

A CULTURE OF choice & creativity



Photos by WASB staff member Patti Welch

Appleton embraces charter schools

ANNETTE TALIS

This school holds no classes, doesn't give letter grades, and allows students to learn at their own pace, selecting projects that interest them. It sounds like a dream come true for the typical teenage student. The program is rigorous, however, requiring students to create goals and deadlines for themselves that meet the state's academic standards. Students either meet the standard or they don't; there are no gentlemanly Cs here.

The school is Valley New School, a recent addition to the list of charter schools in the Appleton Area School District. The district dove into the charter school waters shortly after the law was passed in the mid-1990s with the opening of its Central Alternative High School,

a charter school for teenagers at risk of school failure.

Today, the district boasts 13 charter schools, the largest number in any district outside Milwaukee. Through its traditional schools and charter schools Appleton is offering a broad array of educational options to

parents, including Montessori, environmental, direct instruction, arts, online, engineering, and alternative.

Charter schools continue to grow in number across the state as well. According to the Department of Public Instruction, 28,000 Wisconsin students are being educated in about 200 charter schools located in 80 school districts. In addition, the DPI this fall awarded 35 planning grants to groups that intend to open charter schools in 2007.

Although charter schools are becoming more commonplace and more accepted, the public still doesn't quite understand what they're all about. A recent Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup Poll found that while more than half of those surveyed

said they approved of the “idea of charter schools” (compared to 42 percent in 2000), only 39 percent correctly identified charter schools as public schools. Half incorrectly said charter schools were free to teach religion; 60 percent thought charter schools could charge tuition, which is incorrect; and 53 percent thought charter schools could select students based on ability, also wrong.

What Is a Charter?

“A charter is really just a contract with the school board, and nothing more,” Tom Scullen, Appleton’s superintendent says. The charter defines the mission and the methods of the charter school, and the school board holds the school’s operators accountable for meeting the requirements of that charter. Under this arrangement, the charter school is freed from many local and state mandates and regulations. Charter schools, however, must participate in student assessment programs, abide by health and safety standards, and provide instruction that meets state content standards.

The board’s role is to foster an environment that inspires initiative on the part of parents, teachers, and other organizations to propose charter school designs that meet community needs, Appleton school board President Sharon Fenlon says — not necessarily to create charter schools themselves.

“None of our charter schools has been started by the school board,” Fenlon adds. The board has, however, established guidelines for potential charter applicants. These are intended to help planners understand the school board’s expectations as it reviews applications and

give them a realistic picture of what it’s like to operate a school.

Among the 20 or so questions organizers must answer during the application process are:

- What are the school’s program alternatives, and how will they provide for parent and student needs?
- Is there a community need for this option?
- What will be the make up of the school’s enrollment?
- What approaches will organizers use to market the school to students and parents?
- What are the school’s educational goals?
- What assessment tools will be used?
- What will a typical day look like for students?
- How will the school reflect the diversity of the community?
- In what manner and how often will the school’s operators communicate student progress in meeting state goals and the school’s own measurements of success?

Organizers are also required to provide a detailed budget, discuss personnel recruitment and employment issues, including how parents and staff will be involved in recruitment, and provide information on the school’s operation, such as what facility will house the program, how it will be governed, and what involvement

there may be by the private sector.

As an example of a failed proposal Fenlon points to a proposed charter school that would have used American Sign Language as the primary language spoken in the

VIRTUAL Charter Schools, REAL Learning

They’re called virtual, online, cyber, or e-schools. They are charter schools without classrooms, walls, or buildings. Learning is worldwide, delivered through the Web and also through traditional instructional materials. They are made possible by Wisconsin’s charter and open enrollment laws.

Appleton was the first school district to dive into the virtual waters with the opening of its Wisconsin Connections Academy in 2002. A K-8 charter school, WCA uses what it terms a “standards-based, print-rich curriculum.” Students work at home with parents and stay in touch with teachers and fellow students through e-mail, instant messaging, and online discussion forums. The district also houses the Appleton eSchool, a high school that serves about 15 full-time and nearly 400 part-time students. Students participate in independent learning courses available to them at home or at school via the Internet. Teachers and mentors work with students to identify and meet their goals.

