

CER Baltimore Charter Project, Held Back  
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  - *Baltimore Sun*, For Connecticut Charter School, Small Details Drive Big Changes, September 28, 2004, Liz Bowie
  - *Urbanite*, September/October 2004, Unchartered Territory, pp 16-17
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# MARYLAND

THURSDAY, MAY 11, 2006

## 'Go-slow' policy on charter schools

City takes wary approach; 18 groups weigh proposals

Sites can't open until fall 2005

By LIZ BOWEN  
STAFF

A group of Northeast Baltimore parents believed they had solved the toughest question for those in the city with school-age children: Where would they send their children to school? They would build their own.

They found the perfect space, a church with a school building that sat empty on weekdays and a congregation eager to offer it rent-free. They planned the curriculum and applied for \$700,000 in foundation and federal grants. They even lined up 60 students, most of them attending private and parochial schools, who wanted to enroll in what would be the city's first charter school next fall.

"We bring so many parents into the system who would be paying [private school] tuition," said Bobbi Macdonald, president of the board of City Neighbors Charter School.

But their plans are on hold as they wait to see whether Baltimore school officials will let City Neighbors open in the fall.

Despite passage of a state law more than a year ago authorizing charter schools in Maryland, the city school system has adopted a "go-slow" policy that won't permit the first Baltimore charter school until fall 2005 — and then won't let more than three such schools open in the first three years. The parents have asked for an exception to the policy.

With the city schools enduring a financial crisis and many Baltimore parochial schools closing, the school board will be handling a flood of applications from nonprofit organizations and parent groups who want to create new public schools.

## Baltimore adopts cautious approach to charter schools

City Neighbors is one of 18 groups in the city — and about 40 statewide — considering the idea of opening a charter school. Most would be in neighborhoods where the regular public schools are crowded or low performing.

Charter schools offer the city a chance to revitalize marginal neighborhoods and to stabilize others, advocates argue, because they keep families from fleeing for public and private schools elsewhere.

"The city is hemorrhaging children every year," said Erika Brockman, who heads a committee trying to start the Southwest Baltimore Charter School. [See Charter, 4s]

more Charter School. "This seems like the best way to stay in Baltimore and to get the best education for my children."

Under the new state law, charters remain public schools and receive funding based on the number of pupils who attend. They don't charge tuition and cannot have entrance criteria. The schools accept children from defined neighborhoods or zones; and if there are more applicants than spots, children are chosen by lottery.

Teachers and administrators are part of the teachers union and receive benefits and salary as though they were teaching in regular public schools.

But charter schools provide their parents and founders with freedom to pick their curriculum and set their spending priorities. So if a financial crisis hits the public schools, as it has, charter schools would have more freedom to decide where to put resources.

There are three well-organized groups seeking to open schools, said Laura Weeldreyer, coordinator for charter and new school initiative schools in the city.

In addition to City Neighbors, which would be at Epiphany Lutheran Church at 4301 Raspe Ave. in Northeast Baltimore, there is a group in Patterson Park and another in Southwest Baltimore centered around Union Square.

### 'In every neighborhood'

"What is really striking to me is that they are in every neighborhood," said Carol Beck, a project director for the Center for Educational Reform, a Washington nonprofit group that promotes charter schools. Beck is working with the local groups to provide legal and financial advice.

The Patterson Park school would be located at the old St. Elizabeth's school building and would take in children from several neighborhoods, including Patterson Park, Patterson Place, Butchers Hill, Fells Prospect, Highlandtown and Canton.

"It seems to me that this area is highly diverse, more so than in many parts of Baltimore City," said Stephanie Simms, chairwoman of the Patterson Park Public Charter School committee. She points to the area's emerging Latino population, as well as a mix of African-American, Native American and white families.

The school, she said, would like to ensure that diversity is reflected in the school and is setting up a system that takes half of its students from neighborhoods at each end of the park.

While other school proposals may not be able to boast the same degree of diversity, a number of parents said they want to make sure there is racial and economic diversity in their schools. In many cases, they said, that is what attracted them to city living.

In the next few weeks, the school system is likely to decide how quickly to let the city's charter schools movement move forward. "I am very much in favor of public charter schools," schools Chief Executive Officer Bonnie S. Copeland said recently.

But Copeland said the system must first establish protocols for how to objectively examine and compare applications — and then how to calculate what each school would cost the school district.

For instance, although every charter school operates on its own, the system must collect student test data on each charter school pupil and perform other administrative tasks to support the school. So creating new charter schools could entail costs that the school board may not have budgeted.

Just how much money each charter school will get per pupil also has not been determined.

"One of the things we are going to have to do is say what are the real costs of these schools," said Weeldreyer.

Large schools are less expensive to run because the administrative costs are kept down; creating a number of new small schools would require the system to spend more money.

However, advocates argue that keeping middle-class property owners in the city would bring so many benefits that it would more than cover any extra costs in opening small schools.

Baltimore has some experience in running charter schools. In 1997, the school board approved four New School Initiative schools. They are nearly identical to charter schools except that they cannot receive federal funds.

Three of the four original initiative schools are still in operation and two — Midtown Academy and City Springs Elementary School — are considered among the city's top performers. Midtown, in Bolton Hill, is so popular that it turns away hundreds of kindergarten applicants each year.

### Policy review

At a meeting this week, the school board is tentatively scheduled to review its policy on how many charters can be opened in the next several years, Copeland said. An advisory board for charter and new initiative schools has recommended they allow more.

Critics of charter schools argue that they pick off the most active families from the neighborhood public schools — taking away potential PTA leaders and parent volunteers who typically provide invaluable classroom support.

But those schools often wouldn't provide the same opportunity, advocates say, to try out new ideas.

"Why don't they hang down the door of their neighborhood school? ... It doesn't give them the space or time to dream," Beck said.

New charter schools seem to tap into a longing by parents to have a greater role in their children's education and find creative approaches to teaching. Even some who are now home schooling their children have expressed interest in charter schools.

In other cases, parents simply have doubts about the system. "While they may have faith in their neighborhood school, they don't have faith in the system," Beck said.

BALTO SUN  
5/12/04

## City school board maintains limit on charter facilities

BY A SUN STAFF WRITER

Baltimore's school board voted last night to continue a limit on charter schools that would allow only three to be opened in the next four years.

The vote eased some restrictions on charter schools, however, by allowing existing independently run public schools opened as so-called New School Initiative Schools to apply to convert to charter status.

The New School Initiative group includes City Springs Elementary/Middle and Midtown Academy, which are among the highest-performing in the city.

Charter status would allow them to apply for federal funds but would change little else in how they are run or overseen.

Some 18 groups in the city have shown interest in starting neighborhood charter schools in the next several years, and one parent group has asked to open its school this fall.

The board was divided on the issue, with some members saying they were hesitant to vote on increasing the number because they didn't know what the financial implications might be.

## **Baltimore Guide – Southeast, May 12, 2004**

### **Alternative public school considered for old St. E's building**

**by Mary Helen Sprecher**

**newsroom@baltimoreguide.com**

Locally, students are counting down to the end of the school year, but in the neighborhoods surrounding Patterson Park, parents are looking ahead to fall 2005, when, they say, the city's first charter school will open—and they hope their proposal is chosen. The facility, which would be named Patterson Park Public Charter School (PPPCS), would open as a PreK-grade 4 school, with the intention of expanding to PreK-grade 8 in subsequent years. It would be housed in the old St. Elizabeth School at E. Baltimore Street and Lakewood Avenue, and is projected to serve about 550 children, according to its advocates.

