND REMOVING THEIR CHILDREN FROM TRADITIONAL PUBLIC CLASSROOMS. WHILE SCHOOL DISTRICT OFFICIALS FIGHT BACK, PHILANTHROPIES ARE SUPPORTING EDUCATION INNOVATION WHEREVER THEY CAN FIND IT.

BY CHRISTINE O'TOOLE PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA KYLE

On a bend above the wide Beaver River in western Pennsylvania, a small monument to public education has endured since 1844. • Ten generations of students passed beneath the bell mounted over the doorway of the Little Red Schoolhouse in Brighton Township. Sharing primers and desks in a single classroom, a fortunate few stayed until eighth grade, learning to read, write and cipher—the skills needed in a rural farming community. • The schoolhouse survives, but the education model that worked for 106 years in Beaver County is long gone: It's been systematically scrutinized, stratified, shaken up and wired. • In the decade since Pennsylvania allowed new charter and cyber schools a share of property tax dollars, students have steadily migrated to these new public schools. Meanwhile, local districts grapple simultaneously with population loss, tough new performance standards and a technological revolution that can deliver instruction worldwide. • Debates continue to erupt about the real value this type of "school choice" offers in helping students learn. Public school leaders locally and across the country question whether the new crop of schools prepare students any better than more traditional educational methods. Choice supporters fill their arsenals with anecdotal examples of academic improvements, heightened student self-esteem and increased parental involvement.

Photo by Robert E. Dourm

MY PARENTS WANT ME TO GET EVERYTHING I CAN OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL, SO THIS WORKS WELL FOR ME.

ERIN BURRY RIVERSIDE HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 2008

And research findings vary from state to state, says Gary Miron, an education professor with The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. The center has looked at the impact of school choice in nine states, including studies in Pennsylvania from 1999 to 2002, and found that charter schools perform better in some places than others. But a recurring pattern has been that during the early years of many charter schools, their students' academic achievement lags behind that of youngsters in traditional public schools with similar demographics. Then the scores catch up, only to level off in the end.

"In traditional schools, you have successes and failures, and in charter schools, you have successes and failures," says Miron. "I'm interested in looking at the question of whether charter schools generate more examples of [successful] innovation than traditional public schools."

Rather than rush to any conclusions, some philanthropies in western Pennsylvania carefully balance their support of charter, private, alternative and conventional public schools.

Joe Dominic, director of The Heinz Endowments' Education Program, notes that the Endowments and the Grable and Richard King Mellon foundations have been longtime partners in their support of education reform efforts. On one hand, they selectively fund a range of school choice options, which include a mix of alternative, parochial, private and charter schools that serve African-American children. On the other, they award grants to spur promising improvements within mainstream public education systems. Another recent education funder, the DSF Charitable Foundation, takes a similar approach.

The Education Program has approved a total of $130.2 million in grants in the 11-year period that it has been funding the school-choice agenda. About 13 percent has gone to alternative and charter schools, but a significant part of the foundation's grant making for public education has come from the Pathways to Educational Excellence agenda, a new strategic alliance of several program areas supporting the academic-reform plan for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Another $7.2 million has been approved through Pathways in the past two years. Marge Petruska, senior director of the Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program who also heads the Pathways team, says about $1.8 million has gone to provide programs and services to support a key part of the plan, eight accelerated learning academies that serve some of the neediest families in the district. "The Endowments is making a huge commitment to public education reform in partnership with other local foundations. We're all working very hard to make sure that with all the additional choice, basic support for academic reform isn't lost," she says.

Nationally, philanthropy's decade-long experiment in supporting educational choice includes the Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which recently announced a $10 million gift to support charters in Houston. As part of a strategy to improve and reinvigorate large urban school districts, the Broad Foundation, headquartered in Los Angeles, awards grants to charter management firms and traditional public schools, supporting each group to varying degrees depending on the city.

But Miron notes that the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which sets national education goals and standards, is placing pressure on all schools to be more accountable for student performance.

"The biggest factor affecting schools is No Child Left Behind, and it's not making them more innovative," he contends. "It's forcing traditional and charter schools … to teach to the [standardized] test."

OTHER OPTIONS

But just as schools resist standardization, so do their students.

Erin Burry, a senior at rural Riverside High School, has big goals. She wants to combine her passion for sports and writing in a future career as a sports broadcaster, and she's in a hurry to get

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started. The 18-year-old athlete is one of the first students to take advantage of Beaver County's new Regional Choice Initiative, which offers high school students the option of enrolling at other county high schools for courses not available at their own. Each day at 12:30 p.m., she slips out of choir class ten minutes early and drives down the road to Ellwood City High School for her dream class: Advanced Placement Composition.