With the opening of Monroe’s Virtual Middle School this fall, the number of virtual charter schools in the state rose to 11.

Monroe also hosts a virtual high school that offers more than 700 courses sponsored by three universities to the 300 students enrolled in the program statewide.

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— Tom Scullen

VIRTUAL

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Independent study courses, which students can design themselves (one student tackled horse management, while another performed with his band and cut a CD of the performance), extracurriculars, home visits by teachers, and even a graduation ceremony are also part of the program. Principal Dan Bauer, who is clearly proud of the extensive curriculum his schools provide, says they offer a “world-class education even if you live in the middle of no-where.” He admits that virtual schools aren’t for every student; those who are not self-motivated are unlikely to be successful. However, he adds, virtual schools are proving to be beneficial for the “seekers” — students who don’t fit into the large, traditional high school and are looking for alternatives. These students thrive in the virtual realm. □

OTHER VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE STATE

- JEDI Virtual High School in Cambridge
- Grantsburg Virtual School (grades 7-12)
- Kiel eSchool (7-12)
- Northeast Wisconsin Online Charter School (6-12), Kohler
- Rural Virtual Academy (K-8), Medford
- Wisconsin Virtual Academy (K-7), Fredonia, sponsored by Northern Ozaukee School District
- iQ Academies at Wisconsin (9-12), Waukesha

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school. Although it was a unique and interesting concept, Fenlon said the planners could not show that the school would fulfill an unmet need in the Appleton community or generate student enrollment.

The Advantages of Chartering

“I fundamentally believe that charter schools are necessary because traditional public education does not work well for a minimum of 10 percent of the kids,” Scullen says.

Through conversations with parents, students, educators, and community leaders, the school board concluded that charter schools could be a powerful tool for boosting teaching and learning in the district.

Scullen notes that choice has become an important concept in today’s educational environment. Charter schools, like those in Appleton, offer a broad array of alternatives to parents, who, after all, know their kids’ needs best.

Beyond the educational benefits, another incentive for a school board to authorize one or more charter schools is money, Fenlon says. The federal government has provided a steady stream of funding to states for charter school planning and implementation. Wisconsin will receive \$52 million in grants over the next three years, which will be doled out by the DPI. The department in September awarded \$4 million in grants for charter school planning and startup. Another round of grants winners will be announced in December. In addition, \$1.7 million was handed out in the form of dissemination grants, which help experienced charter schools share information about their successes.

Financial support is expected to continue no matter what political party is in charge at the state and national levels of government. “Clearly both Republican and Democratic leadership agree on funding charter schools,” Scullen says.

The planning and implementation grants allow the school board to

approve new charter schools with minimal reallocation from the general budget, Fenlon says. Once the school is established, it fits into the school district budget easily.

What’s more, charter schools are generating new revenues for Appleton by attracting into the district private, home-schooled, and out-of-district students under the open enrollment law. Last year, more than 700 students open-enrolled into the district.

“But there are still people who don’t really understand, and they think charters are taking money away from traditional schools,” Fenlon admits.

“I can guarantee you that our charter schools are not competing with any traditional school,” for money, Scullen says, adding that the revenue generated by the district’s charter schools exceeds their costs. Charter schools have also helped the district hold on to students who might have opted for private schools.

Teachers and Charter Schools

For some districts, unfriendly teachers unions can create an obstacle to charter school development. In Appleton, Scullen says, the administration began working with the union at the start of the process, emphasizing issues teachers care about, too, such as high student achievement, community needs, and the future of public education.

“Early on we had serious discussions with our union. I was persuasive that charter schools were going to come. Charters were a growing phenomenon across the country,” Scullen says.

All charter schools in Appleton are instrumentalities of the district, meaning that staff members are district employees and covered by the various collective bargaining agreements. The agreements provide some flexibility for the district concerning teacher assignment.

Appleton’s teachers who yearn to

stretch their creative wings have embraced the charter concept fully and have become a major source of charter school proposals, including Valley New School, Tesla Engineering Charter School, and Fox River Academy, Scullen points out.

“Teachers in our charters have a passion for doing things differently,” he says, adding, “Many teachers may not be comfortable with the kind of empowerment that comes with a charter because you have to work a lot harder.”