In 2003, Maryland passed charter school legislation, clearing the way for private organizations to create and run charter schools, which are legitimate educational facilities with a contract to educate students in accordance with local standards. At present, there is one charter school in the state.

According to Stephanie Simms, chairman of the Patterson Park Public Charter School Committee, a charter school is unique in that it is not set up directly by a governmental entity, such as a city or county.

"A charter school," she notes, "is basically a public school that has a charter with, in our case, Baltimore City, and that provides school services for the community."

The city, Simms explains, would create a contract between its school system and the board of directors of the Patterson Park Public Charter School.

"Our teachers would have to be state certified from the Baltimore City system," she notes. "The charter school would have to meet the standards of public schools."

The advantage of a charter school, claims Simms, is what is termed site control—in other words, a board of directors would control the operation and curriculum of the school—although there would be checks and balances to the relationship.

"We'd get to hire our own teachers and determine our own curriculum. We'd have an autonomy within our own governance, but we'd be accountable to the city schools.

The charter school would be a "public school of choice," says Simms. Parents in the target recruitment area (neighborhoods bordering Patterson Park on the north and

south sides) could choose to send their children to the school, or they could instead send them to the local public school.

Simms says that 50 percent of the spaces in the charter school would be earmarked for children living in the neighborhoods covered by the community associations for Butchers Hill, Patterson Place, Patterson Park Neighborhood, Fells Prospect, Canton Community and the Highlandtown Community Association. According to the website, [www.uscharterschools.org](http://www.uscharterschools.org), all but nine of 50 states in the U.S. have enacted charter legislation. Arizona leads the country in numbers of charter schools (495). Maryland's one charter school is the Monocacy Valley Montessori School in Frederick. The website states that since state legislatures began passing charter legislation in the early 1990s, about 3,000 new schools have been launched.

Unlike a city public school which is funded directly through the city, the legislation enacted last year calls for the city working with a charter school to disburse a specific allowance for each elementary, middle and secondary student enrolled.

The charter school would be allowed to decide upon the disposition of the money; in other words, it would be able to decide how much of the per-student stipend went toward various scholastic programs and activities. Simms says the per-student amount given to the charter school would, in terms of budgeting, be "equal to what the public schools are getting."

Parents' frustration over the state of schools in the area, says Simms, was the catalyst for the idea. As a member of the Patterson Park Neighborhood Association (PPNA), she often heard members' complaints about elementary and middle schools. As a new mother, she had even more reason to be concerned.

"Seven-eighths of the schools in our area are not meeting Maryland Annual Yearly Progress Standards," Simms states.

Jennifer Overton, who lives between Highlandtown and Patterson Park, recently attended an informational meeting where parents could learn about plans for the proposed school. About a dozen people were present, many with young children in tow. Some were parents of potential students while others were on the PPPCS Committee. Overton, whose daughter currently attends a parochial school, said the idea of a high quality public school nearby is "a dream come true."

"It's something that doesn't cost money," she noted, shaking her head in disbelief. "I'm paying taxes to live in the city. I should be able to benefit from that, but I don't have a great deal of confidence in the public school system here."

The PPNA got the idea of opening a school in its own neighborhood when the St. Elizabeth facility was put up for sale.

"That was when we as parents became interested," says Simms. In October of last year, she says, Baltimore City was looking at the building as a possible site for a troubled youth school.

PPNA, wanting to continue the revitalization of the area, had other ideas. Its members envisioned a PreK-grade 8 school that would not only help decrease the overcrowding in the area's elementary and middle schools, but would allow them enough control to create an ideal environment for the education of their own children.

Butchers Hill resident and expectant mother Sarah Letos, who also attended the information session, said she is tired of seeing young parents move out of the city when their children hit school age.

"We keep seeing our friends move away," she said, sounding frustrated. "We need people to remain in the city." The way to do that, she believes, is with an improved academic facility.

Plans for the area's first charter school, unveiled at the meeting, are ambitious, reading like a wish list, or perhaps more accurately, like the lesson plan of a school in an ideal world.

"We're going to have a strong core curriculum with strong reading and math," Simms claims, "but also with art, music and physical education, which we'd have in the park. There would be Spanish starting in kindergarten, and community service."

The PPPCS Committee, which was formed by the PPNA, has moved ahead with the curriculum, forming partnerships with the Audubon Society to help with the science curriculum, and with the Creative Alliance to provide depth for the art program.

The committee will establish guidelines for parent involvement. (Although there are charter schools in other cities which mandate specific numbers of volunteer hours each parent must work in the school, Simms says only that "parental involvement will be expected" at PPPCS. That involvement may take the form of in-school volunteer work, or it may mean that parents must be involved in such activities as reading at home with their children, or helping them with homework.)

Before anything can be taught, several significant challenges must be faced.

"We estimate that it will cost between \$2.8 to \$3.2 million to purchase and renovate the school building," says Simms. "Since the building has been empty for over two years, we will have to bring it up to ADA code."

The money for that, she adds, "will have to be fundraised."

Simms noted at the meeting that the PPPCS Committee is in talks with Imagine Schools, an educational service provider (a private company which specializes in the

management of schools). She stated that Imagine "will front the building and renovation costs so that we will be able to open the school September 2005."

To pay back the costs, Simms says, "committee members would be writing grants, and handling the fundraising—we're still looking for volunteers."

Imagine Schools' activities, as described on its website, [www.imagineschools.com](http://www.imagineschools.com), include financing the purchase of, or construction of, buildings for schools that are to be under its control. It also states that its services include recruitment and management of faculty and administration, development of curriculum, payment of school employees and management of their compensation plan, student assessment-testing-benchmarking, student recruitment and selection, providing revenue collection, accounting, auditing, bill paying and required reporting services, and food service.

The PPPCS Committee has received an Outreach Grant from Banner Neighborhoods, notes Simms, and the neighborhood associations that are in the recruitment area "have been asked to donate a nominal amount for seed money which will enable us to file our Articles of Incorporation and non-profit status."

In February, the committee submitted an application for the Federal Charter School Start-up grant. Average awards for which are \$150,000 a year for 3 years.

"Once we receive our approved charter, then we will be better positioned to raise funds through foundations, and we intend to do so," adds Simms.

The committee we will also seek revenue and in-kind donations from the business community, community members and parents through fundraising efforts.

"There will also be a lot of volunteer opportunities," she concludes.

The Patterson Park Public Charter School Committee will also have to negotiate and gain approval for its charter with the Baltimore City Public School System. The city schools' Public Information Officer Vanessa Pyatt notes that since the system has not yet received formal information or an application from the committee, the school system won't comment regarding the feasibility of the proposal.

"We can't do anything until we see it," she remarked.

Note: The Patterson Park Public Charter School Committee holds general meetings on the first Monday of each month at 6:30 p.m. in St. Elizabeth's Hall, next to the church. Information: Stephanie Simms 410-276-5215 or [steph1@covad.net](mailto:steph1@covad.net) On Saturday, May 15, there will be a meeting at the Patterson Park branch of the library at 10 a.m. for Spanish-speaking parents of prospective students.

