

Education powers up: Stirring controversy and test scores, charter schools offer students a new lease on learning

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As the new school year dawns, the hopes and dreams of some Chicago Public Schools parents are invested in 12 "charter" schools making their debut.

Charters are small schools run by private, nonprofit entities that have greater freedom and autonomy in budget and curriculum than other public schools. They also are not required to hire union teachers.

The concept arrived in Chicago in the fall of 1997, when the first five CPS charter schools opened. Today, there are 47 such CPS schools operated by 27 organizations.

Not everyone is a fan: The Chicago Teachers Union is opposed to using public funds for the private operators, and to the lack of staff certification and other regulations governing the system's non-charter schools.

But supporters say there's proof of charter schools' success. Charters have outpaced other schools on test scores, attendance and graduation rates, and other student performance measures, as a recent National Alliance for Public Charter Schools report showed.

This year's crop ranges from the first CPS school run by a Roman Catholic institution to the city's first all-boys public school in more than 30 years.

The schools' focuses range from intensive English instruction for bilingual students to arts-infused curriculums. At some, the school year has already begun. We visited three to see what sets them apart.

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PROVIDENCE-ENGLEWOOD

On Aug. 21, Kristyn Brown, 5, bounded into Providence Englewood Charter, excited about the first day of school.

She already knew some of her kindergarten classmates, because Providence-St. Mel -- a Roman Catholic elementary and high school in East Garfield Park awarded a CPS charter last year -- had recruited students at Kristyn's Kennedy-King College preschool.

"I thought that was a plus, for a charter school to go out and recruit students," said Kristyn's father, the Rev. E. Kevin Brown. He marveled with other parents of the charter's 200 kindergarten-through fifth-grade students at the refurbished, former Ralph Bunche Elementary, 6515 S. Ashland.

The new charter is modeled after Providence-St. Mel, which operates independently of the Chicago Roman Catholic Archdiocese. Providence-St. Mel is highly regarded for its success at sending African-American students to college: 100 percent of its graduates have been accepted to four-year colleges for 25 years, and more than 50 percent to top-tier colleges.

"I'm excited to see whether our model will work in a public school setting," said Paul Adams, Providence-St. Mel's president and principal of its charter. On a recent day, Adams rolled up his shirtsleeves and pitched in, helping to assemble new furniture.

At the flagship school, even kindergartners must pass an entrance test -- a one-on-one interview gauging knowledge of letters, numbers and basic preschool skills. Providence-St. Mel's new public counterpart had planned to do the same.

But entrance testing hadn't gone over well with some parents of former students of Bunche, which was shut down by school officials in June in part because of dismal reading scores. Providence Englewood eventually nixed testing, admitting kids at the 25th percentile, and officials gave priority to Bunche students.

"I love it here," fifth-grader TQuori McGahee, 10, said after her first week. "My teachers are tough, but nice."

The charter's approval was not without controversy, as critics have opposed having a Catholic-based institution involved in running a public school. CPS has stressed that no religion will be taught at Providence Englewood.

LIGHTHOUSE CHARTER

It's the end of the first week of school at Bronzeville Lighthouse Charter, and Jana Baylor, 7, gives it a thumbs-up.

"It's been good," says the second-grader, her wide eyes sparkling. "I was excited to come here to see what they're doing. I like my teacher because she's nice and helps me with work. My best friend Lamaria came here, too!"

Parents bustle in and out of the offices of principal April Knox, a young, energetic administrator who seems able to juggle responding to their inquiries, dealing with somber-faced, uniformed children, and consulting with a national rep from the Framingham, Mass.-based Lighthouse Academies, which is running this new charter school.

Housed in the refurbished Hartigan Elementary at 8 W. Root -- in the one-time shadow of the now-demolished Robert Taylor Homes -- Bronzeville Lighthouse is the 10th such charter opened nationally by Lighthouse Academies, a charter management firm.

Bronzeville Lighthouse serves 361 kindergarten through fifth-grade students.

Teachers are trained to infuse arts through all the subjects.

"That may include movement, theater, dance, visual arts, poetry -- any form of art," said Knox. She said Lighthouse's draw to the former Hartigan site was Bronzeville's history as a black arts mecca. Hartigan was one of 10 elementaries shuttered in 2004 amid a dwindling student population following Chicago Housing Authority teardowns.