"The course wasn't offered at Riverside, and Ellwood City had an open seat," she explains. By 1:40 p.m., she's back at Riverside, where she ends the day at varsity soccer practice. Friday nights are spent at local high school football games; Erin has volunteered to write reports on the games for a local online news site. She expects the AP course to sharpen her skills. "My parents want me to get everything I can out of high school," she says earnestly. "So this works well for me."

The Regional Choice Initiative evolved in response to a Beaver County dilemma. Fifteen small school districts in this low-growth county share two problems: Their tax bases and traditional school enrollments are shrinking.

At the same time, Pennsylvania's 120 charter schools are the fastest-growing in the Northeast, enrolling more than 60,000 students. One million students now attend 3,500 charter schools nationwide. The generally smaller schools offer different educational models, but they are bound by the same regulations and performance standards as traditional schools and are open to all. Cyber charter schools, delivering instruction to students at home via the Internet, can enroll students hundreds of miles away.

In fact, the largest school in Beaver County is the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School in Midland, with 6,000 students from across the state. Local school districts—with some help from the state—are paying tuition for their students to a school they don't control.

"This past year in Beaver County, 700 students chose charter schools, for [a cost of] $7 million. That gets our attention," says Ronald Sofo, Freedom Area School District's superintendent.

Dan Katzir understands: In the world of school choice, money talks. The managing director of the Broad Foundation sees a pattern emerging in response to the national charter movement.

"Districts that have a large or growing charter would have several business models," he notes. "They ignore charters. They claim victim status—which is generally not true. They complain that charters are taking money away—and that's true, that's the whole point! Or, they can embrace them."

Beaver County chose to embrace choice.

Last year, Sofo proposed that Freedom open its own charter school. He received grants from the Endowments and the Grable Foundation for planning and development. "I bet on our faculty to provide outstanding instruction," he says. While that proposal was rejected as too radical, it opened a discussion on how districts could create more choice.

From left to right, Keith Pennington, Romeo York and Najire Taylor look on as Amera Neal receives her "Say No to Drugs" button from police officer George Palumbo in Ramona McIver's (in background) kindergarten class at Imani Christian Academy.

"Choice was killing our high school and the others. There was fear all over the county," says Sofo. "We used that as a lever to get people to come to the table, and having the cyber school in the county tipped the scale enough that people were willing to accept regional choice."

Last month, Beaver County school officials won a $1.4 million federal grant to develop the countywide initiative. It was the only rural area among 14 selected from across the nation.

Sofo envisions a four-stage experiment, beginning with the open-seat program that enables students to take classes in different districts. It will eventually allow county districts to share cyber instruction, provide college-level instruction to larger groups of secondary students at a central setting and connect schools through a wide-area fiber network and videoconferencing.

Still, Dominic has a terse, two-word description for the philanthropic commitment to promoting a range of school choice options: "high risk."

"No Child Left Behind impels us to move quickly. We have to try a variety of solutions [to improve education]," he says.

In Pittsburgh, the Endowments, along with other foundations, has supported city school officials' creation of eight intensive "accelerated learning academies," made planning grants to help the district overhaul its high school curricula, and funded other projects to address student achievement and the racial achievement gap.

Some of those endeavors apply ideas generated in charter schools. For example, a performance bonus for learning academy principals, who also hire their school's teachers, mimics a common charter school practice of giving school administrators greater autonomy and performance-based compensation.

As the Pittsburgh School District moves into high school reform, it is "trying to foster more choice," says Lisa Fischetti, chief of staff for the superintendent's office. "The vision is to move away from feeder-pattern–based schools to offer high schools that people will choose to go to."

Jeremy Resnick, the CEO of Propel Schools, asserts that school districts are acting differently in response to parents having choices. His charter school management company opened its fourth

Eleventh graders at City Charter High in downtown Pittsburgh, Daniel Bethea of Point Breeze, left, and Matt Lodovico of Lawrenceville, measure water in Angela Musto's science class. The students used various hands-on methods to gain an understanding about the principles of mass and volume.