A Small but Large School

Valley New School, which describes itself as “small in size, large in scope,” was founded in 2003 by David Debbink and Steve DeMay, who were veteran teachers in the district.

It’s a project-based school for students in seventh through 12th grade, Debbink explains, and allows students to learn at their own pace

by completing group and individual projects that cut across multiple curricular areas and state standards. About 60 youngsters are enrolled in the school this fall. Many were home-schooled or otherwise off the district’s radar screen, Scullen says.

With an open classroom that more closely resembles a new-age office environment, students go about their work independently while teachers, called “advisors,” mill about the room offering assistance and meeting one-on-one with students as needed.

“We have no classes, no letter grades, and students have a lot of leeway as far as choosing projects,” Debbink says. Students fill out a project proposal form that requires them to establish goals and deadlines and cite community resources and state standards covered by their project. After projects are completed, they are assessed by advisors. “They either meet the standard or they don’t,”

Debbink says. For students whose project doesn’t measure up, advisors provide a list of options and resources to help them improve their work.

Scullen says the students at Valley New School perform well on standardized tests, and parents are happy with the school, which has required little administrative oversight from the district.

Debbink, who was trained as a math teacher, says he became frustrated with the traditional school structure in which he spent his days “pounding” information about polynomials into students’ heads in a rote fashion, disjointed from any application. Although he admits his work at the charter school is much harder and requires many more hours of his time, in part because the teachers share administrative duties, he enjoys his career much more than he did as a traditional teacher.



Under Review

Legislative committee is scrutinizing charter schools law and funding

Wisconsin’s charter school laws and funding are under review by a Legislative Council study committee at the request of the Wisconsin Charter Schools Association (WCSA), which is seeking to expand and “modernize” the state’s charter school laws.

Chaired by Rep. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa), chair of the Assembly Education Reform Committee, the committee also includes another three Republican lawmakers, one Democratic representative, and 11 citizen members. The citizen members include Appleton School Board member Diane Barkmeier, Waukesha School Board President Bill Baumgart, Wauwatosa superintendent Phil Ertl, Monroe superintendent Craig Jefson, and Richland Center superintendent Rachel Schultz.

At the committee’s first meeting WCSA asked the committee to recommend to the full legislature:

- Increasing funding for independent charter schools;
- Creating a state board authorized to approve independent charter schools and overturn school board denials;

- Allowing the UW’s four-year campuses, technical college district boards, CESAs and tribal colleges in Wisconsin to authorize charter schools; and
- Creating incentives for site-based financial accounting systems in all school districts.

The WASB also had an opportunity to testify before the committee. The WASB supports school-board authorized charter schools and opposes efforts to allow other entities to authorize charter schools or allow school board decisions to be overturned.

The Legislative Council, the research arm of the Legislature, creates committees of legislators and citizen members every two years to conduct in-depth research with the goal of introducing legislation. This committee is expected to make recommendations for changes to the state’s charter school laws in time for the 2007-08 biennium.

With state Senate control now in the hands of Democrats, however, and no Senate Democrat on the committee the future of any committee recommendations is cloudy. □

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Rigor and Relevance

The Tesla Engineering Charter School, which is named after Croatian inventor Nicola Tesla, was also started in 2002 by teachers who felt stifled by the traditional system. The Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce was also instrumental in planning for the program, which serves 50 high-schoolers.

The curriculum combines science, math, and technology in an engineering format with hands-on experiences for students. The school's goal is to prepare students for continuing education and careers in engineering, design, and technology. Courses and educational concepts are selected with the help of Appleton-area engineers and professionals to keep the programming current.

Tesla students divide their day between the engineering school and classes at their neighborhood high school.

The program's rigor comes from its relevance, according to teachers and students at the school. Teacher Sean Schuff adds that the school's integrated curriculum demonstrates that the work of engineering is "solving problems," not "doing math," or "studying science."

"I'd say that it's a really great experience to help kids see what they want to go into in the future. I knew I wanted to do something technical," student Kyle Zimmer says. Tesla "showed me all the different types of engineering. It helped me decide what I want to go into for college."

