

<http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/30/us/rights-hero-presses-plan-for-school-in-detroit.html>

Rights Hero Presses Plan For School In Detroit

By HALIMAH ABDULLAH

CHIWETEL EJIOFOR
MICHAEL FASSBENDER
BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH

Published: June 30, 1997

More than 40 years after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus, the opening salvo in what became the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, she is trying to set up one of the first charter schools in Detroit.

If her proposal for a school named for her and her husband, the Raymond and Rosa Parks Academy for Self Development, is approved by the Detroit Board of Education this summer, Mrs. Parks's school will join some 700 charter schools nationwide. Charter schools are run by many groups, including civil rights advocates, and by teachers who have left traditional public schools, and sometimes by private concerns. Proponents view charter schools, which are able to operate autonomously, as alternatives to traditional public schools and private and parochial schools.

The Detroit Board of Education has approved only two of the charter school proposals that have come before it since the state adopted charter school laws in 1993. Mrs. Parks's application is one of 12 such proposals. Mrs. Parks, who lives in Detroit, hopes to open the school in September.

Mrs. Parks already runs an after-school program, the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute for Self Development, which teaches children "quiet strength" and self-paced study, said Elaine Eason-Steele, the program's co-director. The school would be modeled after the institute and would serve 250 students in kindergarten through the 12th grade.

"We noticed in the youth that we have worked with that there are some things that are missing," Ms. Eason-Steele said. "Sometimes the youth solve things in a hostile manner. We want to help them develop a sense of self-esteem and consider other options."

Mrs. Parks has created similar after-school programs elsewhere.

The number of charter schools is growing nationwide, said Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. Mr. Nathan estimated that more than 700 charter schools would be operating in the United States this fall.

"There is great suspicion that many private and parochial schools are elitist," Mr. Nathan said. "These activists have seen that charter schools help kids in more urban areas."

Legislatures in 27 states have provided for charter schools, which operate with public money but are not bound by the same rules and standards as are traditional public schools.

Charter schools originated in St. Paul, Minn. In 1991, Milo Cutter and Terry Kraabel, both former public school teachers, started the Power League, an after-school program for 40 students who had been expelled from school. A year later, the Minnesota Legislature passed groundbreaking legislation that allowed the Power League program to grow into the City Academy, the nation's first charter school.

City Academy now has 90 students and 9 staff members. Many of the graduates have gone on to college, and the school has a waiting list of 40 students.

In Houston, the Raul Yzaguirre School for Success tries to raise the self-esteem of its students by involving the community in the school's programs. The school's mission reflects the philosophy of its founder, who is the president and chief executive of the National Council of La Raza, a nonprofit Hispanic-American organization. Parents are required to volunteer at the school as a condition of their child's acceptance.

"The dropout rate for Hispanic and African-American kids in our area is very high," said Adriana Tamez, the principal of the Yzaguirre school. "In order to help this problem, we feel we have to catch these kids at the middle-school level."

Mrs. Parks's school would have a similar mission. "We hope this works out," said Anna Amato, the Detroit consultant who is helping Mrs. Parks and others prepare their charter proposals, "because we want parents to know there are options out there that are not bound by where they live and how much money they make."