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Charter School Finds That 'C' Means Closing

By ANNA M. PHILLIPS

For the first time, New York City is closing a charter school for the offense of simply being mediocre.

The announcement this week that the city planned to shut Peninsula Preparatory Charter School, a seven-year-old elementary school in Far Rockaway, Queens, was unusual by any definition. Since 2004, the city has closed only a few of its 142 charters that have opened — schools that are publicly financed but privately managed, and are a source of competition for traditional schools.

But as more of the city's charter schools have matured, reaching the five-year renewal mark, the Education Department has become increasingly impatient with weak-performing ones. With the closing of Peninsula Prep, which had received a grade of C on each of its last four progress reports, Chancellor Dennis M. Walcott seemed to be signaling that the city's 136 charters will now be held to a higher standard.

And increasing scrutiny of New York charter schools could have widespread implications, prompting a wider conversation across the country about what the bar for closing should be, and how much charter schools should be expected to outperform public schools.

Under Joel I. Klein, the former schools chancellor, the perception had grown among charter school leaders and those on the outside that as long as their test scores were middling at worst and their schools were functional, the city would not interfere.

"I think that there was a large number of people, including the chancellor, who were just very predisposed to be charter supporters, so it was hard for them to take off that hat," said Michael Duffy, a former director of the

city's charter school office, who remembered having to lobby his superiors in 2010 to close a charter school in East New York, Brooklyn, that was forcing out special education students.

Marc Sternberg, a deputy chancellor who oversees the charter school office, said the city had not changed its approach to monitoring charter schools.

"Our focus has always been on opening new, excellent district and charter schools that provide students with a high-quality education," he said in a statement. "In 2009, Peninsula Prep received a short-term renewal and were told that if they failed to meet the standards in their charter they would not be given another. They failed to do so, and we have to hold them accountable for that."

But charter school advocates and leaders believe that by closing Peninsula Prep, the city is issuing a warning to schools that it is no longer sufficient to be as good as or slightly better than traditional public schools; they have to be exemplars.

Until now, the city's rate of closing for charters — about 4 percent since the first charters were granted in 1999 — was below the national average: 15 percent of charters across the country have been closed since 1992, according to a report by the Center for Education Reform, published last December.

By the city's standards, Penin-

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sula was not the worst charter school, nor was it the best. Last year, 46 percent of Peninsula's students passed the state English exam, a better performance than 47 other city charters. On the math exam, 60 percent of its students scored as proficient. For the last four years, it received C's on its annual progress reports. It was, by definition, in the middle of the herd. But not on Far Rockaway, where those scores were high enough for Peninsula Prep

to outperform 9 of the 10 elementary schools its students are zoned for.

Ericka Wala, Peninsula's principal since July 2009, said the school had been improving, though slowly.

"We were a struggling school in 2009 when everybody was A's and B's," Ms. Wala said, "and when they raised the standard, we were able to maintain a C. The scores had to have gone up in order to do that. I do feel the school is being used as a warning."

New York City has closed charter schools for poor performance in the past, but their test scores were dismal. In other cases, schools were closed after they had already been damaged by poor fiscal or management decisions. Last year, the city succeeded in closing the Ross Global Academy, a charter school led by Courtney Sale Ross, the multi-millionaire widow of Steve Ross, the Time Warner chief executive. When the city announced plans to close the school, only 26 percent of its students had passed the state English test and 33 percent passed math.

James Merriman, chief executive of the New York City Charter School Center, said a confluence of factors might have led the city

A principal says she feels a school 'is being used as a warning.'

to raise the bar for renewing charter schools. In 2010, state education officials toughened the math and English exams administered annually to students in third through eighth grades, after years of complaints about test score inflation. Across the city, scores dropped precipitously, and suddenly schools that once appeared to be holding their own were actually found to be in distress.

