

Why Charter Schools?

It is almost impossible for education-minded parents to reform public schools from within.

By Chiara R. Nappi

(Dr. Nappi is a theoretical physicist at the Institute for Advanced study in Princeton, NJ.)

Are schools as good as their reputation? Not always. High SAT scores and students at Ivy League colleges are deceptive in a wealthy academic town like Princeton where many parents are deeply involved with their children's education.

In the eighties and early nineties when my own children enrolled in Princeton schools, it was hard to find out what was being taught in a given classroom. Educators would explain that they did not believe in "one size fits all," and that they cared about meeting the individual needs of each child and fostering self-esteem.

At the end of the academic year, children were all over the map in terms of learning outcomes. The next year, they were all reshuffled into new classes and often their gaps were never noticed or filled. This approach left many students with serious educational deficiencies.

Of course, in an academic community like Princeton where parents tend to provide tutoring and enrichment programs, many children successfully manage to navigate through the system in spite of its problems. At the same time, many other students, especially the more disadvantaged, fall perilously behind. By middle school, wide achievement gaps — far beyond those explained by variations in ability — emerge. They correspond closely to socio-economic status.

Dissatisfaction with the K-8 curriculum had been bubbling for years when in 1991 a group of about 250 Princeton parents petitioned the board of education for a more systematic and challenging math program. The only thing that ever came out of years of effort, however, was the adoption of a rather unchallenging K-5 math curriculum. This convinced parents that the

only way to improve public education was to elect to the school board people who would support standards and accountability.

In the following years, the so-called 'curriculumists' devoted their attention to winning seats on the school board and, by 1994, they had gained a majority. This is how I came to be elected to the board in 1993. Despite our majority, however, our functionality was continually undermined by strife fed by the 'anti-curriculumists' on the board and in the community. Every time a controversial issue arose, teachers invaded the boardroom en masse.

When the contract of our standards-oriented superintendent came up for renewal in 1996, the teachers' union mounted a relentless campaign against her. There was no trick that they did not use to heighten tension in the district. At one point, for example, high school students, escorted by teachers, marched out of the school.

To counteract the curriculumist pressure, educators began to get involved with local elections in 1993. In Princeton, fewer than 17% of eligible voters vote in school elections, and a few hundred votes can go a long way toward deciding the outcome.

Election after election, the teachers' union opposed those candidates who favoured standards and accountability. One by one, the curriculumists on the board were voted out and replaced by teacher-friendly trustees. Finally, in 1997, the curriculumists lost their majority on the board, and the new board capitulated to the unions' demands and forced the superintendent out. Her departure brought to a complete halt the attempt to reform the system from within.

Princeton parents had paid little attention to the statewide debate about charter schools, so intent were they on improving the existing public schools.

They were deeply committed to public education, the very reason they had invested so much time and energy trying to improve it, and were not sure that charter schools were the right way to go. They agonized for months.

Nonetheless, in the summer of 1996, the idea of the Princeton Charter School (PCS) started taking shape. For many, it was the continuation of their longstanding effort to improve public education. The charter school would embody the educational philosophy that these curriculum-minded parents had advocated for years.

Despite ongoing and vociferous opposition from the teachers and the school board, in 1997 the Commissioner of Education granted the PCS one of the state's first charters. By the February 14 deadline, the PCS had received applications from one out of every four eligible students in the district, despite not yet having a principal or teachers or a building. Today, the PCS is doing very well, with a long waiting list for each class.

The PCS has forever altered the education picture in Princeton. Its advent has been swiftly followed by better and more responsive public schools with a stress on basics. Across the district, principals are paying more attention to the quality of teaching.

Ten years of experience have shown that there are widely divergent visions of education in the district. One can fairly ask whether majority rule is really the best way to deal with such disagreements. Parents really should not be forced to entrust their children to a school system that embraces a philosophy of education they disagree with.

Given the depth and intensity of the disagreements in Princeton, it is hard to imagine a better solution than offering choices and encouraging pluralism. That is precisely what the PCS has begun to do.

(Adapted with permission from an article at www.edexcellence.net)