# BALTIMORE CITY PAPER ONLINE

May 12 - May 18, 2004

## Late Start

### Organizers of a Northeast Baltimore Charter School Anxiously Wait for School Board Approval to Open in September

By Anna Ditkoff

**It all started a year ago** with these words written on a piece of paper: "The Search for a Great School for Sadie." Bobbi Macdonald, who lives in Northeast Baltimore's Cedmont neighborhood, wrote this note to herself when she began the hunt for a place in the city to send her then-5-year-old daughter to school. She didn't agree with the teaching style at the local public school and couldn't afford to send Sadie to a private school. So, Macdonald, who holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the University of Maryland, College Park, decided that the best alternative was to start a school of her own.

In 2003, the Maryland legislature passed a new charter school law that made it possible for parents like Macdonald to found and oversee new public schools, and she took advantage of it. Now, after a year's worth of planning, her school, City Neighbors Charter School, is prepared to open its doors this fall.

City Neighbors would offer an alternative method of teaching that focuses on project-based learning, the arts, and parental involvement. The school will begin with pre-kindergarten through fourth grade, and each year plans to add an additional grade until it reaches eighth. Students living in Northeast Baltimore will get first priority to be admitted to classes in the tiny school—just 10 kids per grade. If there are more students applying for the school than there are places for them, City Neighbors will hold a lottery for admission. Should the school open this September, as its organizers hope it will, Macdonald believes the lottery will be necessary.

"If we opened right now, every spot would be filled, except for a little bit in the older grades," she says.

There is one significant obstacle in the way of City Neighbors' anticipated September debut, however: Charter schools are considered part of the Baltimore City Public School System, and per the system's policy, no charter schools are to be opened in the city before 2005—which means that unless City Neighbors gets special permission to open earlier, it may have to wait another year to begin holding classes.

Macdonald and her board of directors have petitioned the Baltimore City School Board to allow it to open in 2004 because, she says, the school has had so much support from parents, the community, and other educational institutions. She feels that the school has gained so much momentum that there is no reason to wait.

"We didn't plan to be this far [ahead], but sometimes good things happen out of order," Macdonald says. But with time running out to finish preparations for the fall semester, City Neighbors is still waiting for a response from the school system about whether it will be allowed to open this year. "We're at the final wire," she says.

If the school's board does not hear from city schools CEO Bonnie Copeland by the end of May, City Neighbors won't be ready in time for fall.

"I've sent her many letters, I've sent her packets, I've sent her photographs with pictures and arrows on the back," Macdonald says. "I've tried to give her all the information she could possibly need to make a decision. . . . The only thing I haven't done yet—and I might do it at the next school board meeting if I haven't heard from her—is sing her a song."

Macdonald, a 38-year-old mother of three with wild ringlets and more cheerful exuberance than anyone who chases after a 6-, 4-, and 1-year-old on a daily basis should be capable of possessing, isn't kidding. She has written a song asking the school board to let them open and isn't afraid to use it. Macdonald is passionate about City Neighbors and the idea of charter schools in general because she believes they allow for more innovative teaching styles and community involvement than big public schools.

"Why can't I have a great public school in my neighborhood?" she asks. "Why do I have to leave the city to get a good education for my kid?"

Charter schools are seen as an alternative to traditional public education. They are public schools run by nonprofit organizations, often made up of parents and teachers, that focus on specific educational goals or programs. There are nearly 3,000 charter schools in the United States, which vary in size from a few dozen students to hundreds, and they offer a wide range of services and educational philosophies. Washington, D.C.'s 39 charter schools include Next Step/El Proximo Paso Public Charter School, which serves 60 teen parents and high-school dropouts every year, and Paul Junior High Public School,



which focuses on art and technology and has 550 students in seventh through ninth grades.

Since the schools are public and tuition-free, advocates see them as an affordable alternative to overcrowded and underperforming traditional schools.

"It is offering a new choice," says Carol Beck, director for external relations for Maryland for the Center for Education Reform, a national advocacy group that has done extensive research on charter schools. "Charter schools can be put together flexibly, they can achieve some quick progress, which is often pretty elusive in a large centralized system. And it certainly doesn't weaken the system to have additional strong schools."

Critics, however, say that charter schools, which are publicly funded, take money away from already underfunded public school systems. All of Maryland's public schools are funded using a formula that is based on enrollment: Each traditional public school gets a certain amount of money based on enrollment and other factors. If students leave traditional public schools for charter schools, the public schools in question eventually loses the funding that goes along with those students.

"There are some additional costs of having charter schools," says Laura Weeldreyer, coordinator of charter and New Schools for the city school system. "It would be unfair to say differently. I do not think it is as extreme or dramatic as [critics claim]."

She points to the schools started under the 1996 New Schools Initiative, a local precursor to charter schools that follows the same basic guidelines that charter schools will follow when implemented in Baltimore, that have helped retain and attract families to the city's school system. For example, Weeldreyer says, Bolton Hill's Midtown Academy has a more than 300-person waiting list.

"I think charter schools--and the New Schools have borne this out--have the ability to attract students into the public school system who would not have been there," she says. "So you could also say they bring some money into the school system."

Under the 2003 state charter school law, which makes it easier for charter schools to open in Maryland and makes those schools eligible for \$200 million in federal aid. The Maryland law specifies, however, that public school systems are not required to provide money for charter schools' startup costs, which include leasing, buying, or repairing a facility that will house the school.

"In our case the city actually makes money," Macdonald says. "They don't pay for our site, but we do, [and] almost half of our enrollment right now are kids who are going to be entering the public school system for the first time. So that increases the number of kids in their system. That brings money to their system."

When Macdonald held her first meeting about the charter school a year ago, only five people came. At her latest monthly meeting, so many people came that she had to drag in lawn furniture so everyone could sit down. The crowd in her Northeast Baltimore home included parents, children, and educators. Eric Rasmussen, director of early childhood development for the Peabody Institute, gave a talk on teaching music to children. Rasmussen has expressed interest in being the school's music teacher.

"When people in education read a description of what our curriculum is, they give me their résumé because they know it's a solid strong academic program based on the arts," says Macdonald, who got more than a dozen résumés from educators before even posting the jobs. "It's totally built for success and it's exciting. It's an exciting way to teach."

Macdonald points to the project-based learning system, in which students learn through hands-on activities based on their interests, and the mandatory parental-involvement policy as just two of the school's strengths.

"We expect you to be involved," says Bernadette Naquin, the City Neighbors board's director of accountability. "If your kid's not doing his homework, we're going to ask you why. So if you don't want that kind of involvement, then maybe our school's not for you."

City Neighbors already has 80 prospective students for its 60 open slots, and the school has yet to complete a canvas of the area to recruit families.

Macdonald has gathered an accomplished board of directors, whose members' expertise ranges from architecture to public relations, to oversee City Neighbors. The school has formed a partnership with the Center for Young Children at the University of Maryland and regularly consults with the Center for Education Reform. The school's organizers have even solved the most daunting problem that faces most fledgling charter schools in Maryland: finding a facility. The Epiphany Lutheran Church behind Macdonald's house has a series of classrooms that are largely unused, and it plans to allow City Neighbors to use classrooms on two floors, which are already furnished with child-sized tables and chairs.

