

Catalyst Chicago

"Making schools match the kids; From unique curriculum to longer school days, charter school directors say their success comes from their freedom to decide"

By Sarah Karp

February 2007

<http://www.catalyst-chicago.org>

After years of teaching history in Chicago Public Schools, Kim Day concluded poor children of color were disconnected from the communities they lived in as well as the world outside their neighborhoods.

"Part of education is teaching children how to operate outside of school," Day says.

Day and colleague Diana Shulla-Cose thought it would be a good idea to get their students off campus weekly and out of town periodically. But they didn't think their idea would fly inside the CPS bureaucracy, since just arranging a limited number of field trips took a ton of paperwork.

So Day and Shulla-Cose applied to become one of the first charters in Chicago, Perspectives. As a charter, they would have the freedom to make their idea a reality.

"We have a school model based on what is best for students and teachers, instead of a school that works through the system," says Day, whose two-campus school spends about \$150 per student to send children on field trips or internships every other Wednesday.

The freedom to tailor programs to meet the needs of students and carry out an educational vision is the hallmark of charter schools. With this autonomy, charters can invest in extra counselors or nurses and or have a longer school day or year without getting approval from central or regional offices.

"The people at the school have ownership of it," says Greg Richmond, president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Richmond previously evaluated charter applicants for CPS.

Understanding how charter schools use their autonomy and how it contributes to their success is important as CPS considers what freedoms they should give the public schools still in their domain. Also, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings is pushing the expansion of charter schools as part of the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind.

Spellings says superintendents should have the option to shut down chronically under-performing schools and replace them with charters, regardless of state limits on the number of charter schools.

"We think that superintendents should take drastic steps to make the promise of No Child Left Behind a reality," Spellings says.

MONEY MATTERS

Michael Milkie, superintendent of Noble Network Charter Schools, recalls how the spending flexibility that charters enjoy came into play when the first Noble Street charter campus opened in fall 1990.

Initially, Milkie thought the school didn't need a social worker because "we were a small, intimate school and the teachers could meet [students'] emotional needs." But after a few months, he realized that students needed more counseling. He was able to shuffle money around to hire additional staff immediately, without securing an OK from central office.

"If we need more [money] for sports and less for books, then we are able to do that," says Milkie. "The needs of a school are so individual. The way a school spends its money depends on the students, the neighborhood and the physical facility."

Noble Street is one of several charters that pays teachers bonuses based on performance, a concept the district is planning to pilot in a small group of schools next fall.

Noble pays teachers \$500 if their home-room has high attendance, \$500 if more than 88 percent of parents show up at parent-teacher conferences and \$1,000 based on the principal's evaluation of their performance. Every teacher receives \$2,000 if schoolwide test scores reach targets set each year.

At Perspectives, teachers get bonuses based on student progress on periodic assessments. Day says regular assessments also show teachers whether a colleague is more successful helping students master a certain skill; if so, teachers can learn from each other before the next round of assessments.

TEACHING FREEDOM

Jim O'Connor, principal of KIPP Ascend Charter in West Garfield Park, says the freedom to choose his own curriculum led him to adopt a math curriculum that sparked improvements in the test scores of low-achievers.

O'Connor says he discovered the curriculum while researching high-performing public schools in areas where students were generally underperforming.

"It is absolutely critical to be able to choose your curriculum based on the individual characteristics of your students," says O'Connor.

At the Academy of Communications and Technology Charter in West Garfield Park, teachers are actively involved in developing the curriculum and choosing what and how they teach.

"I feel that teachers are most creative and effective when they teach what they know," says Sarah Howard, executive director for finances and school affairs at ACT. "They need a framework, but not a script."

Stacy Beardsley, a director of the University of Chicago's North Kenwood/Oakland Charter School, says that her teachers don't work from a set curriculum and most subjects are taught without a textbook. Instead, school leaders decided to use project-based instruction that integrates all subject areas. Teachers then use their own expertise to choose classroom materials.

A 1st-grade teacher who is teaching a unit on dinosaurs in science might, for instance, get books on dinosaurs to read aloud to the class, then go to a museum and borrow materials for the classroom, Beardsley explains.

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES

Teachers at North Kenwood/Oakland also spend a lot of time talking to each other and borrowing lessons, Beardsley says. Teachers have time to collaborate because the school has a longer day and year.

In contrast to the district's typical 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. schedule, North Kenwood/Oakland's doors open at 8:20 every morning and aren't locked until about 6 p.m. Classes are dismissed at 3 p.m., but Beardsley says more than half the students stay around for tutoring or other programs.

At KIPP Ascend, students spend even more time in class: from 7:25 a.m. until 5 p.m. Students also must attend classes for four hours every other Saturday and for four weeks during the summer.

Extra instruction time is important because "there are no short cuts to being successful," O'Connor says. "The only way to master subjects that you are not doing well in is to spend more time on them."

Charters can also rework their schedules at will to meet a particular need. At Perspectives, leaders noticed one year that students weren't performing well in math. Along with hiring a veteran math teacher and a team of tutors, the school changed its daily schedule to give students an extra 30 to 50 minutes of math instruction.

TEACHER HIRING

While charters can hire non-certified teachers, directors have mixed views on the benefits of doing so.

(Beginning this school year, 75 percent of the teachers at charter schools established before 2003 must be certified; the proportion drops to 50 percent for charters started in 2003 and later. In a previous bill, as a concession to the teachers union, charter schools were required to hire a greater percentage of certified teachers.)

Margaret Small, director of Young Women's Leadership Charter in Grand Boulevard, says the ability to hire noncertified teachers gives her a wider pool of candidates. While professionals who want to become teachers may already have family and other obligations that prevent them from going back to school full time, she points out, working at a charter while earning certification is a nice solution.

Milkie also believes non-certified teachers can be a big bonus. He points to one of his faculty, a non-certified teacher with a degree in astrophysics, who can teach physics in both Spanish and English.

But Richmond, who worked on the original charter legislation in the 1990s, notes that some charter schools have opted to hire only certified teachers or to pay higher salaries than regular schools. For instance, currently all but one teacher at Passages Charter is certified; when the school opened in 2001, only half were certified, according to the school's original proposal.

Day says certified teachers are typically more committed to the job than career-changers.

"The banker gets burned out and leaves after two years," Day says. "The certified teacher stays in it for the long haul."

Even non-credentialed charter school teachers must have at least a bachelor's degree and experience in their field. Barbara Mazur, director of instruction at Passages Charter School in Uptown, says noncertified teachers should get their credentials once they've started on the job.

While teachers at Passages and other charters are typically paid less than their counterparts in regular public schools, teachers at the newly opened University of Chicago Charter High in Woodlawn earn about \$60,000 a year.

Despite lower salaries, Mazur says charter teachers get something more than money.

"They have a lot of freedom here," Mazur says. "They have a voice. They feel respected and supported."