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## Expanding the Charter Option

By Anne Marie Chaker

Andrea Byrd, mother of two boys, had enough with her son's school. After she and her older son, Andrae, moved from Mississippi to Memphis a year ago, the formerly straight-A student "started dumbing himself down," she says, to fit in with the other boys at his new school.

"I needed to get my child into a school where there were high expectations," Ms. Byrd says. A charter school had recently opened nearby, but the 34-year-old single mom hesitated over getting an application since Tennessee law required her son to either be considered low-performing—which he wasn't—or attend a low-performing school—which he didn't—in order to get in. But all that changed a few weeks ago, when the state enacted a law for charter schools to also include students from low-income families. Two weeks ago, Ms. Byrd went into the Power Center Academy for an application. Later that same day, she got a call to say Andrae had been accepted.

The U.S. Education Department is engaged in a high-pressure campaign to get states to lift limits on charter schools through a \$4 billion education fund, Race to the Top, that encourages more charters as one of the criteria for states to qualify for a piece of the pie. A total of 40 states and the District of Columbia permit charter schools.

In recent weeks, seven states have lifted restrictions, a spokesman for the department says. Tennessee, for instance, passed a law that raises the state's limit on the number of charter schools to 90 from 50 and allows more students to qualify for entry. Illinois doubled its limit on the total number of charter schools to 120. Louisiana passed a law that simply eliminated the existing cap of 70. And several other states are moving in a similar direction. Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick proposed legislation that more

than triples slots for students in charter schools to over 37,000 from the 10,000. Rhode Island's Legislature, which had considered cutting \$1.5 million from the budget for charter schools, restored that money in large part to compete for the federal funds.

Charter schools gained traction in the 1990s with parents, teachers and other community members who were frustrated with public-school offerings and wanted an alternative. Such schools secure a "charter"—or a contract with the state or local government—detailing how the school will be run. The schools, which are part of the public school system, are run autonomously by community groups. In exchange, they must show more accountability than average public schools in order for their charters to be renewed—which is usually every five years.

### Many Freedoms

Proponents say charter schools offer competition in often-stagnant public-education systems. A significant difference is that they are typically nonunion. To that end, teachers and school administrators have complained that the schools receive taxpayer funds while enjoying many freedoms regular public schools lack, such as hiring noncertified teachers or setting up their own disciplinary codes.

Teachers' unions want to see the \$4 billion more squarely focused on traditional public schools. In a statement, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said that "the vast majority of kids—90%—attend traditional public schools and that is why we have proposed the lion's share of Race to the Top money be directed to helping improve those public schools."

Looser restrictions on the number

of charter schools a state can offer, or which type of student can attend, are already being felt: In some states, families initially rejected by a school have gotten calls back to welcome them. In other states, charter schools are looking to expand. The upshot is that, as a new school year begins, charters are preparing to make way for new students, start new campuses and hire more teachers.

The data on whether charters are working are mixed, at best. A Stanford University analysis of test scores of students at charter schools in 15 states plus Washington, D.C., released in June, is widely considered one of the most comprehensive studies on the subject. It found that only 17% of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, 37% of charter schools showed results that were worse than traditional public-school counterparts, and 46% of charter schools demonstrated no significant difference.

*"We're strong proponents of not throwing kids away."*

*Tim King*

Todd Ziebarth, vice president for policy at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools in Washington, D.C., says lifting limits will likely create "a larger stream of proposals coming in." The danger there, he warns, is a proliferation of bad ones—such as those with vaguely defined missions—along with the good. Authorizers, he notes, must assess those applications with a keen eye.

Regardless, charter schools are attractive to many parents, like Wendy Lewis, a 46-year-old single mother on Chicago's South side. For her, gang-

# Charter Schools Get Promoted

ridden public high schools in her area weren't an option for her teenage son Odis as he enters his freshman year. "I did check into private schools, but there was no way in the world I could afford the \$700 a month," says the unemployed Ms. Lewis. "Charter was the only other option."

Power Center Academy, where Ms. Byrd's son is now enrolled in sixth grade, is a new middle school in a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Memphis. Students don uniforms, each gets a laptop, and they learn business concepts along with their other classes.