"For us it's a no-brainer. It's a fabulous opportunity," says associate Pastor Thomas Frizzell. "A school is a very good and easy way to reach out to folks."

City Neighbors has also applied for more than \$700,000 in grants, many of which hang in the balance as the school waits to see if its charter is approved for this September.

"I knew the policy said '05 and I was thinking, *OK, well, that gives us quite a while,*" Macdonald says. "I didn't know there would be this amazing group [of people] that are so efficient, so professional and dedicated, that we would be ready to open this fall, but we are."

Since the charter school law was enacted last July, nearly 20 groups in Baltimore City have expressed interest in starting schools. "They are incredibly geographically, economically, and racially diverse," Weeldreyer says. "They're all over the map, which is I think one of the things that makes it so exciting." But City Neighbors is the only charter school proposed for the city so far along in its development that it is ready to open this fall, if given the go ahead.

On March 15, City Neighbors submitted its application to the school board requesting an expedited review. A March 23 letter from the school system to City Neighbors indicated that the city's school board had asked Copeland "to review your request and to make a recommendation to the Board. The Board will act upon Dr. Copeland's recommendation."

But since then, Macdonald says she hasn't heard from Copeland. If the local school board says no, City Neighbors can appeal to the state, but time is running out to hire teachers, buy books, and start enrollment.

"I think it's a shame," Beck says. "The city should be begging these guys to open this school."

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<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-md.edbeat23jun23,1,4903761.column>

## Propping up charter law

### Funding: More federal dollars strengthen Maryland's weak measure for education innovation.

**Education Beat: Mike Bowler**

June 23, 2004

THE MAN from Washington came bearing money for Maryland charter schools yesterday, and what has been a trickle will turn into a \$13 million stream.

The occasion was the presentation of a \$3.8 million federal check to Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick. It's the first installment of a three-year grant to charter schools -- independent public schools planned and operated by groups such as educators, parents and community leaders.

Everyone beamed as Gene Hickok, deputy U.S. education secretary, displayed one of those oversized checks, the kind given to lottery winners. And in a sense, Ehrlich had won the lottery. He'd made charters a campaign promise in 2002 and had squeaked a watered-down bill through the 2003 General Assembly just minutes before sine die.

More than a year later, Maryland has but one official charter, Monocacy Valley Montessori in Frederick County. But there's pent-up demand, and those who attended the check-passing affair yesterday at Anne Arundel Community College predicted the floodgates will soon open.

Joni Gardner, president of the Maryland Charter School Network, said 50 proposals are in the works around the state, 20 in Baltimore.

None of the charter proponents likes the Maryland legislation Hickok came to reward -- not Hickok, not Grasmick and certainly not Ehrlich, who had been forced to sign one of the weakest charter bills of the 41 enacted so far across the nation.

"We had to take what we could get," Ehrlich said. "There were powerful interests lined up against us." He referred to the state teachers and school boards associations, two powerful pillars of the Establishment.

The bill's primary deficiency is that it establishes but one chartering authority in each of the state's 24 school districts. That's the local board of education, a body that's often unwilling to turn over students -- and authority -- to independent operators. It's rather akin to putting the fox in charge of the henhouse.

"A lot of boards have been friendly and are doing a good job," Gardner said yesterday. But not all of them. The State Board of Education, which is the appeals panel for rejected charter applications, already has one from Prince George's County. Jeanne Allen, president of the pro-charter Center for Education Reform, says charter applicants have encountered major resistance from local boards on

the Eastern Shore and in Anne Arundel and St. Mary's counties and Baltimore City. (The center, which evaluates the nation's 41 charter laws, recently gave Maryland's legislation a grade of D.)

There are already several "quasi-charters" in Maryland, schools that have charter characteristics but lack the name. The Stadium School and Midtown Academy in Baltimore prove what can be done when a school is freed -- if only partly -- from the public system straitjacket.

Grasmick said yesterday that the quasi-charters will be eligible for the federal funds, too. "They will have to become formal charter schools and perhaps make some changes," the superintendent said. "But they are definitely eligible."

Let's hope city school officials don't stand in the way. Their "go-slow" policy on approving new charters -- none can open before the fall of 2005 and then no more than three a year -- isn't encouraging.

City Neighbors Charter School in Northeast Baltimore already has filed for a piece of the federal grant. (Schools can receive up to \$200,000 over three years.) "We could have opened this fall," said Bobbi Macdonald, the school's founder and board president, "but now apparently we're going to have to wait.

"But if we opened now, City Neighbors would be a fully racially integrated and high-performing school that's helping to keep a neighborhood stable."

### **Grasmick has tenure extended yet again**

Last week, the State Board of Education unanimously extended Grasmick's contract four years. First appointed in 1991, Grasmick is by far the nation's longest-tenured appointed chief state school officer, exceeded only by North Dakota's Wayne G. Sanstead, who is elected by popular vote.

Grasmick has served under three governors -- two Democrats and a Republican. One of the secrets to her longevity was on display yesterday: She embraces the governors who appoint the state board members who appoint her. And she embraces their ideas, even if they're unpopular in the Establishment.

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# THE SUN

## EDITORIALS

# Gatekeepers

**M**ORE THAN A year after the Maryland legislature cleared a legal path for public charter schools to open, not a single new one has welcomed a student. And it's beginning to look like another academic year will pass before local authorities will allow any to begin operating.

What's the holdup?

Not money: The federal government just gave Maryland \$3.8 million in startup funds for which school operators may apply. Granted, some delay can be attributed to the enormity of the task; great care should be taken in these planning and startup phases, to ensure the viability of proposed new schools.

What's worrisome is that some 40 private groups and individuals eager to launch schools are predictably running into obstacles foreshadowed in 2003 when the General Assembly weakened, then adopted, its charter law. The lawmakers gave the authority to charter new schools to local school boards, the entities least likely to want to cede control over schools and their funding to independent operators. Some school boards, including Baltimore's, are taking a "go-slow" approach, limiting the number of charter schools possible and postponing the adoption of charters until 2005 and beyond.

Of course, there are practical realities to work out. Few districts have their own infrastructure fully in place to handle the responsibility the sketchy law gives them — each must essentially invent its own wheel. Should the district help a charter school find a suitable facility? What's the share of funding to come from the district? How much freedom will the charter school be

permitted in curriculum and program development? All of these are local decisions.

If the legislature had instead created a centralized state chartering authority, or granted the authority to the state school board jointly with local school boards, Maryland still might not have seen speedier startups, but it might have avoided some pitfalls. Why not standardize those decisions that are basically common to all new school startups — and still allow for local variation?

The Center for Education Reform, a Washington-based charter school advocacy group, recently gave Maryland's new chartering law a *D* and said Arizona's charter law is the one to emulate. It allows the state as well as school boards to authorize charter schools. It grants the schools operational freedoms — most notably in hiring teachers, exemptions from collective bargaining agreements, and waivers from state and district regulations.

By contrast, Maryland lawmakers, bowing to the concerns of teachers unions and school boards, created a system in which charter schools in essence will not be independent. It will take trial and error to figure out what the proper balance should be between autonomy and accountability, but the way it works now, it's going to be a slow, bumpy ride in which local politics share the front seat with education.

Many advocates fear that Maryland's clamps on charter school autonomy also will stifle instructional innovation and thwart the reform, but there's no evidence here on which to judge that. After all, it's hard to demonstrate innovation until you actually get your doors open.

