

## **Academy to be 1st charter school \*It's time to give innovation a chance, say the Board of Regents.**

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With palpable enthusiasm, the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education yesterday made the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy the first operating charter school in the state.

The public high school, founded three years ago on a partnership between the Providence School Department and the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, now has a charter granting it independence from the administrative bureaucracy that helped spawn it.

Two Providence residents, including a member of the Providence School Board, protested the fact that the school system will have no direct control over the school but will still have to pay for it.

But the Regents and the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education were not swayed, saying it was time to give innovation a chance.

"I strongly support this proposal," said Elia Germani, the Regents' vicechairman.

He said it was essential to inject competition into the existing system of public schools.

"The present system is not working. It's dysfunctional for those in society who are the most vulnerable, and those are the kids in the large cities in America," Germani said.

Frederick Lippitt, chairman of the board, said, "we owe it to ourselves to give it a shot."

Having visited the innovative school-to-career program, Lippitt said, "you can't help but see that this is going to be a plus."

Peter J. McWalters, the commissioner of education, said the approval was in keeping with the spirit of the 1995 charter-school legislation enacted by the General Assembly.

"The spirit is asking us to take risks and support partnerships" such as this one, he said, in which business provides after-school jobs and mentors for disadvantaged and troubled youngsters to encourage them to set high educational and career goals for themselves.

"More than any proposal we've seen, this one comes from the staff," McWalters said. "This I've felt the least problem endorsing," he said.

The Regents granted the very first charter earlier this month to the Providence school district to enable a private nonprofit agency called Times2 (pronounced "Times Squared") to create a new secondary school with a focus on math and science.

But the Times2 school is not scheduled to open until September 1998, and that means the three-year-old Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy is the first charter school in actual operation.

NOTICEABLE BY his absence at yesterday's Regents' meeting was Providence school Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella, who encouraged what was then a school-to-work program sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce to consolidate its three locations and become a full-fledged high school in 1994.

Zarrella supported the Academy's charter-school application, while his School Board did not.

Zarrella and McWalters each had initial reservations about the Academy's application because the current principal was not consulted, and his position will be eliminated.

But McWalters said Zarrella had assured him by telephone yesterday that issue was resolved. Zarrella has said publicly that the principal will welcome a new assignment.

McWalters said he will monitor the operation of the charter school to make sure that such an issue does not recur. The Regents need to make it clear that the legislation is not to be used to eliminate an existing position, he said.

Meanwhile, Providence School Board member Robert S. Bucci objected strenuously to the Regents' granting the charter, saying he feared the program would lose its commitment to youngsters with special needs, among other things. "We have pride of ownership in this program," he said. He contended that the School Board, as the duly appointed municipal educational authority, had a property right to the Academy, and that property cannot be confiscated without due process.

Bucci suggested he might file suit challenging the constitutionality of the charter-school legislation.

But McWalters circulated a legal opinion that the General Assembly was well within its authority to enable charter schools to become alternative agencies for public education.

Arthur Robbins, general partner of the Providence Marriott and a founder of the Academy, promised a "first-class school" that will be accountable to the public.

"We wanted to go the charter-school route to be more innovative and creative" than would be possible otherwise, Robbins said.

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