

WATCHDOG REPORT: EDUCATION

Charter school pay challenges

Teachers have plenty of passion and more freedom, but are greener and earn less

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STAFF WRITER

Tina Harrity and Cory Gross were already in their 30s when they decided to change careers and became teachers at Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School.

Predictably, they learned a lot in 2013-14, their first full year: how to manage a class; to interact with students, colleagues and parents; to persevere through challenging days and weeks.

Now, in their second full year, they're being counted on to share those lessons. They've been recruited to serve as mentors to teachers even less experienced. It's an indication of the relative inexperience among teachers at many Rochester charter schools.

While traditional public schools, urban and suburban, rely on a scaffolding of veterans to advise and comfort newer colleagues, charter schools, by choice and necessity, are staffed largely by men and women new to the profession.

About 51 percent of charter school teachers in Rochester had fewer than five years total teaching experience in 2013-14. In the City School District, about 19 percent of teachers have fewer than five years' experience.

In 2013-14, the average (mean) teacher at a Rochester-area charter school had 5.6 years of overall teaching experience,

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Nicole Berg, K-4 principal, gives a high-five to kindergartener Brandon Fagan as she pops in to visit the class at the Urban Choice Charter School in Rochester last week.

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Third-grade teacher Anne McDonald calls on one of her students during her class at the Urban Choice Charter School last week.

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three years' experience at her current school and a salary of \$46,830.

By comparison, the average Rochester School District teacher in 2014-15 has 12.5 years of overall teaching experience, five years' experience at her current school and a salary of \$56,126.

The pay discrepancy grows when benefits and work hours are considered. Most charter teachers are not members of the state retirement system, which provides a potentially generous pension; and unlike in the traditional public schools, where limits to the work day and work year are prescribed through collective bargaining, charters can, and usually do, require teachers to work longer hours and more days.

But those who work at charter schools say the seemingly disadvantageous conditions are in fact a stimulus for innovation and a magnet for hard-working young teachers who feel constrained in a larger district.

"It's both exciting and challenging," said Maria Velickovic, the principal at Rochester Career Mentoring. "They still have that passion and want to do good things for the kids. But it's hard because they don't have the experience with classroom management."

In low-performing districts like Rochester, charter schools promote themselves to weary parents as alternatives to the failing status quo, offering innovative programs, strict discipline and independence from the district's institutional problems.

But if teachers don't know their craft, or feel the effects of inadequate pay and long working hours, those promises can hardly be fulfilled. In Rochester, the picture of charter teacher experience and compensation is mixed. *** Studies, like one in 2010 from the nonpartisan American Institutes for Research, show student performance generally trends upward with teacher experience for the first five years or so in a teacher's career, after which the teacher's impact on student achievement essentially plateaus.

"There's an abundance of educational research that shows that experience matters," said Carl Korn, a spokesman for the New York State Union of Teachers, which represents mostly traditional public school teachers along with those in about 30 charter schools. "Just as a physician or engineer or attorney is going to be better in their third or fourth year than in their rookie year, I think the same thing holds true for teachers."

Having stability among the faculty is helpful in creating bonds among teachers and establishing a positive climate for adults and students. There too, some charter schools struggle.

About 38 percent of charter teachers were in their first year at their current school in 2013-14, compared with 25 percent of city district teachers.

"The pressure in charters seems to be more intense; charter school teachers leave more frequently and do it because of working conditions," said Shawgi Tell, an education professor at Nazareth College who's currently writing a book critical of charter schools. "There's less opportunity ... to develop community or collegiality. That certainly can't be considered a positive setting for teaching and learning."

Newer schools with tight budgets, like Rochester Career Mentoring, have it worse. Ten of its 15 teachers in 2013-14 were in their first or

second year professionally, and only one had 10 years' experience.

The trend continues this year, as 10 of last year's 15 teachers — including the only two with more than five years of experience — did not return. Two have left since school started in the fall, and Velickovic, the principal, is also in her first year leading a building.

Velickovic described the school's pool of teacher applicants as "very much slim pickings." And even if more seasoned teachers were to apply, school founder Dennis Francione said it would be difficult to fit their higher salaries into the budget.

Some charters offer more competitive salaries to first-year teachers — as high as \$46,000 for some at Rochester Prep. Overall, though, the average for first- and second-year charter teachers is \$42,764 compared to \$47,095 in the city school district.

Private and Catholic schools are not obligated to disclose their teachers' salaries. The Diocese of Rochester only acknowledged that its teachers "make a financial sacrifice to serve in the ministry of our Catholic schools."

