

Prognosis hopeful for charter-school experiment

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

Since Gov. Ridge signed legislation earlier this month making Pennsylvania the 27th state to permit the creation of charter schools, much confusion has arisen about the definition, mission, and success of those schools as well as their relationship to public education. Because Pennsylvania recently awarded 67 charter-planning grants, it may be useful to examine those fundamental issues:



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■ What exactly is a charter school?

It is a public school, funded by the local school district but run by an independent board that includes parents, teachers, and principals. It must practice open admission, meet basic health and safety standards, and comply with civil rights laws.

At the same time, charter schools have been released from many state regulations in curriculum, personnel rules and district scheduling requirements. This kind of flexibility has made charters extremely popular among parents who cite a more rigorous curriculum, smaller classes, and enthusiastic and innovative teachers as major advantages over their local district schools.

As a result, many charters have waiting lists. In Massachusetts, for example, eight charter schools received a total of 1,316 applicants for 882 spots. Another charter, University Public School in Michigan, received 5,223 applications for only 330 spots.

■ Will charters educate students better than the traditional public school? Since Minnesota established the first charter school in 1991, the movement has grown to almost 450 schools in 27 states and the District of

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Some of the initial research indicates that the schools have met their academic goals. For example, the New Visions School in Minneapolis, which educates students with learning disabilities, was able to show increases in both vocabulary and reading comprehension scores during its first two years of operation.

Additionally, a small group of the earliest charter schools — five in Minnesota, one in California and one in Colorado — have had their charters renewed after their first few years of operation, indicating that they have met the academic goals they established.

But gauging achievement will be a difficult task because no two charters are alike — each one has greatly different expectations for their students. That is why the U.S. Department of Education recently apportioned \$2.6 million for a national study on the effectiveness of charter schools, and many states are allocating portions of the federal grants they receive for charters to pay for further research as well.

■ Will charters lure the best and brightest students away from public schools or will they welcome all children, even those with learning disabilities or limited English proficiency? Because charter schools are designed to meet the educational needs of individual students and communities they are characterized by a remarkable degree of diversity. There are charters for home-schooled students, juveniles who have been convicted of crimes, and

highly motivated students as well as those who are learning disabled. Two-thirds of the charters that currently exist target a cross-section of students, and half specifically target at-risk children.

In Michigan, a 1994 survey of 10 charters indicated that 49 percent of students were minorities, compared to only 23 percent in the local school district. City Academy of Minnesota, the nation's first charter school targets students with a history of poor academics and behavioral problems. And Jingle-town, a California charter, emphasizes bilingual education.

Of course, not everyone thinks charter schools are the elixir for the nation's educational problems. Critics fear that the schools will undermine hard-won bargaining and tenure rights of teachers, siphon badly needed funds from the public school system, and operate as *de facto* private institutions that provide — at public expense — forms of education that are unacceptable to the general public.

Will charter schools be successful in Pennsylvania? Only time will tell. But they certainly offer a more practical solution than the voucher system and remind us that just as education must adapt to meet the varied needs of students, so too, must school reform.

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