

AMERICA GOES BACK TO SCHOOL

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Information

Secretary Riley's
Press Release '98

Model Programs/
Best Practices

Five Key
Areas in Education

Key facts
on family

Partner's Activity
Kit 1998

Co-chairs and
Steering Committee
Members

Home

Giving Parents More Choices: Public Charter Schools

"The charter school movement represents what is best about American public education -- a willingness to change, to be impatient, to demand excellence -- and at the same time -- a deep, abiding commitment to the democratic principles that define public education."

U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Charter schools are public schools run by teachers, parents or other community leaders that can help communities raise academic standards, empowering educators, increasing accountability and expanding public school choice. They operate with a contract - or charter - which are granted by public groups, such as local school boards or state boards of education. Each charter explains how the school will operate and how well its students will perform. As long as the school meets the terms of its charter and continues to attract students and their families, it is freed from many rules and regulations covering traditional public schools. As public schools, charter schools are not allowed to charge tuition, they must be non-sectarian, and they cannot be selective in their admissions. Most charter schools are not limited to accepting students from their school district; all students are eligible to apply.

Some facts:

- More than 160,000 students attended nearly 800 charter schools during the 1997-1998 school year. The charter school movement began with only one school in 1992.
- Thirty-three states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have enacted laws authorizing the creation of charter schools.

- Most charter schools are located in nine states -- Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas.
- Roughly half the nations charter schools are in Arizona, California, and Michigan.
- Federal support for charter schools has increased from \$6 million in FY 1995 to \$80 million in FY 1998 and has proposed \$100 million for FY 1999.

Some good examples:

- *New Visions School*, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is called "The Reading School" is for its intensive focus on reading and helping children overcome reading deficiencies. The school was started by a parent who has a child with a disability and who has worked with the Minneapolis school system on innovative approaches to reading. The school's students are making substantially more progress in reading than before, and it has received a Goals 2000 grant to help teachers in nearby school districts learn about its effective strategies to help children read.

CONTACT: Bob Deboer, parent and founder of the school: (612) 521-2266

- *City on a Hill*, in Boston, Massachusetts, was founded by two teachers eager to structure a school around civic education, community service, and diplomas awarded on the basis of clear academic progress. The school is working with Northeastern University and other local groups to provide learning and volunteer opportunities in the community. The school's high expectations are embodied in academic requirements for what students must do and learn in order to receive a diploma. For example, students must be able to write a well-structured and interesting essay, defend their views on various subjects, analyze important American historical documents, converse in a second language, and read a core list of great books.

CONTACT: Sarah Kass, teacher and co-founder of City on a Hill: (617) 262-9838

- *Vaughn Next Century Learning Center*, in Los Angeles, California, was a public school that became one of California's first charter schools in July, 1993. Parents and teachers call this school "the little school that could", and indeed, after more than three years of intensive focus on academic restructuring and family involvement, attendance

and test scores have improved significantly. Reading and math scores are up, and attendance has gone from one of the worst in the area to the best in the L.A. school system. The school has also cut administrative costs considerably, and has used the savings to reduce class size and build a new computer center. While most charter are quite small, Vaughn serves 1200 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. All of its students are eligible for the federal free lunch program, and 75% speak a native language other than English.

CONTACT: Yvonne Chen, Principal, (818) 896-7461

- *The Henry Ford Academy of Manufacturing Arts & Sciences* outside of Detroit, Michigan is an innovative public high school designed to provide students, teachers and other community members with a unique teaching and learning experience. The academy provides students interested in manufacturing arts and science with an educational experience that emphasizes the application of mathematics, science, the humanities, social studies, communication skills, technology and problem-solving in a real-world context. The Henry Ford Academy has access to a wealth of resources in Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village. Additionally, the academy will utilize the resources and expertise of Ford and other local businesses, higher education and community cultural and arts organizations.

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