

Rising to the Challenge

In Arizona, an expansive charter school law is forcing school districts to adapt.
By Kelly Pearce

- Flagstaff has started to offer full-day kindergarten.
- Mesa now enrolls pupils who turn five late in the year.
- Queen Creek tossed aside its superintendent and is pumping more phonics into the classroom.

From the Navajo nation to Nogales, public school districts are taking extraordinary — some say long-overdue — measures to keep students from defecting to Arizona's charter school explosion.

Nearly one quarter of all the nation's charter schools are in Arizona, where 270 charters serve about 30,000 students. Four years ago, some 50 charters in Arizona housed 7,000 children.

Throughout the state, school superintendents and boards are changing programs in response to the new competition. Many are spicing up their curricula to try to match the enticements of charter schools, which often offer a focused diet of arts, technology or back-to-basics entrées catering to niche children, a category that includes both gifted kids and academic stragglers.

"In order to survive, we had to quit our whining and do a better job ourselves," said Kent Matheson, former superintendent of Flagstaff Public Schools, who launched a variety of programs in his district to dazzle students bent on leaving.

In no city in the state are charters more concentrated than in Mesa, home to Arizona's largest school district, with 70,000 students. About 50 charter schools have taken up residence.

When charters arrived on the scene, districts spread horror stories about them, asserting that far-out institutions, such as witchcraft schools, would spring up. They spun tales of doom about a movement they thought would sputter and choke. It didn't, especially in Mesa.

During the 1996-97 school year, about 900 of the Mesa district's 70,000 students transferred to charters. All 70 schools in this suburban district, already a school-reform leader in the state, lost at least one student.

The district began listening more closely to parents' wishes. Coincidentally or not, it opened a third back-to-basics school — with a fourth slated to open this fall — and began a first-of-its-kind enrichment program for home-schoolers. It also lent several teachers to an arts-based charter school and converted its Montessori program into charter schools.

Mesa made national headlines when it began advertising for students. It also started promoting its cutting-edge programs, including an elementary school transformed into an arts magnet the year charter schools were written into the law. The teachers are convinced they wouldn't enjoy so much freedom if it weren't for the competitive atmosphere.

By so reacting, it's as if many districts are reminding parents that they offer good programs too. "It's kind of like looking at your wife and seeing someone flirt with her. You ask yourself if you've told her you love her enough times," explained Robert Meko, principal of Mendoza Elementary School, an arts-based school with a new early-kindergarten program.

The effects charter schools are having on traditional public schools are not unique to Mesa.

- In Flagstaff, the superintendent is trying to entice an award-winning arts charter school to nest under its wing.
- Higley district, realizing it could charge schools a fee to sponsor them, became the largest sponsor in the country. The superintendent wanted to use the money to funnel the dollars into his impoverished district. Today, he oversees 260 district students and 3,500 charter students flung across the state in 28 schools, none of them within the boundaries of his district. "This is a new business," says Likes, who admits he was as big a 'crybaby' as anyone when charters first emerged.
- The Florence district asked a charter school for at-risk students if it would take some of the district's struggling students.

While not all districts have reacted so positively to the charter school movement, most public educators are realizing that treating charters as Public Enemy Number 1 won't serve them well in the long run.

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