

Supporters say charter schools improve all education

By EKN ABRAMCZYK
STAFF WRITER
kabrancyk@eo.honcom.net

Lansing Mayor David Hollister saw where families were relocating in the Lansing area. They were moving to Lansing's surrounding communities of DeWitt, Grand Lodge, Holt and Okemos, which led him to describe Lansing as a "doughnut," according to James Goenner.

"The mayor talked about that (growth) and that keeping the young families in Lansing would keep the doughnut from getting bigger," Goenner said. "He said, 'We have to improve schools.'"

Of course, as the director of the charter schools office at Central Michigan University and a charter school advocate, Goenner agrees. Improving the schools will improve many of Michigan's cities, Goenner said. "As Compuware comes to Detroit, where will they send their kids?" Goenner asks.

Goenner also uses that argument to push for the elimination of the 150-school cap on the number of university authorized charter schools. State legislators may discuss the possibility of removing the cap during sessions this week.

Goenner believes the cap should be lifted because schools have waitlists list up to 1,000 students long and the possible partnerships between charter and public schools in areas like food service, and eventually in education, may save tax dollars.

Goenner and the Michigan Association of Public School

'Getting physical facilities is one of our toughest problems.'

James Goenner, director

—Charter schools office at Central Michigan University

Academies believe adding charter schools to the educational marketplace, thus creating competition, will force existing public schools to improve.

Chartering a school

CMU maintains contracts with charter schools as do several other Michigan universities. CMU required the schools to incorporate a national test and Michigan Educational Assessment Program tests for reference points and outline mission goals, Goenner said. Parent involvement will improve many of Michigan's cities, Goenner said. "As Compuware comes to Detroit, where will they send their kids?" Goenner asks.

"We issue contracts for three to five years," Goenner said.

Four CMU-authorized academies have closed. One had too small an enrollment to operate; another for pregnant teens was transformed into a private partnership. For the third closed academy, CMU was not "comfortable" in allowing a Catholic school on the first and second floors, and the charter school on the second and third floors.

It also characterized the difficulties in starting a charter school, Goenner said.

"Getting physical facilities is one of our toughest problems," Goenner said.

The closing of the fourth school — the Sierra Leone Academy in

Detroit — was not viewed as a failure but what Goenner called a "victory" to show how the universities hold the academies accountable. "They were not good to work with, we did not get disclosure and cooperation," Goenner said. "We said, 'These schools will be accountable, we will oversee them.'"

Class size is regulated, so if a school wants to increase above their contracted amount, they must amend their current agreement, Goenner said.

Parental requirements

Wilhelmina Hall, a former educator in the Detroit school system for 32 years and a charter school advocate, said charter school teachers also are held accountable. "I know someone is checking on me to find out if I am doing this," Hall said.

Hall said parents must sign a contract, which includes a specified number of hours that parents must spend on academics with their child or children. Parents also must attend a parent-teacher conference, and the academy must provide them training.

"When you give (parents) a choice, it gives them a different aura," Hall said. "It doesn't matter with the poverty level. Because this is a choice, I have

What is a charter school?

Since August 1994 Michigan's elementary and secondary public school system has added more than 100 new public schools: commonly referred to as public school academies or charter schools.

The schools must follow the same laws that govern traditional public education. Educators, community leaders, business people and parents who start charters select the curriculum, philosophies and emphasis of the schools.

Public universities, local districts and community colleges authorize charters, which sup-

porters say adds a level of accountability not seen elsewhere by ensuring that each school upholds its written performance contract. Charters operate solely on state aid of \$6,000 per student; they do not levy millages or issue bonds.

All charter schools are non-profit, as required by law. A charter board may hire a service provider for administrative chores instead of hiring a central office staff.

Approximately 60,000 Michigan students attend 178 Michigan charter schools.

different.

"They want the schools to be safe."

Hall said the schools do not pull from the "elite."

Students learn reading, writing and arithmetic, along with respect, responsibility and character education, highlighting values, honesty, truth and integrity, Goenner said. Academies also focus on the fine arts, automotive manufacturing and environmental science.

Western Wayne County does not have many charter schools because they tend to be proposed in areas that "need" them, though that isn't always the case, Goenner said.

"Forest Hills in Grand Rapids is one of the top three in the state, and a charter school went there and filled up. It doesn't necessarily mean a school district is bad. It's just that a core of parents want something different."

Charter school instructors generally earn between \$25,000 and \$32,000 to start, Goenner said. With experienced instructors in public schools earning more than double that, Goenner admits it will be "hard to be competitive."

"They are looking at merit pay, and they are struggling with that," Goenner said. But charter school instructors praise the professional development offered at the schools, along with the appreciation and support of parents, Goenner said.

"Every child in the state of Michigan has the best learning opportunity available to them, Goenner said.

made this choice and I have chosen this school."

Parents like a "nurturing environment," Goenner said.

"We can predict a child's test scores based on income," Goenner said. "That's a sad commentary."

"I think the majority of parents love their children and want what's best for them. A majority of students are from minority households, a majority do care but they couldn't move to suburban districts."

Safer schools wanted

Goenner was asked about charter schools and their ethnic focus and whether that contributed to segregation.

Goenner said Hispanics in the Saginaw area wanted a charter school, so one was started. Many students continued to struggle with academics at that school and had problems with drug abuse. MEAP scores did not improve, but the school eventually graduated its first student and the Hispanic community helped her obtain a college scholarship. She continued to study at that college, Goenner said.

Many Detroit academies are African American with 95 percent or more of the population African American. Hall added: "They have the same needs, they have the same deficiencies and they have the same desires. They are looking for something

Plans approved for road repairs

A committee of representatives of Wayne County's 43 communities and county engineers approved a transportation improvement plan Nov. 6 calling for repairs in 2001 to Beech Daly in Redford, Merriman Road and Six Mile Road in Livonia and Wayne Road in Westland.

The plan must go to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, the regional planning organization that distributes the federal funds, for its approval. Federal funds will pay for 80 percent of each project.

Each year engineers rate the condition of each of the county's 700 miles of paved primary roads and develop a prioritized list of roads for improvements.

Projects are selected on a "worst first" basis until the county's annual share of federal funds — about \$13 million — is obligated. Once projects are approved for funding, the county begins design and engineering work.

The list includes the following roads and the estimated federal funds available in western Wayne County:

■ Beech Daly, Six Mile to Grand River, in Redford, \$370,000 available

■ Merriman Road, Seven Mile to Eight Mile Road, Livonia, \$1.7 million

■ Six Mile Road, Farmington to Merriman, Livonia, \$700,000

Also slated for 2001 is the reconstruction of Seven Mile Road between Merriman and Middlebelt using state transportation economic development funds.

This year Wayne County enjoyed its largest road construction season, making repairs to 72 miles of roads, nearly twice the county's average annual rate.

That means nearly 50 percent of the 166 miles of road county engineers rated in poor condition at the beginning of the year have been fixed.

The additional work was possible due to a \$60 million road improvement bond program initiated in 1997 by County Executive Edward McNamara.

For updates on current Wayne County road projects, visit the county's roads web site at www.waynecounty.com/waynecounty or call (734) 695-ROAD.

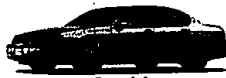
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