

New education beacon

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Compared with other states, according to the Oct. 5 story in the Journal-Bulletin front-page series, "Teaching Matters," by Elliott Krieger, "Rhode Islanders spend a lot on public education and get mediocre results - low test scores, not just on the SATs, but also on a test specifically designed to assess education progress state-by-state."

So there are some serious problems in the public schools, especially in the older cities, albeit with some notable exceptions, such as Nathanael Greene Middle School's Gifted Program and Classical High School, both in Providence.

And now witness the growing achievement of the city's first charter school, the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy.

The impetus for the school came in September 1996, when Textron's chairman and chief executive officer, James F. Hardyman, announced that the company would contribute \$325,000 to the Chamber of Commerce Academy, an alternative Providence high school that incorporates school-to-work education and serves about 200 students. Many of the students there are economically disadvantaged and considered "at risk" of dropping out of high school.

Textron's grant was the largest single corporate contribution ever made to a Providence public school. Furthermore, the global conglomerate has pledged to provide funding support over the next three years.

The grant has made a difference, helping to pay for student counselors. Student attendance rates average 92 percent, well above the average attendance rates for Providence public schools as a whole.

Under the leadership of Robbins Properties president Arthur Robbins, vice chairman of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce's education council and chairman of the new school's board of directors, the business community has thrown its support behind the academy, employing over 100 of its students in part-time jobs.

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy could become a jewel. Mayor Cianci, Providence School Supt. Arthur Zarrella, some of the teacher union leaders, the City Council, state education commissioner Peter McWalters and the Providence Blueprint for Education have been advocating the sensible reforms embodied in charter schools, especially accountability.

One of the things that strikes a visitor to the school, on Broadway, is the contrast between the unassuming office facade of the building and the academically engaged students and teachers inside. The atmosphere of the academy, into its third year, resembles that of a prep school or a college, where 70 percent of its graduates are headed.

Providence needs more such charter schools, with their greater accountability, improved academic results,

community support, site-based management and dedicated staff such as the new institution's director, Rob Pilkington.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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