Another factor is that as more charter schools reach their five-year renewal points, the city is judging them by their progress report grades, which were not given to schools opened and renewed before the reports began in 2008. The additional measure-

ment affected Peninsula Prep, which failed to meet five of nine standards it had promised to reach, according to the city's renewal report. One of the standards was receiving at least a B on its progress report.

Charter school advocates said the Education Department had also become responsive to criticism that it treated charter schools differently from district schools. Since 2002, the city has closed 117 district schools, a vast majority of them for poor performance.

"School closure is built into the charter idea — and needs to happen regardless," Mr. Merriman wrote in an e-mail. "But certainly if a district is closing traditional schools for poor performance, not closing charter schools becomes doubly indefensible."

On the other hand, he said charter school critics and the teachers' union had been too quick to urge the city to close charter schools, while defending failing district schools.

Mr. Duffy, who is now a managing director at Victory Education Partners, said that in the early years of the Bloomberg administration, the city was focused on opening many charters to give parents new choices. But in 2010, a change in legislation that lifted the cap on the number of charter schools also diminished the city's authority to open new charters, giving more power to the state Board of Regents. While the city is still focused on opening new charter schools — Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has promised to open 25 each year — charter advocates say the city's charter school office has more staff members and resources to scrutinize schools it already opened.

"I definitely think in 2012, what was good enough even five years ago is no longer good enough," Mr. Duffy said.



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Republicans for Monopoly

GOP leaders bow to unions and defeat school choice in Pennsylvania.

One of the best stories of 2011 was how Republicans and Democrats united in more than a dozen states to increase school choice. Then there's Pennsylvania, where a few Republicans joined the teachers unions to kill modest reforms that would have helped poor students in the state's worst schools.

Republican Governor Tom Corbett campaigned last year on expanding school choice, but he's been undone by his Republican-controlled legislature and his own diffident leadership. The state House and Senate passed separate legislation earlier this year to improve education options for low-income kids. Too bad they couldn't get their acts together, literally.

During the spring the House approved a bill increasing tax credits to \$200 million from \$75 million for businesses that contribute to scholarship organizations. These private scholarships help some students, but their impact is limited because they rarely subsidize full tuition at a private school. The unions didn't vigorously oppose the House bill because they wanted to save their ammo for the bigger threat that was looming in the Senate: vouchers.

Senate Republicans and Democrats came together in the fall to rebuff the union assault and pass a pilot voucher program that would be phased in over seven years. Only low-income students who attend schools ranking in the bottom 5% of the state on standardized tests would be eligible for vouchers during the first year. The program would be expanded during the second year to include private-school students who live in districts with failing schools.

Many of these students receive scholarships from private schools and organizations, so making them eligible for vouchers would free up scholarship money for middle-class students who can't afford private schools on their own and don't qualify for scholarships. After seven years, low-income students at public schools where half of students perform below grade level on standardized tests would be eligible.

The vouchers could help up to 70,000 kids escape failing and often dangerous schools. Poor kids in urban school districts like Philadelphia, where most of the state's failing schools are located, would benefit the most. Only about 70% of Philadelphia students graduate, and fewer than 50% score at or above grade-level.

Unions played their usual false tune that vouchers steal money from public schools, though what they really fear is that vouchers would break their monopoly control over public education. Under the voucher bill, public schools would come out ahead financially since they would be educating fewer students while still receiving local property tax revenues for kids in their district who attend private schools on vouchers.

Alas, House Speaker Samuel Smith and Majority Leader Mike Turzai bowed to union pressure and refused to put the Senate bill or even a modified voucher program up for a vote. Instead, on the last night of the legislative session, they rushed out a bill that expanded tax credits for scholarships and increased oversight of charter schools. Rank-and-file members of both parties revolted against the slap-dash packaging and sank the legislation.

Pennsylvania's school choice setback offers a lesson for reform-minded Republican Governors elsewhere who may be tempted to let their legislatures do the heavy-lifting. Big reforms require strong executive leadership and engagement. It's not enough to cheer from the sidelines.