The charter is part of CPS' ambitious effort to overhaul 25 schools in the State Street corridor, once home to the nation's most notorious public housing, and lure a mix of families to a gentrifying "Mid-South" area.

The ambitious plan seems to have worked for Jana's mother, South Shore resident Michelle Clayborn. "It was important to me that Jana be

able to express herself and also receive a strong academic foundation," she said.

CARLOS FUENTES

With only a week before school starts Tuesday at the **United Neighborhood Organization's** Carlos Fuentes Campus, everyone was scrambling.

Among the landscapers and construction workers completing upgrades at the former Resurrection Catholic Academy in Avondale, teachers like Ginny Roper lugged supplies and hung last-minute classroom decorations.

"I didn't even know what a charter school was until a year ago," said Roper, a fourth-grade teacher. "But, it has really connected with me -- setting high expectations for all kids, regardless of the community they're from."

The charter at 2845 W. Barry, named for a famed Mexican writer, is United's third charter. The organization opened its fourth, the Bartolome de Las Casas at 1641 W. 16th in Pilsen, 1998.

UNO charters, which include Octavio Paz at 2651 W. 23rd and Rufino Tamayo at 5135 S. California, serve predominantly Latino, immigrant student populations, with a curriculum based on an intensive English instruction model.

"We immerse our children in English from day one, so they learn English very quickly, and our parents love it," said UNO CEO Juan Rangel. "They know English is the language their children need to know to succeed in this country."

Rangel and other Latino leaders are alarmed at dropout rates among Latino students and say those rates are evidence of the need for more vocational and charter school programs to provide educational model alternatives.

Parent Christina Castro agrees that charter schools can help focus on the specific needs of the community, saying her eighth-grader didn't get the attention she needed at her former school.

"She was having problems and I went to the principal, and he said he didn't have time to talk to me about it," said Castro, whose daughter Stephanie, 13, has transferred to Carlos Fuentes. "I chose this charter because they're very organized and actually want to know about your kid. They're interested in helping our kids achieve."

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TOOLS FOR SCHOOLS

It's not too late to make a monetary contribution to the Chicago Sun-Times Charity Trust's "Tools for Schools" program, which provides school supplies to some of the more than 10,000 homeless children in the Chicago area. A donation of \$25 provides three children with backpacks full of supplies. Donations are tax deductible. Send checks, payable to Chicago Sun-Times Charity Trust, to Chicago Sun-Times Tools for Schools, P.O. Box 3455, Chicago 60654.

NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS

New Chicago public schools opening this fall:

Austin Business & Entrepreneurship Academy: 231 N. Pine, grades 9-12, entrepreneurship

Bronzeville Lighthouse Charter School: 8 W. Root, K-8, visual and performing arts

Catalyst Charter School-Howland Campus: 1616 S. Spaulding, K-8, reading, writing, math

Chicago International Charter School-Ralph Ellison Campus: 8101 S. Honore, 9-12, college prep

Chicago Virtual Charter School: 225 N. Michigan, K-8, online courses

Noble Street Charter School-Cortland Campus: 4131 W. Cortland, 9-12, college prep

Noble Street Charter School-Ohio Campus: 1337 W. Ohio, 9-12, college prep

Perspectives Charter School-Calumet Campus: 8131 S. May, 7-12, discipline and communications

Providence Englewood Charter School-Bunche Campus: 65151 S. Ashland, K-8, college prep

University of Chicago Charter School-Woodlawn High School: Campus, 6420 S. University., 6-12, college prep

UNO Charter School-Bartolome de las Casas Campus: 1641 W. 16th, K-8, intensive English instruction

UNO Charter School-Carlos Fuentes Campus: 2845 W. Barry, K-8, intensive English

Urban Prep Academy for Young Men Charter School-Englewood Campus: 6201 S. Stewart, 9-12, college preparatory

Sherman School of Excellence: 1000 W. 52nd, preK-8, shared governance

MONDAY IN LIFESTYLES: Keep track of your September events with our "Calendar, Girls" feature.

LOAD-DATE: September 1, 2006

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC:

Photo: Rich Hein/Sun-Times; NEW SLANT ON COLLEGE PREP: Kindergartner Michael Bryant has a question at Providence Englewood Charter School, 6515 S. Ashland. It's a new school opened by Providence-St. Mel, a Catholic school, and its focus is to get its students, who are predominantly