

# The Community Page

## Chartering a Course for the Future

It's early on a Monday morning, and the school bus has just stopped in the unloading zone of a local elementary school. The students who get off the bus are friends and neighbors who live in the geographical area



**Charlotte Arnold,**  
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defined by the district administration for that particular school. They laugh and roughhouse as children do, waiting for the bell to ring before they go inside.

A few blocks away at the White Pine Charter School there are some buses, but many of the children arrive driven by parents themselves, dropping off their children at school. The students come from all over the city, not from any one neighborhood. They also laugh and play as children do, waiting for the bell to ring so they can go inside.

The difference between the two school types doesn't end with geography and transportation. Charter schools are able to be more innovative in curriculum choice—a very important draw to parents. The particular design at White Pine, for example, stresses the theory of Core Knowledge Sequence—that there exists a basic body of knowledge that has been handed down from generation to generation and that every child needs in order to build a framework of education. These essential elements are then presented sequentially year by year, each year building upon the previous.

In addition, charter schools offer innovative

programs. White Pine, for example, features Spanish language instruction in all grades beginning with kindergarten.

Although both charter and public schools receive the same student financial allotment from the State of Idaho, charter schools have a resource that is not so available to traditional public schools, that of comprehensive parental involvement. When they enroll their children at a local charter school, parents understand that they are requested to donate at least 20 hours of service each month to the school. Many parents give more time than that. Those hours may be in the lunch room, playground or classroom, whatever the need may be.

In the local neighborhood school, a very small percentage of all the parents donate any time at all, while 100 percent of charter school parents are expected to participate. Although the charter school cannot force this requirement, the parents are eager to comply. The very reason they opted for the charter school environment for their children is because they know and support the policy of parental involvement to a higher level than can be achieved currently in a traditional school.

Second only to the desired curriculum mentioned above is the prerequisite of improved discipline in the classroom, including respect for teachers and classmates. There is a higher expectation of behavior, and with the presence of parents supporting this step, there is little wiggle room for misbehavior. Manners are also enhanced by the fact that most charter schools, including White Pine, have a strict dress code, eliminating sloppy mental attitudes by banning sloppy dress. Some even re-

quire uniforms.

White Pine, for example, requires collared shirts in a limited number of colors, navy blue or khaki pants and skirts, and all shirts tucked in. Educators and parents have long known that behavior is very strongly influenced by how one dresses, and that others respond to one's appearance. The economics of such a requirement also pay dividends to parents.

This united effort by parents, children and educators is an investment that is not lost on the child and can only breed greater respect for learning in the child.



*A progressing curriculum allows students to learn in sequence.*

## WHAT ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Locally, charter schools are publicly funded schools that are authorized to function by the Idaho Charter School Commission that was formed by the legislature in 2004. The movement toward charter schools arose in the early '90s as a response to the demand by parents and legislators for improvement in Idaho's public education system. It is an attempt to cut through the red tape of traditional public instruction and offer more innovative educational programs.

Most charter schools are small, serving approximately 300 students, and have greater autonomy, as was the purpose of their creation, accommodating the desire of education reformers to find more effective ways of teaching our children. They have greater choice in areas of operation, curriculum and instruction, and operate independently, governed by a community board rather than by elected school board members.

In exchange for the greater freedom given, charter schools are accountable to the state for the results of their program. Their original charter, negotiated between the school's founders and the sponsoring entity, sets forth detailed conditions and expectations. If the school doesn't perform, parents will not send their children, and the school will fail and be closed.

There is a threat to charter schools from three areas: first, the perception that they take money from traditional public schools; second, the alarmist cry of segregation; and third, surprisingly, from



*Enjoying the snow in front of White Pine Charter School.*

those who set the standards for them.

With perhaps a few exceptions in small rural districts, the first two threats seem to be more perceived than real. The money allocated by the state for public education follows the child to whichever school he attends. If a traditional school loses a student to a charter school, the funding goes to the charter school with the exception of transportation funds and a few others. But the district then has no expenditure for that child.

Across the country, and here in Idaho Falls, rather than segregating brighter or more affluent students, the mix is actually very much the same as other schools, perhaps even better. Charter schools cannot charge a fee for enrolling, nor can they discriminate on any basis. Students are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, and the waiting list is nearly as long as the current enrollment. As long as parents are willing to invest their

time, their children are eligible.

The greatest danger can come to innovative education programs if the defining of outcomes is turned over to anyone who is threatened by the process. Although having adopted, in general principle, a focus on results, some educators may promote vague outcomes emphasizing values, attitudes and behaviors—often reflecting quasi-political and ideologically correct positions—rather than knowledge, skills and other cognitive academic outcomes.

If this is allowed to happen, education bureaucrats will be able to take a sensible principle—an emphasis on results—and hijack its meaning so that accountability is actually made impossible.

All the above must be taken into account when evaluating and comparing charter schools and traditional public schools. Variety and newness add to the dilemma of correctly assessing value.

When assessing the effectiveness of reforms in education, clear heads must prevail. The education question involves two of parents' most cherished possessions—their children and their tax dollars. Care must be taken to select wisely. Dissatisfaction with traditional methods of measuring learning is continuing to grow, and all schools will need to make needed changes. After a period of time, we'll have a better idea of the effectiveness of innovative education programs, and a rush to judgment now would be unfortunate. As Henry Clay reminded us, "Statistics are no substitute for judgment."