

Enrollment at charter schools still booming

Charters

Number on waitlist expected to continue to grow even though no new facilities currently able to open

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

Among the chants, the calls and responses, the stomping and the singing, Mariah Welch's opening emerged.

A third-grader at Rochester Prep Charter School in northeast Rochester, she had followed along as principal Emily Volpe led the students in an assembly on a convoluted series of cat stories. One teacher had six cats, another had three times as many. How many legs were on the first teacher's cats?

She counted off on her fingers, then stood and took the microphone. More than a hundred classmates watched expectantly.

"Each cat has 24 legs," she said with confidence.

Partial credit.

"I mean — she has 24 legs altogether."

The mental picture was fuzzy but the math was true, and Mariah was rewarded with resounding, synchronized congratulations.

Those moments — combining joyful performance, strict unison and academic mastery — are a Rochester Prep trademark. They have resulted in not only test scores that match many suburban

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Fourth-graders stand and cheer behind third graders at Rochester Prep Charter School. Rochester Prep has nearly 2,000 students on its waitlist, with third and fourth grade being the most popular. JAMIE GERMANO/@JGERMANO1/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER There are just over 6,000 students in Rochester-area charter schools in 2017-18, up from 1,060 in 2007-08.

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"If we wanted easier numbers, we would have opened a primary school," she said. "Very few people start charter schools in ninth grade because many people say it's too late. I don't think that's right and I don't think that's moral. It's not too late."

school districts, but also swollen student enrollment and a massive waiting list.

More than one-third of Rochester-area students attending charter schools are at one of Rochester Prep's six schools. Nearly two-thirds of the 3,157 names on charter school waiting lists belong to Rochester Prep as well.

Charter school enrollment has boomed over the past 10 years as more schools have opened and expanded. There are just over 6,000 students in Rochester-area charter schools in 2017-18, up from 1,060 in 2007-08; that number is expected to continue to grow even though no new charter schools are currently authorized to open, because a number of current schools are still adding grade levels.

Behind that overall trend, though, are several significant disparities among the schools. The most striking is the market dominance of Rochester Prep, which has almost 2,000 students enrolled and also nearly 2,000 students on its waiting list.

The waiting list numbers are not unduplicated; one student could be on the list for several charter schools, or be attending one charter and waiting on another. And not every child who rises to the top of a waiting list will enter that school, for a variety of reasons.

Some of the schools have students at more than one site, including Rochester Academy Charter School and Eugenio Maria de Hostos. Rochester Prep, though, is the only one with more than one campus serving the same grade levels. It is growing out to a configuration of three elementary schools and three middle schools feeding one high school, with an eventual total enrollment of about 3,000 students.

Caveats aside, the 3,959 children who are either attending a Rochester Prep school or are on its waiting list are equivalent to about 9 percent of all children ages 5-19 in the city of Rochester, according to census data. Its waiting list is more than twice the actual enrollment of the next largest charter school, Eugenio Maria de Hostos.

Apart from Rochester Prep, there is a clear dichotomy — based largely on grade level — between those schools with healthy waiting lists and those struggling to make enrollment.

Seven other schools have more than 100 students waiting to get in, led by Urban Choice at 342. At the other end of the spectrum, four schools serving mostly

There are waiting lists in the Rochester City School District as well. Several hundred children were placed on a list after the kindergarten lottery for 2017-18, led by 186 of them at World of Inquiry School 58 and about 90 at James Duffy School 12. There are also smaller waiting lists at some district schools for students entering the seventh or ninth grades.

The district's response to charter school growth has been a mix of criticism, frustration and grudging respect. Some school board members have noted Rochester Prep, like most other charter schools, has many fewer students with disabilities, and hardly any students who don't speak English.

At the same time, there have been some tentative steps toward collaboration, including on teacher recruitment and professional development. The district believes charter school enrollment can only be curtailed by improvements in the traditional public schools.

Melinda Murray's son is in fourth grade at Rochester Prep. When he began in kindergarten, she found the amount of homework overwhelming, but eventually came to value how they pushed him to succeed.

"At first you look at that packet, like: 'Is that all for *tonight?*'" she said. "They're little, but they expect a lot from them. ... I love how they push the kids. It's not to the point where they break; it's to where they want to learn."

The results, based on state test scores, have been remarkable. Rochester Prep students, 90 percent of whom live in poverty, have outscored many suburban school districts in English and math, particularly at the lower grade levels. Board Chairman Geoff Rosenberger pointed out that Rochester Prep had more students earn a 4, the top score, on the state math and English exams than did RCSD, which has about 10 times more students.

Rochester Prep's internal surveys show that more than 50 percent of parent applicants hear about the school through word-of-mouth rather than advertising. That was true for Tara Nettles, who has twins in fourth grade. She, in turn, sings the school's praises to her friends.

"It's not just my kids; *all* the kids are flourishing here," she said. "They get so much encouragement and support. It's worth the wait."

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secondary students are underenrolled compared to the targets in their charter documents and have little or no waiting list to speak of.

They risk falling into a spiral where low enrollment leads to lower funding and more difficulty maintaining staff and programs.

Across all schools, the greatest waiting list is for third and fourth grade. Both lists have more than 500 names across all schools, though again, some of those are duplicates. Demand tails off in the secondary levels but still exceeds supply, with 111 12th-graders waiting for a spot somewhere, nearly all of them at Rochester Prep.

Vertus Charter School began with ninth-graders in 2014 and will have its first graduating class next spring. Cofounder Leigh McGuigan said there are about 280 students currently enrolled, below the target of 300.



Emily Volpe, principal at Rochester Prep Charter School, talks with third-grade students during an assembly. Rochester Prep has nearly 2,000 students on its wait list, which, combined with its enrollment, accounts for 9 percent of all children in the area.
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