

## **Charter school plans facing first test \*The Board of Regents will examine proposals from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy and TIMES tonight.**

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### **Document Text**

Two years ago, the General Assembly enacted a law opening the door to charter schools in the hope that they would become laboratories for innovation, especially in the service of students who might otherwise be failing.

Rhode Island still has no charter schools, although the Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education has approved the design of one proposal from Woonsocket.

Last year, most of the groups that participated in the initial round of applications chalked up the process as a learning experience.

This year, two groups that have garnered national recognition for their work among disadvantaged students in Providence have submitted applications. They will get a preliminary review from members of the Board of Regents today.

One is an established school, the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy at 130 Broadway, an alternative high school with just 180 students that has won recognition from Business Week magazine for its innovative approach in finding mentors and jobs for students.

The other is TIMES2 - called "Times Squared" - a private non-profit agency that has 18 years of experience in providing volunteer mentors, tutors and academic enrichment intended to encourage minority students to pursue careers in mathematics, engineering and science.

Last year, TIMES2 won the President's Service Award, the highest honor bestowed by President Clinton for volunteerism. Only 20 winners were selected nationwide from 3,200 nominations.

TIMES2 has proposed a new secondary school that would nurture students in a more comprehensive way.

"We have a proven success strategy" in combining hands-on learning and personal attention from mentors and tutors, said Ralph N. Taylor, executive director of TIMES2, who would be the first director of the new school.

Each year, TIMES2 reaches about 400 students in kindergarten through grade 12 in Newport and Providence, Taylor said. With about 45 students graduating annually, almost all go to college and about 8 out of 10 focus on careers in science, math, technology and engineering, Taylor said.

The proposals from both TIMES2 and the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy, along with one from Central Falls, will go before the Policy Committee of the Board of Regents this afternoon.

Peter J. McWalters, the commissioner of education, said this week he is prepared to recommend approval of both plans to the Policy Committee, although his recommendation is based only on a review of the organizers' documentation.

The Policy Committee meeting will give members of the Board of Regents their first chance to meet with the organizers and question them about their proposals, McWalters said.

Last year, the first year of the application process, "we had two or three come to us that . . . got as far as the (policy) committee" but no further, McWalters said.

He said he could not predict whether, after hearing the applicants, the Policy Committee will recommend approval of the proposals to the full Board of Regents.

The application process is still so new that "I don't think this is a science yet," McWalters said.

Besides the Regents, both the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy and TIMES2 need approval from the Providence School Board, which would be required to turn over public funds to the charter schools, based on the number of students they enroll and other factors.

Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella originally estimated that in the next fiscal year, Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy would receive about \$1.2 million and TIMES2 would get a similar amount.

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy would keep its current enrollment, about 180 students in grades 9 through 12, and remain in existing quarters at 130 Broadway. Zarrella favors concept

TIMES2 would begin its secondary school with about 200 sixth-graders, according to the application. Ultimately, its new Charter School for Engineering, Mathematics, Science and Technology, would encompass grades 6 through 12, adding one grade a year.

The school would be located in office buildings at Union and Weybosset Streets, near existing colleges and the financial district.

Zarrella said he is prepared to recommend approval of the TIMES2 plan to the School Board, and he has informed McWalters' staff that he expects the School Board to go along with him.

Zarrella also said he is having "positive" conversations with Robert Pilkington and Gary Davis, teachers who have organized the proposal from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy.

He said he heartily approves of the autonomy the two charter schools are seeking.

But he said he wants to make sure that the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy will continue to serve students who are most at risk for failure.

Zarrella said it has been his experience that without the proper leadership, innovative schools can "drift from their original goal, especially if they are working with kids who come from a great deal of difficulty."

In just two and a half years, The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy has gained a reputation for working with business to open doors to college for students who might just as easily have dropped out if someone hadn't taken a personal interest in them.

When innovative programs "see results, they start looking for a population that is not so problematic," Zarrella said.

"I wanted to make sure it (the Chamber academy) remained dedicated to that particular population," he said.

"We're having a very positive conversation regarding those points . . . with the Chamber school," Zarrella said.

He said Pilkington and Davis have sent him a letter in response to his concerns, and he plans to meet with them a second time about their proposal. Principal absent from plan

Zarrella was asked whether he had noticed that the academy's proposal does not include the current principal, Joseph Maguire. Maguire could not be reached yesterday.

"I have utmost confidence in Joe," Zarrella said. At the same time, "there have obviously been some problems" involving the leadership of the school, the superintendent said.

"There is no provision in the proposal for Joe, nor has he been consulted on it," Zarrella said.

"That is also a point that I'm discussing with them. I want some clarification about what has brought all of this about," Zarrella said.

Asked about Maguire's absence from the proposal, Arthur Robbins, an influential backer of the plan, said, "The long and the short of it is that if everybody was happy, there would not be a charter application.

"The teachers want to move forward in a more rapid form than they have in the last few years," said Robbins, an official of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce who has been a mentor to the innovative Textron Chamber school since its inception.

Besides the Regents and the School Board, the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy needs approval from the Providence Teachers Union, because it is seeking an exception from the requirements of its collective bargaining agreement.

Rhode Island's law is the only one in the country that requires charter schools to use public school teachers, all of whom are represented by teachers unions.

The president of the Providence union, Phyllis E. Tennian, said she has "concerns" about a request for an exception that would substitute peer evaluation of teachers for another evaluation process "that is in its infancy in Providence."

The evaluation process in the contract depends on a portfolio of a variety of materials that document a teacher's

work. Portfolio assessment has been used with beginning teachers, but not with tenured ones, Tennian said.

"I have concerns about a charter school that has a different kind of evaluation, and I want to know what will happen to teachers who don't work out," she said.

In an interview earlier this week, Pilkington suggested that teachers who don't work out will retain the right to transfer, as they may do now under the collective bargaining agreement.

But Tennian said, "I'd hate to see transfer used as a viable option for poor performance.

"I don't see a need for an exception to the evaluation system," she said. Emphasis on achievement

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy needs autonomy to better serve students in a number of ways, according to Pilkington, one of the authors of that school's proposal.

As a charter school, it would change teaching methods and graduation requirements to emphasize performance rather than the amount of "seat time" a student puts in, Pilkington said.

It's not enough to "come to school every day, sitting there and not saying much," he said.

Michael Jarrett, who teaches social studies, said students need to learn not only to record information but to analyze it so they can take a position on whatever issue is on the table.

"It helps them if they're in the business world, especially if they're in a position where they want to be a CEO," Jarrett said.

Students will need to pass an exam to be admitted to the final two years of the program, during which each one will have an "individual graduation committee," a group of mentors who will meet regularly to keep track of a particular youngster's progress.

The committee is an effort to intensify the person-to-person relationships that can often make a difference between success and failure in young people.

The governance of the school will give much more power to parents and the business community. Each group will have the same representation as teachers on the board of directors, which will hire the headmaster and have ultimate responsibility for running the school.

"We're not saying that we haven't taken good steps forward," Robbins said.

"But there's a feeling that we can jump-start students by the board of directors . . . taking action as need be for the individual student right there in that school, not 5 or 10 blocks away," Robbins said.

**CAPTION: NEWS TO NOTE:** Teacher Victor D. Enders helps sixth-grader Alicia Price with a newspaper assignment in the TIMES after-school program at the West End Community Center recently.

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