Some private high schools did disclose median teacher salary and experience, showing a workforce that is more experienced than at charter schools but not much better paid. Teachers at The Harley School, Allendale Columbia and Aquinas Institute earn a median salary near \$45,000 despite a median experience of around 15 years.

Our Lady of Mercy stands out among private high schools, paying its teachers a median salary of \$58,100. They average 16 years of experience.

Suburban teachers are generally comparable to those in Rochester in terms of experience but vary in median pay, from around \$50,000 in East Rochester to more than \$65,000 in Greece and Pittsford. *** Just as with traditional public schools, though, there is a great deal of variation among charters in terms of teacher pay and experience.

Genesee Community Charter School, in the Rochester Museum & Science Center and teaching mostly middle-class children, had by far the most experienced and highest-paid teachers. Thirteen of the 19 had more than 10 years teaching experience in 2013-14, and the average salary was \$55,440.

Urban Choice Charter School on Humboldt Street also stands out, with an average of 8.3 years experience among its teachers. School leaders attribute its success to a unique recruiting system, in which prospective teachers usually move up the ladder from substitute teachers to "instructional specialists," who support regular teachers full-time in their classrooms, to teachers.

Danielle Fagnan spent about six years at the school before she finally got her own first-grade classroom this year — a drastically different sort of rookie teacher than one right out of college.

One day last week, she met with half a dozen fellow teachers to share a student's work and elicit feedback on how she could better reach her, part of regular professional development at the school.

"I could have gone elsewhere, but it's like a family — not just for the staff, but for the kids," she said. "I can go to anybody, whether it's just venting about a bad day or if I need help in this or that area."

Urban Choice is led by Ed Cavalier, the longtime East High School principal. He acknowledged the charter can't match the salaries and benefits packages that some traditional school systems offer, and also echoed other charter leaders in bemoaning what they say is poor teacher training at local colleges.

But, Cavalier said, creating a nurturing environment for faculty can mitigate the disadvantage.

"If you start by putting together the right environment, you don't worry about people leaving," he said. "We think with our recruitment process we can get exactly the people we want for \$41,000 (or) \$42,000. ... We have very seldom been burned by our commitment to young, passionate, hard-working, limited- experience people." *** Those with experience in traditional and charter schools say they see the merit in both.

Eric Morris began his teaching career last year at Young Women's College Prep High School. Over the summer, he accepted an almost-full-time job at Brighton High School for slightly less money but, he hopes, better prospects for advancement.

He enjoyed his year at the charter school, describing it as "kind of an entrepreneurial atmosphere."

"They're trying to get things off the ground and get rolling, and you have dedicated, hard-working, younger staff members," he said. "(It was) an intimate staff. I worked closely with every teacher in the building."

It is no sure thing for a charter to "get things off the ground" — a school is examined after five years for a renewal of its charter, and not every school is granted more time. More so than at more stable traditional schools, charter teachers know their job performance will have an impact on the school's very existence.

Morris did his student teaching at East High School and said he benefited from experienced colleagues there — something lacking at Young Women’s College Prep, where nine of the 12 teachers in 2013-14 were in their first or second professional year.

“At East, I was around some master teachers and I really felt like I was learning the craft from them,” he said. “At the charter, without the support of master teachers around to learn from, there are challenges.”

In lieu of master teachers, Harrity and Gross are stepping up as leaders at Rochester Career Mentoring.

Harrity specifically sought out a charter school when she was looking for her first job because she wanted freedom to teach in her own way, without the strictures she feared in an established system.

“I want to maintain the state and Common Core standards but also have my own spin,” she said. “Being in a big district, you don’t always have the leeway to do that.”

She called tenure “a safeguard that can breed mediocrity and laziness.” Even if Rochester Career Mentoring were unionized, though, none of its teachers would likely have enough years to qualify for tenure protection.

Francione, the school founder and a Rochester School District veteran, says this year’s crop of teachers is much stronger than in the last two years. He sees a clear path toward firmer ground, following the model of Urban Choice, Genesee and other established schools, and he hopes his now-green teachers will ripen and stay around.

“Is it a struggle? Yes,” he said. “But if they survive, they get stronger.”

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First-grade teacher Danielle Fagnan, center, listens as other teachers offer feedback on her lesson plan during a bi-weekly Professional Learning Community K-2 meeting at the Urban Choice Charter School. The small groups are designed to help teachers with feedback and constant support from peers. Fagnan is a first-year teacher, but has spent the last four years as a staffer.

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SHAWGI TELL

AN EDUCATION PROFESSOR AT NAZARETH COLLEGE WHO’S CURRENTLY WRITING A BOOK CRITICAL OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

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