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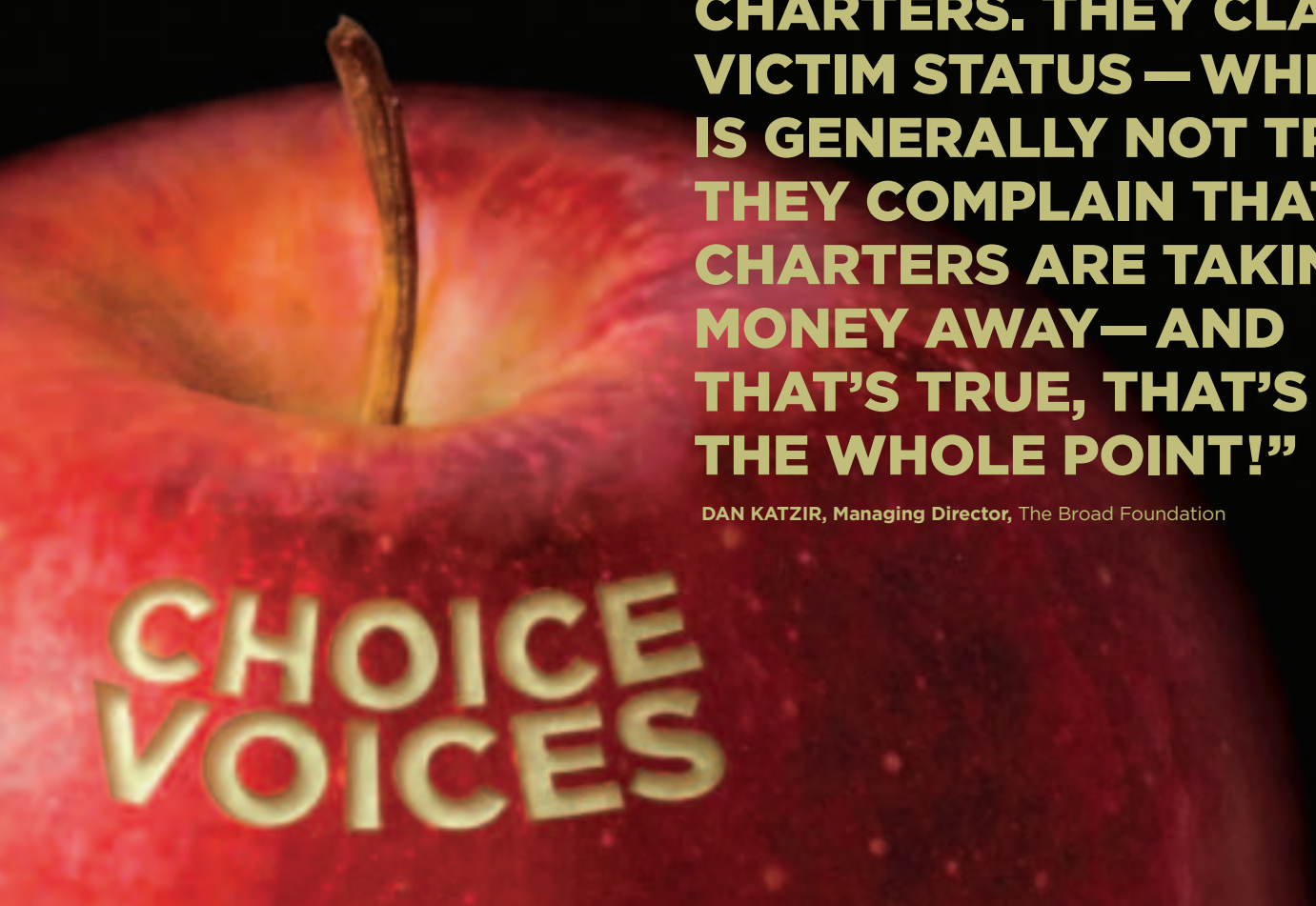

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THE STATE PERFORMANCE TESTS REQUIRED UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND PROMISE CLEAR BENCHMARKS FOR SCHOOL AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE. BUT ON THE CRITICAL QUESTION OF WHETHER CHARTER STUDENTS OUTPERFORM THOSE IN TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS, THE ANSWERS ARE MURKY.

kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school in Allegheny County this month.

"The Regional Choice Initiative in Beaver County would never have happened," he says, "without the groundwork of the charter school movement."

ENROLLMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Resnick's sentiments are common among charter school leaders, acknowledges Miron, who has seen examples of school districts starting all-day kindergartens and special language programs in apparent response to similar offerings at charter schools.

But Miron adds that school district officials insist that many of the changes that they make are to improve performance results rather than to match charter school programs. In fact, he says traditional school districts may be even better equipped to offer innovative programs because they have experienced teachers who know how to write curricula. In many cases, charter school organizers may have innovative ideas, but they don't have the mature teachers to carry them out.

Still, as charter school enrollments increase, Miron says districts studied by the Western Michigan center have been spending more money on marketing tactics such as billboards and public service announcements to draw and keep students.

Contributing to charters' rapid growth are low-income city neighborhoods that have become fertile recruiting grounds. Well-publicized failure to meet national performance standards in large urban school districts has pushed families toward choice. In the District of Columbia, 25 percent of students now attend public charters. Philadelphia now has 19 secondary charters, with 5,000 students on waiting lists. In Pittsburgh, with just six charters overall, the impact of charter enrollment is just beginning to be felt, but the arguments about their academic achievement has raged for years.

