

Cleveland charter schools join forces while staying separate

THOMAS OTT
Plain Dealer

How can three highly regarded Cleveland charter schools join forces without losing the unique identities that set them apart from mainstream public education?

Their futures may hinge on the answer.

Citizens' Academy, the Intergenerational School and Entrepreneurship Preparatory School -- also known as E Prep -- will study how they can work together to improve efficiency and save money. The Cleveland, George Gund and Martha Holden Jennings foundations have collectively given the schools \$100,000 to pay consultants for the project.

Once the consultants are hired, the schools expect recommendations within six months.

The foundations have invested in the charter schools, so helping them stretch those dollars is a logical move, said Helen Williams, who handles education programs for the Cleveland Foundation.

Citizens' Executive Director Perry White, Intergenerational Principal Catherine Whitehouse and E Prep operator John Zitzner speak of sharing office staff or specialists, like psychologists. And though the schools are allies, they are cool to the idea of a merger.

"We see no advantage to a homogeneousness," White said.

The school leaders don't sound desperate but know it's in their best interests to collaborate.

Publicly funded, privately operated charter schools receive state aid for each student, but they get no locally generated taxes and have to raise money for facilities. That situation is probably not about to change, given Ohio's weak economy and Gov. Ted Strickland's wariness toward charter schools.

Strickland has pledged to hold charters more accountable for their quality of education. While the governor is out to get the unscrupulous and incompetent, all schools pay a price, Whitehouse said.

"The screws get tightened across the board," she said. "Every new regulation, new requirement, means additional work, reporting, cost and time."

E Prep has turned to an unusual source for some assistance, getting the Cleveland schools to act as the nonprofit sponsor that charters are obligated to have under state law.

The relationship provides E Prep with credibility -- a plus when raising money -- and a repository of technical advice, Zitzner said. In return, the district receives 3 percent of the charter's state aid, can lump the school's test scores with its own and gets another option it can promote to families.

Citizens' Academy is thinking seriously about affiliating with the district after the school's present sponsorship agreement expires next year, White said. Intergenerational also is open to the possibility, Whitehouse said.

Charter schools have always had informal relationships, but the move to share services is recent, said Nelson Smith, president and chief executive officer of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools in Washington, D.C. Though money shortages are driving the trend, he holds out hope that it will produce new ideas for instruction.

"There are always good economic incentives for charter schools to pull together," he said. "But I'd also look at the creativity they might jointly bring to bear."

CITIZENS' ACADEMY

Location: Ansel Road, near Chester Avenue

Years in operation: 9

Size: 397 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Plans to expand through 12th grade.

Approach: Emphasizes "responsible citizenship"

State rating: "Continuous improvement," third highest of five designations, on most recent report card.

Notable: One of 13 schools in the recent report "Cleveland Schools That are Making a Difference," paid for by the Cleveland and George Gund foundations

ENTREPRENEURSHIP PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Location: East 105th Street near the Bratenahl border. Will move in December to East 36th Street and Superior Avenue.

Years in operation: 2

Size: 330 children in sixth through eighth grade. Plans to add a second school with kindergarten through fifth grade.

State rating: "Continuous improvement"

Approach: Promotes entrepreneurial spirit

Notable: Only privately run charter school sponsored by the Cleveland school district

THE INTERGENERATIONAL SCHOOL

Location: Fairhill Road, west of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive

Years in operation: 8

Size: 176 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Plans to add students to its present grades.

Approach: Mingles ages according to children's development. School involves older adults as volunteers.

State rating: "Excellent," top designation

Notable: One of 13 schools in the recent report "Cleveland Schools That are Making a Difference." One of seven charters nationwide listed in the U.S. Department of Education's 2007 report, "K-8 Charter Schools Guide: Closing the Achievement Gap."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
tott@plained.com, 216-999-5739