7/7/2004

## **MOBTOWN BEAT | Education**

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### **Held Back**

*Charter-School Groundswell Faces Resistance From City School Board*

By Anna Ditkoff

Bobbi Macdonald has a song and she's not afraid to use it. Macdonald is the founder of the City Neighbors Charter School in Northeast Baltimore (Mobtown Beat, May 12). She hoped to open her school this fall, but after countless letters failed to elicit a response giving her the go-ahead from the Baltimore City Public School System's North Avenue headquarters, she says she wrote a song about her school, and is prepared to perform it for schools CEO Bonnie Copeland if that will help get City Neighbors up and running

But Macdonald left her guitar at home when she appeared at a June 28 City Council hearing to discuss the city's charter-school policy. See, City Neighbors is just one of at least 18 groups that are working toward opening charter schools, and the city has limited the number of charters it will award.

"It dampers a movement that is going to be part of the transformation of Baltimore City public schools [into] being the best in the nation, and there's no reason to damper a movement like that right now," Macdonald says.

In 2003, Maryland passed a law legalizing charter schools—independently run public schools—and making them eligible for federal funding. The law also allowed each school district to create its own policy; Baltimore City's allows for "no more than three charter schools to be operated during the first three years of this program." On May 24, City Councilwoman Catherine E. Pugh (D-4th District) introduced a resolution that states that "[l]imiting the number of charter schools will not only hinder students from getting the best education that the public school system has to offer, but will also create a situation where less funding will be available from federal grants for the public schools system," and demands that the city school board explain its decision.

At the hearing, school board member David Stone attempted to do just that.

"Implementation is not as simple as waking up one September morning and opening the doors to shiny new schools," Stone said. He said that there are many complications involved with creating new charter schools, but did stress that the policy only restricts the number of "wholly new charter schools," and that unlimited number of existing schools can be restructured into charter schools.

While the board takes a slow and steady position on charter schools in new facilities, many fear that the small number of available slots will create competition between the fledgling charter-school groups and dishearten those who may be considering starting one. "I don't think we should be stopping them," Pugh says. "I think we should be applauding their efforts."

When Macdonald returned home from the City Council hearing, she found a letter from Copeland waiting for her. The letter said that the school board will respond by July 12. It's already too late for Macdonald to get City Neighbors ready for September, so now she waits to see if her charter application will be accepted for 2005. But even if the school board does approve it, Macdonald doesn't see a happy ending as long as the cap is in place.

"What if they are going to approve us for '05?" she asks. "It just means there are only two slots left."

8/25/2004

## **QUICK AND DIRTY | Education**

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### **If at First You Don't Succeed, Appeal**

By Anna Ditkoff

**After nearly six months of struggling** to get approval from the Baltimore City Public School System, City Neighbors Charter School is looking to the state for help. City Neighbors, a group of Northeast Baltimore parents trying to start a charter school that will implement project-based learning, submitted its application for a charter on March 15.

Under the Maryland State Charter Law, the city school board must "review the application and render a decision within 120 days of receipt of the application." But 120 days after City Neighbors' application was delivered to the school board, the organization still had not received an official approval or denial of the application ("Held Back," *Mobtown Beat*, July 7; "Late Start," *Mobtown Beat*, May 12). And the information it has been getting from the board, City Neighbors says, has been contradictory and inconclusive. A June 22 letter from city schools chief executive officer Bonnie Copeland promised a response on the application by July 12. A July 12 letter said the school district would not be accepting applications for new charter schools until Sept. 1.

By August, City Neighbors founder Bobbi Macdonald says she had enough.

"Being the first charter applicant in the city, my greatest hope was to work within the system and have it be a big party when we opened," she says. "That's why I tried for so long not to appeal, and it just didn't work."

On Aug. 9 she submitted an appeal to the State Board of Education asking for an expedited review of City Neighbors' charter. Just five days earlier, the state ordered Prince George's County to review the application of Potomac Charter School in Fort Washington. Macdonald is hoping her school will have similar results.

"I feel really optimistic about it," says Macdonald. "And everyone on the [city] school board is still invited to the opening-day party. No hard feelings, just give me that charter."



# CITY PAPER ONLINE

## BEST OF BALTIMORE 2004

9/22/2004

**Baltimore Living**

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## **Best Plan to Restore City Schools**

### *Charter schools*

Things aren't looking so good for Baltimore City Public Schools. Missing money, test scores that still aren't really impressing anybody, and plenty of unhappy parents. But things may be looking up. Maryland passed a law in 2003 allowing for the creation of charter schools, public schools that have to live up to state requirements but are more or less autonomous from North Avenue, and making those schools eligible for federal funds. In theory, charter schools allow a space for innovative teaching styles and can be opened by parents, teachers, and/or community activists; in practice, they also offer parents disgusted with city schools an option other than dropping serious change on private schools. Several promising would-be schools have already applied, including **City Neighbors Charter School** in Northeast Baltimore and Patterson Park Public Charter School, and more than a dozen others are in the planning stages. The problem is that the city has limited the number of wholly new charter schools that can open in the city—three in the next three years. With so much going wrong in Baltimore Public Schools, it seems strange that the school board wants to limit the number of things that could go right.



<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/education/bal-te.md.amistad28sep28,1,4577465.story>

## **For Connecticut charter school, small details drive big changes**

### **Academy finds success turning struggling pupils into thriving students**

By Liz Bowie  
Sun Staff

September 28, 2004

NEW HAVEN, Conn. - To succeed as a student at Amistad Academy is to learn that it is easier to stay out of trouble.

Don't do your homework and you'll be staying for three extra hours on Friday afternoon. Lose control and shout out an obscenity in front of classmates, you'll stand before the whole school to apologize. Put your head down on the desk or forget to follow the teacher with your eyes, the whole lesson will stop while the class waits for you to start paying attention.

With its near obsession with getting the small details right and enforcing consequences for poor behavior, Amistad has found a formula to mold its undisciplined and low-achieving fifth-grade students into eighth-graders who study hard and beat the odds.

Amistad, one of Connecticut's charter schools, set out to prove that poor, minority children can succeed as well as white middle-class students if only they are given the right education.

So their children get much of what a student at a good suburban public school would learn and be exposed to at school and at home. They go to school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with most of the afternoon spent on their choice of music, art, dance or sports.

Students must shake hands with adults when they greet them, say thank you and keep the shirttails of their uniforms tucked in. They are told again and again that they will go to college - the only question is where. And they have a lot of adults who care about them.

"It is different here," says seventh-grader Nyasia Porter. "The teachers are like your school parents. They stay after school. They are dedicated to helping you." Porter's brother graduated from Amistad and moved on to a private high school.

Six years after it opened, Amistad's 97 percent black and Latino population is posting test scores better than those in New Haven and the state of Connecticut on statewide eighth-grade tests. Last year, 86 percent of its eighth-graders passed the writing test, above the statewide average of 62 percent and better than the public schools of wealthy Greenwich.

In most cases, those same students - 84 percent of whom are poor enough to qualify for a free or reduced lunch - were reading and doing math about two years below grade level when they started at

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/education/bal-te.md.amistad28sep28,1,207314,pri...> 10/12/2004

Amistad in fifth grade. By sixth grade the scores had gone up, but were only slightly better than the city average.