The state performance tests required under No Child Left Behind promise clear benchmarks for school and student performance. But on the critical question of whether charter students outperform those in traditional public schools, the answers are murky.

The National Assessment of Education Progress, analyzing 2003 scores, found no difference in math or reading performance between charter and traditional students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds.

John Tarka, president of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers, is a charter school skeptic. "Nineteen million dollars last year for six charters and about another $6 million for cybers—what did [Pittsburgh taxpayers] get for that money? That's a fair question, especially because the choice schools are not providing the achievement that we were promised they would," he argues.

Charter advocates counter that students transferring from traditional schools often start below grade level, requiring more attention to reach proficiency. Tarka is unmoved by that argument. "As some charter school founders have realized, it's tough," he says. "They say, 'We don't have achievement because it's difficult.' Well, of course it is."

The union chief contends that the dramatic collaboration envisioned between charters and public schools locally has not come to fruition. "An opportunity's been lost," he contends.

While suggesting that charters could work more closely with the district, he offers no specifics on how that might occur.

Rick Wertheimer, co-founder and education manager of City Charter High School in downtown Pittsburgh, says his school's high-tech teaching style—where every student receives a laptop computer— could provide a model for other Pittsburgh district schools. "No one [in the district] wants to hear about it," he laments. "There's a real obstinacy in western Pennsylvania about change."

By measures like attendance and graduation rates, some charters are

posting respectable results. City Charter High School posted a 93 percent attendance rate for the past school year and 91 percent of the Class of 2006 graduated. Within all 11 city district high schools, the average attendance was 86.2 percent. School officials say they don't have a current graduation rate yet, but a Rand Corp. study released last year calculated that the city district's average rate was about 64 percent.

And Resnick's small Propel schools serve challenging elementary students: 22 percent of Propel's students have an identified disability, while 78 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. But Resnick points to assessments by Johns Hopkins University researchers that showed that the number of Propel students proficient in reading grew from 34 to 65 percent over the course of the past year. Gains in math were even larger: 24 percent to 69 percent.

"At the same time," observes Dominic, "while good scores on achievement tests are important indicators of school success, they are not the only ones." He says other essential elements include creating a culture of high expectations for success and offering a variety of ways to support students when they encounter difficulty. He believes Pittsburgh's newer private schools such as Imani Christian Academy and Neighborhood Academy, both of which focus on African-American students, try to do everything possible to produce gains on several levels.

Imani has made considerable progress in attracting and keeping youngsters who face overwhelming challenges to succeeding in school and life. Without the academy, many kids simply would not complete basic schooling, Dominic says. With a recent Endowments grant of $200,000, Imani hired a professional firm to develop a business plan and a comprehensive funding strategy. Neighborhood Academy, a smaller school than Imani, received a similar Endowments grant and has shown more academic improvement.

MORE OPPORTUNITIES

The promise of success has lured parents like Lee Ann Munger. She waited three years for Propel to open a charter school with kindergarten through sixth grade near her home in Montour, west of Pittsburgh. During that time, Munger and her partner drove their sons, Henry and Owen Smith, 40 minutes each way to Propel's school in Homestead, another town outside of the city.

"Our children were African American in a school district that lacks diversity, and moving was not an option. We have elderly parents we couldn't leave," explains Munger, a 45-year-old nonprofit executive. After Propel's Montour charter application was rejected by the local school district, the company appealed the decision to the state.

"It was a real civics lesson to see the number of hurdles that were thrown up," she notes drily. If the state had blocked the Montour school, she says she would have continued the Homestead commute "without a moment of regret."

"The blossoming that every parent wants for their kids has happened. We are fortunate," she says cheerfully. "Other families only wish they could drive across town for a better opportunity."

Resnick claims Pittsburgh families are doing just that. Of the 280 students registered at Propel's new Montour school, a majority come from the nearby Pittsburgh and Sto-Rox districts. Only seven or eight will transfer from the local district's schools.

"The Pittsburgh schools are hemorrhaging," says City High's Wertheimer. "Forty years ago, it had 70,000 kids; now, it has under 28,000."

The city district closed 22 schools last year. Those brick-and-mortar classrooms may never be re-activated, and, as cyber schools demonstrate, students no longer need to go to large buildings to learn.

This year, Propel will begin to explore a way to blend charters and cyber schools in "pod schooling," where a handful of students and an adult meet regularly at one location, says Resnick. The newfangled concept sounds a lot like the 19th-century Little Red Schoolhouse—a small but diverse group of learners in one room. But Resnick rejects that suggestion, arguing that pod schooling might offer students the broadest possible window on the world.

"Back then, the only information source in the room was the adult," he says. "Now we have continuous information from multiple sources. We can coach kids to access knowledge of the wider world. We can turn school inside out." *h*