

Charter schools get wide support

Charter

Monroe residents welcome expansion of publicly funded, privately run institutions; enrollment has exploded in past decade

UNITE ROCHESTER POLL

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A wide majority of Monroe County residents believe the quality of local schools is a significant problem — and the same proportion believe charter schools are an important part of the solution.

According to the latest Unite Rochester poll, 71 percent of county residents would like to see charter schools expand to serve more children. That is about the same as the percentage of people who agree that the quality of local education is a somewhat or very significant problem.

The level of charter school support was essentially the same across demographic, economic and geographic boundaries; the young, the poor and racial minorities showed the greatest enthusiasm, nearing 75 percent.

Sara Berrios, 50, recently moved back to Rochester after raising her daughter in Pennsyl-

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Kindergartner Camila Sanchez-Gonzalez prepares her classmates for going over a journal entry she made that included a picture and writing at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School 9.

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vania. She attended a charter school there and Berrios approved of the school culture.

“I really agree with (charter schools),” she said. “They make the students dress for the part, and the teachers put more discipline in the kids.”

Charter school enrollment in Rochester has exploded over the last decade, from 659 city students in 2005-06 to 4,591 in 2015-16. Many of the current schools are continuing to add grades and a new school, Exploration Charter School for Science and Technology, is slated to open in September.

Charter schools are funded with public money but controlled by private organizations who are free to experiment with innovative means of educating students — but face closure if they don’t succeed within five years. For example, Vertus Charter School has a mostly computer-based curriculum; Renaissance Academy School for the Arts is based on music, dance, art and theater; and Young Women’s College Prep is the only local all-girls public school.

“It’s clear parents want more choices and see charters as a lifeboat for their children,” Duncan Kirkwood, advocacy manager for the Northeast Charter Schools Network, said in an email. “It’s hard to blame them when the (City School District’s) performance is among the worst in the state every single year and every attempt at change is mired in political bickering instead of focusing on what’s best for kids and the community.”

Charter school detractors believe they drain resources, including students, from traditional districts, and accuse some operators of putting profit before students’ best interests. As with traditional public schools, there is wide variety among the results achieved in local charter schools. Only two high schools, University Prep Charter School for Young Men and Rochester Academy Charter School, have had graduating classes; both had an August graduation rate just above 90 percent, though their rates for students with disabilities, or non-English speakers, were well below the district averages.

By comparison, the City School District’s overall August graduation rate was 53 percent. It also had two schools (World of Inquiry School 58 and School of the Arts) near 90 percent, but many others, including East, Monroe and Charlotte high schools and Edison Tech, were at 50 percent or below.

At the younger grades, where there are more charter schools, the gap is also pronounced. On average among third-graders at charter schools, 29 percent are proficient in English and 45 percent are proficient in math according to the state’s measure, compared with 7 percent and 15 percent, respectively, in the City School District.

Those scores range widely among charter schools. In math, for instance, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School has a 76 percent proficiency mark among thirdgraders, while Discovery Charter School is at 13 percent.

The 71 percent approval rating in the Unite Rochester poll was much higher than was recorded in a 2015 Quinnipiac poll showing upstate voters were neatly split on the question, with 46 percent approving and 44 percent in opposition.

Members of Generation X — that is, those most likely to have school-age children — expressed the greatest concern about the quality of schools overall, with 51 percent calling it a very significant problem. There was also much more concern among black people (63 percent rated the problem very significant) and Hispanics

(55 percent) than white people (38 percent).

The poll also asked about support for a countywide school district that would include the city and all the suburbs. The answers to that question depended much more on where respondents live, how much they earn and what race they are.

More than three-quarters of black people and Latinos expressed support, compared with 45 percent of white people. Millennials supported the idea at 62 percent, compared to 49 percent of those 65 and older; people who earn less than \$50,000 a year supported it at 62 percent, compared with 38 percent of those earning more than \$100,000 a year. Overall, 52 percent of people supported a countywide system, compared with 40 percent opposed and 8 percent undecided. Those numbers are virtually identical to those in the first Unite Rochester poll, conducted in December 2012.

Jennifer Dieter, 39, has three children in the Webster Central School District and said they're very happy there. Nonetheless, she believes they would do even better in a countywide system because it would have more diversity and wider opportunity for students.

"I think it would probably improve things overall and even things out," Dieter said. "I feel there's a disparity between the suburban and city schools, and combining them would level the playing field." There is no active movement to create such a system; doing so would likely require state legislation. The group Great Schools For All, however, has been studying ways to transcend district lines in education and is pushing a proposal to create magnet schools that students from a number of districts could attend.

"I think there's a willingness to look at how districts interact and might collaborate with one another — if not all in one big swoop, then handfuls of them working together to do different things," said the Rev. John Wilkinson, one of the group's cocreators. "The growth of the Urban-Suburban program and the willingness to talk about suburban- to-urban (student transfers) ... show a willingness to ask questions about what all this might look like, even if the ultimate solution is not countywide."

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Second-grade teacher Linda Baez and student Taleah Chandler work on lessons learned throughout a story the class was reading at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Charter School 9.

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JENNIFER DIETER

WEBSTER CENTRAL PARENT