"Amistad has rewritten the book on closing the achievement gap," says Mark Linabury, charter school program manager for Connecticut.

Born out of the minds of Yale University law school students who believed the achievement gap was the civil rights issue of their time, Amistad is a plain, crisp-looking school housed in a former office supply business, not far from a stunning, modern public school.

The school isn't fancy. Furnishings in the classrooms are spare, but the walls are colorful and filled with sayings such as: "Excuses are the tools of the incompetent."

Student artwork lines the white halls, and the cafeteria is a big, bright windowless room with no-frills tables and chairs. Most school principals would walk into Amistad's cafeteria and think it was immaculate, but director Dacia Toll walks in, spies a small, plastic wrapper from the straw of a juice box and sighs. She will have to talk to the students about this, she says, picking it up.

The school's curriculum isn't unusual either. It stresses the basics of reading, writing, vocabulary and math. The emphasis is on efficient use of classroom time.

The staff creates ways to cut down on time lost to fooling around. On one of the first days of school this month, nearly every teacher was explaining a schoolwide system for paperwork. Papers are handed left or right and then up the aisle. Students practiced with a stop watch to make sure it could be done in less than 30 seconds.

Students can't escape the mandate to attend to details and strive to learn. On every sheet of paper turned in to teachers, students must write their name, date and the motto "Education is Freedom." They are told they must turn in homework and that it won't count if it has stains or isn't complete. They are even trained in restroom behavior: Don't write on the walls, don't clog the toilets, wash your hands.

Demanding responsibility from parents is just as important, says Billy Johnson, assistant dean of students, and so he will visit parents at their work if phone calls home aren't returned.

Because charter schools are often criticized for cherry-picking children whose parents care most, Amistad has made it easy to apply. The New Haven system oversees the lottery to pick enrollment.

In most schools such as Amistad, what makes the school different is the way its teachers work together, the extra hours they put in and their attitudes toward students. Jaime King has been at the school from the beginning and says that it is only recently that she feels she can balance her teaching life with her home life. For the first several years, she says, most of the staff would work six days a week.

But there are rewards, says Kim Mowery, who moved to the school from the Bronx. "I couldn't voice my opinion and make a difference," she says of her previous teaching job.

When there are problems at Amistad, the staff talks together about how to solve them. Teachers feel they have a say in what happens, she says, and take very seriously the future of each of their students.

At Amistad - like at many charter schools across the country - teachers are not union members, a

point of contention with the well-organized teachers unions. Amistad's staff is paid a bit more than teachers in New Haven's public schools and receive health and retirement benefits, Toll says.

"Teachers work harder by contract, and work harder by nature," Toll says, noting that each year, staff members are let go. "We really need team players."

One of the greatest challenges for the school has been raising money. The school receives \$7,250 for each of its 275 students from the state, but Toll says it isn't enough to provide a good education. So each year, the school raises about another \$3,000 for each student from private donations.

Because of its success, the school has created Achievement First, a nonprofit organization to replicate itself elsewhere. A new elementary school and a new middle school opened not far away this fall in New Haven.

If there is a failure at the school, it may be that at least a third of its graduates move on to the same low-performing high schools that they would have attended had they stayed in the regular public middle school.

Another third secure scholarships to private schools. And the other third win spots in city magnet schools.

Amistad's teachers say they're most frustrated by what they hear about the regular high schools. Toll says she was appalled when one student told her that his Advanced Placement English class would include three of the Harry Potter books.

Nevertheless, teachers say they believe their graduates are better prepared to succeed.

"All the kids come out of here with a set of tools," Mowery says. "They come out with exposure to a set of values - what it is to keep up with homework and be organized."

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# Unchartered

At least 18 groups want to open brand new charter schools in the city. Only three will make the grade.

**W**hen the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation in 2003 allowing the creation of charter schools, it seemed to open a world of possibilities for public education. Frustrated parents and teachers who yearned for better educational environments could sidestep the system and develop their own schools.

Charter applications began flooding local school boards across the state, and in Baltimore, at least 18 groups are now vying to be among the first to obtain a charter from the city school board. The applications speak to a community hoping to develop innovative curricula and to create safer environments where children would be better equipped to succeed. Parents, who might have retreated to suburban and private schools in the past, are digging in to fight for city alternatives, while community activists in lower-income neighborhoods seek fresh solutions to inner-city ills.

**They say it's easier to turn around a small ship in the ocean than a huge one. We've got some super-high-powered little ships all fired up.**

At the state level, Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. is championing an aggressive approach, calling charter schools "the wave of the future." The city school board, which supported the innovative New Schools initiative in past years, is taking a more cautious stance. It plans to limit the number of wholly new charters to three as it evaluates the schools' place in the city system.

The local debate comes amid growing national concerns about the academic merit of charter schools and their long-term effect on the public system. As the

city braces itself for this first round of applications, it leaves many wondering what this means for the future of public education in Baltimore.

Every neighborhood in the city has its own set of realities and every parent his or her own ideas about the specific education that they want for their children. Behind each charter application in Baltimore is at least one stated rationale for wanting to opt out of the existing public schools—and many underlying ones.

For one parent, curriculum is key. Bobbi Macdonald, a mother of three, leads the City Neighbors Charter School effort in Northeast Baltimore because she objects to the schools' waning emphasis on the arts in favor of Direct Instruction, a controversial teaching method that emphasizes carefully scripted drills over more personally responsive approaches. She supports the public system and believes that charter schools, by offering a range of subjects, could help keep families in the city. "Parents want more for their kids," Macdonald says. "An education is not just math and science and reading. The arts are what make life meaningful."

For the president of Coppin State University, the neighborhood is the reason. Stanley F. Battle sees rationales for alternative schools on every street corner in the West Baltimore area where he works. "You can find a young boy or a young girl in this community who can get a 1300 on their SAT's," says Battle, "but they have to see the ravages of drugs in their community. Now, are these children living in this environment because they want to, or because those are the cards they've been dealt? Somebody's got to intervene."

Battle successfully partnered with the Baltimore City school system to create the Coppin Academy, which will offer students smaller class sizes and college preparatory courses. The school opens in the fall of 2005. Still, Battle likes to keep the option of independent charter schools open. Down the road he hopes to develop a boarding school for at-risk kids.

"The charter school approach is something to explore," Battle says. "With the challenges that we face in student achievement, we have to look at different models for success."

For one Union Square mother, the environment is the issue. Erika Brockman lives across the street from Steuart Hill Academy. The facilities are run-down and broken glass litters the campus, she says. The school's test scores, though rising, don't reflect the quality of education she wants for her two children. "I'm a public school person," Brockman says. "But for each year that goes by that we don't get a quality school it's devastating."

It is hoped that charter schools, by providing a choice, can change the landscape of Baltimore public education much more quickly than city or state bureaucracies ever could. "They say it's easier to turn around a small ship in the ocean than a huge one," Macdonald says. "We've got some super-high-powered little ships all fired up."

Few dispute the challenges that charter school advocates describe. Whether charter schools are the best solution is the question.

Sam Stringfield is a principal research scientist at the Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools and has written widely on school improvement throughout the United States. He just ended a five-year term on the Baltimore City school board. "Every urban center in America is in a situation that's academically relatively similar to Baltimore's," Stringfield says. "There is no exception. Urban systems in the United States face tremendous challenges."

