

Study charter schools to transplant their successes

By Lee Tetkowski

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A sparkle of hope exists in the very low-income neighborhood of Genesee and Rich streets. Credit the dedication of Dr. Claity Massey to each young child enrolled in the King Center Charter School.

As part of a statewide League of Women Voters study of charter schools, a Buffalo committee visited most of the ones in Erie and Niagara counties during the past seven years. A review of the performance of charters in New York State indicates that, while some do an excellent job of educating children, others are less successful than the most substandard traditional public schools. Therefore, the league supports public funding of academic research into the characteristics of charters that lead to student academic success.

On our recent return to the King Center Charter School, seven years after its opening and our first visit, we observed what the freedom in operating a charter school can provide when it is led by experienced, well-qualified educators, passionate to help every child.

Ninety-seven percent of the King Center Charter School students qualify for free/reduced-price lunches, more than the average Buffalo district school. Seeking best school practices, we were impressed with the strategies the school has developed to help children and families living in poverty overcome the barriers to school success. You can't begin to teach a hungry, frightened, insecure child. Children without age-appropriate vocabulary need extra intervention.

A parent-child home program now helps younger siblings of children at the school to benefit from a series of home visits. The trained visitor models how to read to a 3- or 4-year old and how to interact with toys. This facilitates social development and academic achievement later, while promoting positive parenting. These youngsters will be more prepared when they enter kindergarten.

The home program is supported by private donors. Massey, the school's director, uses videos of individual children as they develop reading skills. These are shown to parents, adding greatly to the "report card." Most parents attend these sessions. Throughout this unusual school, looking down from the former choir loft of this inspiring, converted church, one sees a purposeful calm activity. Concepts of safety, respect and self-confidence are developing. With continued individualized instruction, the school's recent fourth-graders' test scores have risen substantially.

To better measure outcomes in charters and to compare them to traditional public schools, the League of Women Voters supports public funding to measure educational growth in individual students as they progress from grade to grade in charter schools.

Wouldn't it be beneficial if we could offer to all disadvantaged young children in Buffalo similar early intervention with home visits through our district schools with public money?

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