

## **Businesses lament board's hesitation on charter school \*The Textron Chamber Academy's partnership with business is said to be at stake.**

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The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy was just a year old when it got national recognition from Business Week magazine as one of the six most innovative schools in the country. That was in 1995.

Since then it has gotten another award from the Small Business Administration for its record in placing students in after-school jobs.

And last year, its valedictorian was accepted at Syracuse University after jumpstarting a faltering academic career.

These are signposts of the success that make members of the School Board unhappy about relinquishing control over the Textron Chamber school, which has applied for a charter from the state to become an independent operation.

The state's law on charter schools does not give local school boards any right to block an application to the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education, which has the authority to grant charters.

But School Board member Robert S. Bucci questions the legitimacy of the statute itself. He charges it is a violation of taxpayers' property rights for the Regents to remove a public school from the control of a local school committee.

Some say they worry that the School Board's hesitation in supporting the charter school application - it has tabled a vote on the matter twice - might alienate the business community.

The academy's partnership with business - which has come up with volunteer mentors and part-time jobs for about 80 students - is key to the school's success.

Arthur Robbins, general partner of the Providence Marriott, is a prominent backer of the charter school application. He says the School Board's indecision is "not only bad for this particular school, but it sends out a message to the business community as they deal with all schools" in Providence.

In the last three or four years, since the Providence Blueprint for Education issued a call for a sweeping overhaul of the city school system, business has become much more involved with the schools, Robbins said.

For example, he said, businesses have adopted individual schools in a city-wide partnership program. Robbins heads the education committee of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce.

"We're a definite partner with the teachers and the parents and the students to build a better environment in the schools," he said.

"Business likes to address things and get things accomplished," he said. "We're at that point with the Chamber school. Everyone together has created a school that makes sense. We in the business community are proud of our participation in a school that is great for the students," Robbins said.

He sighed.

"Of course I'm frustrated," he said, in response to a question, "but when you have a good thing out there, you don't throw up your hands and walk away."

Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella has asked the School Board to support the academy's charter school application. That question will probably come up for the third time at the board's next meeting Monday.

Robert Pilkington, an English teacher at the academy who co-authored the charter school application, has indicated that no matter what the School Board decides, he and his colleagues will ask the state Board of Regents for final approval at a meeting June 12.

He said the reorganized charter school intends to be ready for the next academic year, beginning with a summer session in July.

Like Robbins, the school superintendent said he is concerned that the board's uncertainty about supporting the academy's application might deflate enthusiasm on the part of the business community in working with schools.

But in the next breath, Zarrella said he hoped it wouldn't.

Zarrella once had reservations about the academy's application, but he says those concerns have been resolved.

He had said he did not like the fact that the planning did not involve the current principal, Joseph Maguire, but he said recently that that is no longer an issue.

Asked how the problem was resolved, Zarrella said, "I really don't want to get into that topic."

Pressed on the matter, he acknowledged that Maguire would accept a transfer to another administrative post in the fall. He declined to say what it might be.

Zarrella said he also had been worried that the new charter school might turn its back on the troubled students who need it most.

The original application said the student body could be drawn from private middle schools, such as the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program (UCAP) or the San Miguel School.

But Zarrella said that a recent letter from the charter proponents excludes students from private schools as prospective applicants, and he is no longer concerned that needy public school students will get short shrift.

Zarella said he accepts the idea, spelled out in the charter school legislation, that the Textron Chamber Academy can be a public institution while remaining exempt from the control of the superintendent and the School Board.

"Whether I like it or not, the legislation allows the Chamber faculty to do exactly what they've done" in applying for a charter, Zarella said.

The application calls for an 18-member governing board, which would include parents and representatives of business as well as faculty. The school would be accountable to the Regents.

Zarella said School Board members "have a problem with that kind of flexibility being granted to a school."

He said he hopes the School Board might still support the academy's application at its next meeting, although there have been no outward signs in the last week that opinions on the board are shifting.

Bucci was as adamant as ever in his opposition to the plan and did not rule out the possibility of a legal challenge, should the Regents approve it.

The School Board has asked its lawyer, Joseph Rotella, to research the charter school legislation.

Bucci said, "Unless the board can direct the programmatic aspects . . . you can say it is a part of the school system all day long, but you have lost something. You have lost a role in the decision-making process."

Despite assurances to the contrary, Bucci says he still believes that youngsters with special needs who now attend the academy will be culled out as the program raises expectations.

He said that if the state can spin off a school whose good reputation was developed with the resources of the public school system, it will discourage the district from nurturing innovations in the future.

And Bucci said he finds problematic a part of the state legislation that says charter schools must be staffed by public school teachers. That means that the school system remains potentially liable for the actions of teachers in a charter school even though it has lost management control over them.

Bucci was asked why he thinks the School Board must control or "own" the academy for it to be a public school.

"For the same reason that the American people own Yellowstone Park," he said.

Then he said the central issue is not so much who controls the school, but "getting it to be responsive to the total needs of the community."

Pilkington, the teacher who helped write the application, maintains that it is precisely the autonomy bestowed through a state charter that will enable the school to become more responsive.

If the school fails, Pilkington has said, the Regents can revoke the charter.

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