As of January 2004, nearly 3,000 charter schools were operating across the United States, and 41 states and the District of Columbia had adopted charter school laws. Charter schools are vastly outnumbered—nearly 30 to 1—by traditional public schools nationwide and the effect they have on the wider public

education landscape is in debate. "About half the charter schools close within a five-year period," Stringfield says. "The other half go forward, but even then, the average academic achievement isn't higher than it was before."

Last year's National Assessment of Educational Progress concluded that fourth-graders in charter schools trailed students in other schools by half a year in reading and math. Charter schools that fail can have a negative effect because the traditional system is forced to reabsorb students.

"When you start moving away from an institution that clearly has been one of the cornerstones of American democracy—I mean from Thomas Jefferson to today—and you don't have a clear idea of what you're moving toward, it behooves you to go very slowly," Stringfield says. "Baltimore schools have tried to go slowly, and I think that's the right thing to do."

The problems that beset public schools cannot be remedied overnight, and charter schools would address only a sliver of the more than 90,000 children enrolled in Baltimore public schools. Parents face a tough choice between bold—but ultimately unproven—new approaches such as charter schools and what Stringfield calls the "long and very, very hard work" of improving conditions within the existing system.

Brockman says she thought long and hard about working within the system. She tried unsuccessfully over several months to schedule meetings with the administration of Steuart Hill Academy. "There's a general consensus that, for whatever reason, the community and the school haven't really done well by each other," Brockman says. "And it didn't look like that was going to change quickly enough for me to have the kind of impact on the neighborhood that I want."

With the promise of charter schools so tantalizingly within reach, impatience is growing with the Baltimore school board's cautious approach—and a sense of urgency is growing about the consequences of not moving faster.

The conditions Battle describes around West Baltimore schools aren't going to magically change for the better. Macdonald has a child entering school this fall, but her City Neighbors Charter School application was effectively tabled by the city after the standard 120-day review process. Maryland law allows local applicants to appeal to the state level, which City Neighbors did on August 9. "We are going to get our charter," Macdonald says. "At one point, it was just, 'Who wants to give it to us—the city or the state?' And now I'm done asking the city."

Brockman, who submitted her committee's application in early September, says she understands the city's reasons for adopting a measured approach to charter schools. "Look what the city school system has been through," she says. "You can't blame them for going slowly and one step at a time, but I think they're going to step up to the plate. I think this is going to be good for them, and I think it's going to be good for kids and families. They're going to see that."

Macdonald is more blunt. "They're just not ready," she says. "But guess what? The parents of Baltimore are ready. And the students of Baltimore need charter schools yesterday."

Chris Isalt contributed to this article.



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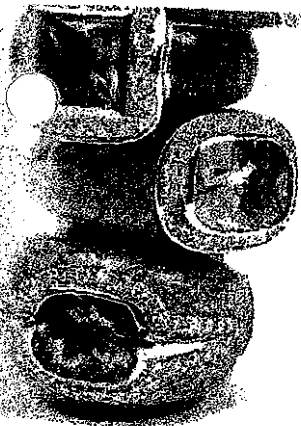
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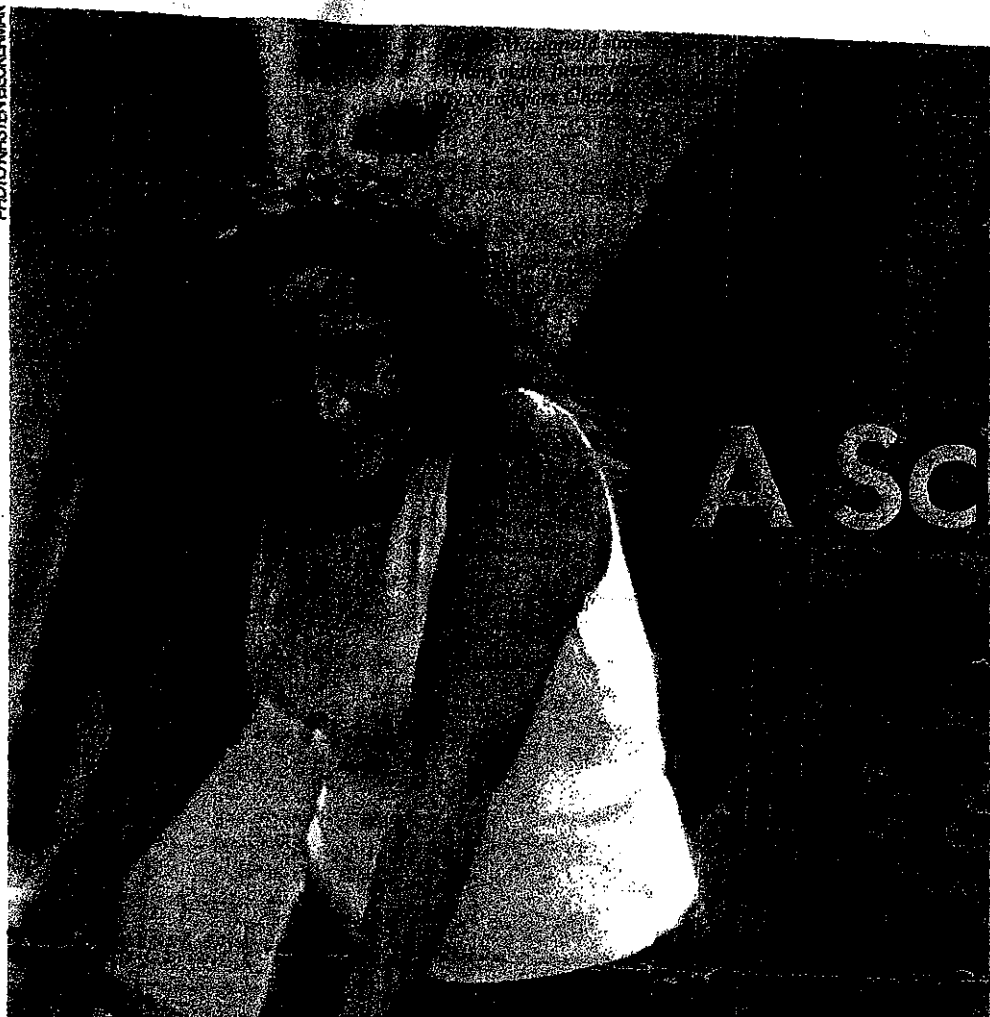
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## City Neighbors Charter School culminates a mother's dream.

By Karen Baxter

**C**hicago native Bobbi Macdonald is loving city life in Baltimore. She feels passionately about living in a place with such great diversity and history.

So when it came time to find a good school for her oldest daughter, Sadie, moving to the county wasn't even an option.

Macdonald and her husband, Rob, and their three children, Sadie (6), Eve (4), and Ramsay (1), live in the Cedmont area of Northeast Baltimore City in a Victorian home with a big yard. "We love it here. Why do I have to move in order for my children to get a good education?" she says.

Dissatisfied with the teaching philosophy at the local public elementary school — which she describes as too "systematic" — Macdonald began investigating private schools in the area only to find that they were too exclusive for her taste. Then, in May 2003, the State of Maryland legalized charter

schools. Macdonald, who holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the University of Maryland, knew what she had to do — open her own school.