The school had a waiting list of 30 families who wanted to get in but couldn't because of the existing law. After the law changed a few weeks before the first day of school, Power Center leader Yetta Lewis made a "mad race for the phone" and called those applicants whom she had previously turned away. "I've had parents shout and scream" with joy, she says.

Ms. Lewis, a former middle-school teacher in Baltimore, was recruited by the local community development center, which is the entity that applied for the charter and got funding from the state Department of Education. She began her school on the campus of a church last year with 110 sixth graders who are now starting seventh grade. Last week, she brought in a new class of sixth graders, which, thanks to the new law, she was able to increase to 90 students from 75.

This past school year, more than 1.4 million students attended over 4,600 public charter schools in the U.S., according to the National Alliance. That is an 8% increase in the number of schools, and an 11% increase in students enrolled, from a year earlier. Due partly to state and local funding cuts in education, as well as growing momentum in certain states to place further restrictions on charters, that growth would likely have slowed significantly, says the National Alliance's Mr. Ziebarth. But thanks to federal pressure on states to lift restrictions, he estimates "growth in line with what we've seen in the past."

The Chicago Public School system has been near its limit on the number of

charters it could grant. Until recently, state law limited the number of charters to 30—and only 15 were allowed to "replicate," or open multiple campuses.

That is why Tim King, founder of Urban Prep Academy, a school for African-American boys in Chicago, is opening a second campus this fall as a "contract school" rather than a charter. The concept of contract schools was created in Chicago in 2004 to create a range of options for people seeking to start their own autonomous schools. Contract schools, like charters, are typically non-unionized.

Operators of contract schools can manage them independently, but still have to sign a contract with the school board. Unlike charter schools, they have to follow certain district rules. For instance, all teachers need to be certified, students have to follow the district's code of conduct, and the school has to follow certain operational policies, such as how it runs field trips.

By contrast, at the Urban Prep charter school, many courses are taught by young college graduates from the nonprofit Teach for America or former professionals, such as lawyers, who want to try teaching. Mr. King considers that an asset. Also, Urban Prep uses its own code of conduct, which means suspensions and expulsions are very rarely used. "We're strong proponents of not throwing kids away," he says.

Now that the limit on the number of charter schools in the state has doubled to 120, with 75 of those allocated to Chicago, Mr. King says he is applying for two more charters, in order to convert two new campuses to charter schools, rather than contract schools. (Along with the new campus just opened this week, he hopes to start up a third campus in the fall of 2010).

He hasn't yet heard whether his application has been approved. But Mr. King hopes his track record in only three years of operation speaks for itself. All Urban Prep juniors took the ACT this past spring and scored an average of 16.5 on a scale of 36. The 2008 average score for black male students attending Chicago

Public Schools who took the test as juniors was 15.7, which a spokesman for Iowa City, Iowa-based ACT Inc. says is a significant difference.

When that class entered as freshmen in 2006, Mr. King adds, more than half were reading below sixth-grade level.

## Drawn to Teaching

As a student himself, Mr. King, now 40, was one of the few African-American boys in the class at his parochial school in Chicago. He attended Georgetown University for both his undergraduate and law degrees but was so drawn to teaching as a part-time law student that he decided against a legal career after graduation—and came back to Chicago. "The Chicago data is really depressing when it comes to young, black males," he says. Over three years, he researched the possibility of starting a charter school for young black men. Once approved, he tapped a mix of local, state and federal funds as well as private donations, all totaling about \$1 million.

Jaime Guzman, deputy of the Office of New Schools for the Chicago Public Schools, says contract schools that want charters instead will go through an approval process in the fall, and if approved, will open as charters in the 2010-11 school year. Other proposals will be considered starting next May. "We are expecting a deluge of applications," says Mr. Guzman.

The U.S. Education chief, for one, is cheering from the sidelines. "I am a big fan" of Urban Prep, says Secretary Arne Duncan, former chief executive of the Chicago Public Schools. "When something is working, give more children those kinds of opportunities," he says.

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**For more information on Urban Prep, contact:**  
Urban Prep Academies  
420 N. Wabash, Suite 300  
Chicago, IL 60611  
312.276.0259  
[www.urbanprep.org](http://www.urbanprep.org)

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