"This school has helped me get so far ahead I am very confident when I go to Michigan Tech I will be far ahead," student Bryan Swanson says.

"We've got universities telling us this is what they want," Schuff adds.

Scullen said replication of the Tesla model would go a long way toward meeting the nation's need for higher achievement in math and science and competent professionals in those career areas. He scoffs at new mandates proposed by some lawmakers related to additional high



Appleton superintendent Tom Scullen and school board president Sharon Fenlon agree that when it comes to charter schools, the board's role is to foster an environment that encourages teachers and others to submit proposals that meet community needs.

school credit or national standards.

"It's refreshing they've come to the conclusion that we need to focus on math and science because we came to that conclusion seven or eight years ago," Scullen says. Schools like Tesla are only part of the solution, however, Scullen cautions. "Success in math and science is also connected to programs such as full-day kindergarten. It doesn't just start in high school."

Students Get Hands Dirty

Fox River Academy was founded by teachers Julie Spalding and Kim Vander Velden. The two had a vision of an elementary school that would deliver instruction using the environment as a unifying theme. The school currently serves about 40 students in grades 3-8.

Even the youngest students in the school can describe in detail the water-quality issues facing the Fox River. Students readily launch into a sophisticated discussion of the river's social and industrial influences, as well as the chemical and biological

concerns confronting that waterway. Not unexpectedly, students express glee at being outside getting their hands dirty while they learn.

Leading the Way

Although critics have contended that charter schools pull attention from traditional schools, Appleton has found just the opposite: Charter schools are providing the stimulus and inspiration for other schools, such as Foster Elementary, to experiment with new approaches.

Seeing the excitement that has surrounded the district's charter schools and the resources available to them, Foster Elementary School Principal Judith Baseman and her staff decided to rethink their entire program and convert the 50-year-old school into a charter school. Using school reform grants, charter planning grants, and the flexibility of charter school status, Baseman is working to meet the needs of Foster's changing school population. Foster is "losing its middle class," Baseman says, and now serves a

growing population of economically disadvantaged students and English language learners, along with students from affluent households. Bridging the gap among those students in an integrated environment is Foster's challenge, Baseman says.

Foster's staff now offers differentiated, individualized — yet standards-based — instruction according to test

way of thinking about their jobs and their students. But now, several years into the process, even the most ardent detractors are on board and excited by the success they have seen.

"We spend much of our day focusing on data. We're focused on moving all our students forward. And that data changes what we do," a fourth-grade teacher explains.

"One thing that I really like is that students have so much more responsibility for their own learning," another teacher remarks, adding that all students have shown themselves to be capable when challenged under the school's model — a result that surprised many teachers who had worked in a traditional elementary environment for many years.

Scullen and Fenlon attribute Foster's successful reform efforts to the culture of creativity and exploration created in the district with the advent and growth of charter schools. As the charter authorizer, the school board can better focus on results — high levels of student learning — while leaving the "how" part up to the charter school. The board frees the school from local interference in a manner patterned after the flexibility in the state charter school law, enhancing and elevating the governing role of elected officials. ■

Talis is the editor of Wisconsin School News.

WEB RESOURCES • • • • •

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
www.dpi.state.wi.us (click on "Topics" > "A-Z Topics" > "Charter Schools")

UW School of Education, Office of Charter Schools
www.soe.uwm.edu/pages/welcome/Charter_Schools

Wisconsin Charter Schools Association
wischarterschools.org

National Association of Charter School Authorizers
www.charterauthorizers.org

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
www.publiccharters.org

Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University
www.itlmuonline.com (click on "Empower" > "Charter Schools Information")

U.S. Charter Schools
<http://uscharterschools.org>

results for each student. Instruction is delivered through learning centers that offer activities at varying levels, even as students work side-by-side with peers of all abilities.

Watching students in the classrooms, it is impossible to discern students with disabilities and other learning barriers from those who are tagged as gifted and talented. Each child moves through the centers at his or her own pace.

The school's new model also includes strong parent involvement and staff participation in decision-making.

Teachers at the school say the conversion process, which required them to break the molds of what they knew and believed about public education, has been grueling. The entire staff has had to adjust to a new



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