What began as a brainstorming session with five neighbors is now close to becoming a reality. Macdonald says a petition for the City to allow the school to open this fall failed, but City Neighbors Charter School will be more than ready to open its doors in Fall 2005 pending approval from the Board of Education. City Neighbors will be staffed by state-certified teachers, and students will undergo state testing, like other public school students. But the similarities mostly end there.

The school's nontraditional curriculum will emphasize project-based learning and the arts, and parental involvement and community outreach will be integral to the program. In fact, families will be expected to give 60 hours of volunteer work to the school and community each year. "We really

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believe that when families are involved, we can help them and we can help us," Macdonald says.

Already, Macdonald has conquered one of the greatest obstacles faced by groups who want to start a charter school — finding a suitable facility. The Epiphany Lutheran Church, located behind Macdonald's house, has agreed to allow the school to use the unused classrooms in its education building. The building also has a gymnasium,

Instead, funds will come from local government and grants. Macdonald says she is particularly hoping to benefit from a \$3.8-million federal grant that was recently awarded to the state for charter schools. The City will not pay any start-up costs for the school, but by law has to provide a per pupil expenditure. The amount of that expenditure is yet to be determined — a source of frustration — according to Carol Beck of the Washington, D.C.-based

2005 and 2008, according to a Baltimore City Board of Education policy, she says. But hopeful charter groups are challenging that policy. In addition to City Neighbors, two other groups have already submitted applications for charters.

Meanwhile, Macdonald has received 96 applications for 70 slots in the 2005-06 school year. A lottery system will be used to ensure a fair admission policy. "If we opened right now, we would be fully racially integrated," Macdonald says. That is one of her goals. In another form of integration, mixed age groupings will be used combining pre-K and kindergarten students, first and second graders, and third and fourth graders. For the first year, fifth graders will have their own class. In subsequent years, grades six through eight will be added and the multi-age groupings will continue. Each classroom will have about 20 students, one teacher and one teacher's apprentice.

Opponents to charter schools have two main arguments against the independently run public schools, Beck says. First, they say that it's not fair if only a select group, and not all children in the system, benefit.

Secondly, they argue that charter schools take money and good students' families away from existing public schools.

Macdonald disagrees with both of these objections. In fact, she's convinced that charter schools will bring new families into the public system and that she and other charter school founders can actually help effect change throughout the entire public school system. She has met with the principal of her local elementary school already to discuss partnership opportunities.

There are nearly 3,000 charter schools in the United States and only one existing charter school in Maryland — Monocacy Valley Montessori Public Charter School in Frederick. However, the idea of charter schools is not completely new in Baltimore City. Under the 1996 New Schools Initiative, 11 New Schools that operate under charter-like guidelines were formed and have proven very successful.

While Macdonald has been working to open City Neighbors, daughter Sadie attended a kindergarten at a private school. Macdonald has not decided if Sadie will return for first grade or if she will home-school her for the year instead. □

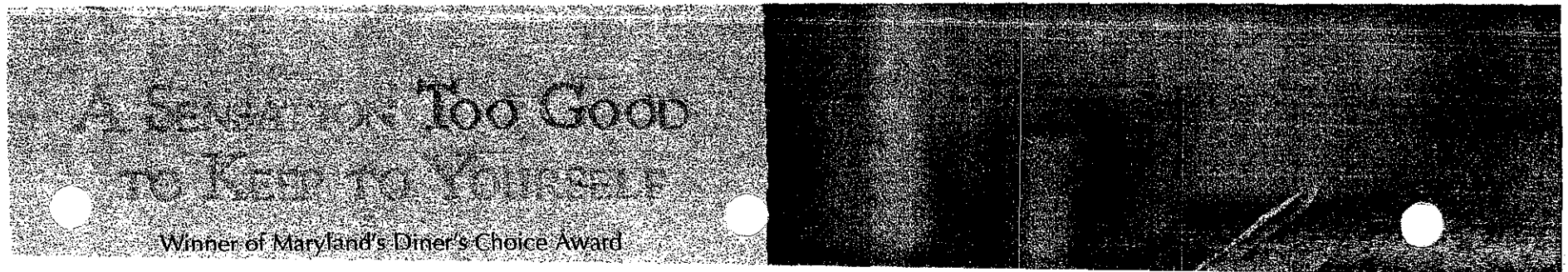
# ool For Sadie

um, kitchen, photography lab and ceramics room. (Except for using the space, the school will not be affiliated with the church.)

Financing is another challenge faced by charter schools. Since they are public schools, students do not pay tuition.

Center for Educational Reform.

As the organization's director of external affairs for Maryland, Beck has been working with more than a dozen groups, including Macdonald's, who want to start charter schools in Baltimore City. Only three charter schools can open between





## **State board lifts limit on charter schools**

### **Ruling means 10 rather than 3 can be opened in Baltimore by 2008**

By Liz Bowie  
Sun Staff

October 13, 2004

Charter school advocates in Baltimore won a victory yesterday in a state board decision that encourages the proliferation of the new schools across the city in the next few years.

The state Board of Education lifted a cap on the number of new charter schools that can open in the city in the next three years, a decision that advocates said was a signal to local school boards not to try to drag their feet in allowing new charter schools to open.

"It indicates the state board is supportive of charter schools and giving charter schools a chance in the state," said Joni Gardner, president of the Maryland Charter School Network.

A charter school is a publicly funded school allowed to operate independently. Under a state law passed two years ago, local school boards approve the new schools, although charter schools can appeal decisions to the state Board of Education.

But some local school systems, such as Baltimore's, have moved slowly to approve the schools. The city school board, in imposing the cap last spring, said it was afraid that it might incur additional costs at a time when a spending has been restricted by a \$58 million deficit.

When a new charter school is approved, the school board must carve out a certain per-pupil allowance from its own budget for each city student at the charter school.

Ten groups have filed applications to open new charter schools next spring. Under the cap, only three of the 10 could have opened by 2008. Many charter school advocates see charters as a way to keep middle-class families in the city and stabilize neighborhoods.

"I think it is a ringing bell of freedom for every grass-roots group of parents, teachers and community leaders who want to participate in improving public education," said Bobbi MacDonald, founder of City Neighbors Charter School, one of the 10 applicants.

The state board's decision stems from an application filed last winter by the City Neighbors Charter School, a group of Northeast Baltimore parents who want to open a charter school next fall.

Under state law, City Neighbors argued, the school system was supposed to decide 120 days after the group filed its application. But when a decision was delayed, City Neighbors appealed to the state and asked that the cap be eliminated.

In its decision, the state board said the Maryland charter school law doesn't set a limit on the charters and that "each application must be considered on its own merit without regard to other applications."

Stephanie Simms, chairwoman of the Patterson Park Public Charter School - a school that doesn't exist yet but hopes to be approved this fall - said having the cap removed will allow the different charter groups to share information more freely rather than feel they have to compete with one another. Simms said she was no longer concerned that sharing information with another charter school group might give that group an advantage that would help their school get approved.

"It is great news for the people who live in the city and who felt they needed another public school option in their neighborhood," Simms said.

"We are disappointed in the decision," said Patricia Welch, chairwoman of the city school board, in a statement during last night's board meeting. "We have not had the opportunity to read the entire ruling, but we will discuss it and review options for the [city school] commissioners and the system."

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