



Wednesday, December 12, 2007

A learning curve

Charter enrollment up

Public districts feel the impact as more of Michigan's children transfer to alternative schools.

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

Enrollment at the state's charter schools broke the 100,000 mark for the first time this year, just 13 years after Michigan lawmakers first approved their creation, according to data released today by the Michigan Association of Public School Academies.

Official enrollment numbers have not yet been released by the state Department of Education, but a survey that included each of Michigan's 230 charters found that enrollment jumped to 100,146 this school year from 99,124 in 2006-07.

The academies also reported more than 10,000 children on waiting lists to get into the controversial schools, which critics say weaken public education by drawing funding away from traditional school districts and are subject to less scrutiny.

The impact of charter school enrollment gains is being felt most acutely in the Detroit Public Schools district, where enrollment in 79 area charter schools grew by 2,122 this year, for a total of 46,313 students. "Not all children are the same, and parents like that each of these schools has an individual approach, whether it be performing arts, or a particular method of learning," said Daniel Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies. "Public school academies each have a unique focus, whether it be performing arts or a particular teaching method."

The Michigan Education Association (MEA), the state's largest teachers' union, which opposes charter schools, said public school academies don't always deliver what they promise.

"Charters are OK if they're fulfilling their mission to educate children, but too many of these schools continue to draw funds away from neighborhood schools without meeting the same standards or having the same successes," said MEA Director of Communications Doug Pratt.

Angela Elkordy lives in Saline, but she drives 36 miles each way to take her kids to school at Star International Academy in Dearborn Heights. She said the commute sometimes takes up to 55 minutes, but she values the school's multi-cultural focus.

"I'm happy that my children are growing up in an extremely diverse school, with children from all over the world," Elkordy said of the school, which added 78 students this fall for a total of 1,344. All students at the school learn to speak Arabic.

"My children are learning a second language, my daughter loves her teacher, and you really feel like the staff care about the kids," Elkordy said.

The survey coincides with the state Department of Education's annual Report to the Legislature on Public School Academies, which was presented to lawmakers Tuesday.

According to the state's report, 5.7 percent of Michigan school children attend charter schools, but the vast majority of those -- 73 percent -- are concentrated in 30 mostly urban districts in the lower Peninsula.

Charters receive an average \$2,289 less per-pupil revenue than the districts in which they are located, and \$923 less than the statewide per-pupil average, the report said.

You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or kbouffard@detnews.com.

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20071212/SCHOOLS/712120369>



Star Academy teacher Kristen Carulli, center, works with fourth-graders in the library at the Dearborn Heights campus. (Max Ortiz / The Detroit News)