

Charter school growth targets more 'high performing' options



Photos by Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

Persistence Preparatory Academy on Michigan Avenue starts students early on a college preparatory track.

Foundation backing quality, not quantity

BY JAY REY

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A local private foundation with deep pockets laid out a plan a few years back to improve education for kids in Buffalo.

The goal: add 3,500 "high-performing seats" in schools across the city.

That effort is starting to take shape with two new charter schools opening their doors, thanks in large part to backing from the Cullen Foundation.

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Students take part in a character and fitness class at Persistence Prep. Four charters have opened in Buffalo in two years.

rine Luhr, president of the Cullen Foundation, "and I think these schools are going to be the beginning of what's hopefully a new chapter for Buffalo charter schools. I think they're going to raise the bar."

The opening of Buffalo Collegiate Charter on Jewett Avenue and Persistence Preparatory Academy on Michigan Avenue is a continuation of the charter school expansion that began in Buffalo last year, when two other charters opened.

Four new charter schools in two years has not gone unnoticed, raising the number of charters in the Buffalo region to 20

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Foundation sponsored 2 to open new charters here

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and adding fuel to the debate over urban education.

Charters are public schools, but are run independently by their founders – often educators or parents – to provide dissatisfied families with an alternative to “traditional” public schools. In turn, the home district pays the charter schools for each student they enroll – a financial transfer that strikes at the heart of the debate.

“It is a concern,” said Barbara A. Seals Nevergold, president of the Buffalo Board of Education. “It takes resources away from the school district, which undermines our programs.”

Nevergold and the majority of the School Board asked the state last year for a moratorium on charter schools in Buffalo, a city where one out of every five children attends a charter in a field that’s growing increasingly crowded.

The state denied that request.

“We’re not focused on more charters. We’re focused on more high-performing charters,” Luhr said. “We do have some high performing and we have faith Buffalo Collegiate and Persistence Prep will be high performing, but I would not lump everyone into the same category.”

“Charter schools need to do their job of becoming great options,” said Brian Pawloski, head of school at Buffalo Collegiate, “and I don’t know if all of them are.”

Making a charter

The Cullen Foundation, founded 15 years ago by the late Jack S. Cullen, may be relatively new on the scene, but boasts about \$132 million in assets.

Cullen built his company, Multisorbe, into one of North America’s largest producers of drying agents – those packets that protect products from being damaged by exposure to moisture. After his death in 2010, the company was sold and the proceeds passed on to his foundation, in part to support the performing arts, but largely to enhance the education of students in grades kindergarten through 12.

The foundation hired consultants to analyze the educational landscape in Buffalo and determine how best to spend its money. What it found was that of the roughly 41,000 students in Buffalo – enrolled in either the charters or district



Mark Mulville/Buffalo News

JoAnna Wingo teaches a character and fitness class at Persistence Preparatory Academy. Students at the new school and at Buffalo Collegiate, another charter school that opened in August, are consistently reinforced by the idea that they will go to college.

schools – only about 5 percent, or 2,200, were “high performing,” meaning they performed above the state average on standardized tests.

That framed the foundation’s goal of adding another 3,500 high-performing seats across the city. While the strategy wouldn’t necessarily preclude the school district, the focus would be on the charters.

“We think with some really targeted investments in charter schools, we can move the needle,” Luhr said.

In some cases, that may mean providing resources to help push the middling charters over the top. Only two Buffalo charters, for example, performed above the state average last year on the standardized math test for grades three through eight.

In other cases, it’s by helping create new charters, such as Buffalo Collegiate and Persistence Prep. Luhr pointed to Elmwood Village Charter School as the standard.

To help, the Cullen Foundation courted the Boston-based Building Excellent Schools, a national organization involved in the founding of more than 120 charter schools in 19 states.

During a yearlong fellowship, the organization trains people to build successful charters, then continues to provide

support in the difficult early weeks, months and years of the school.

Luhr was so impressed with Building Excellent Schools’ intensive training program that the foundation sponsored two candidates interested in opening new charters in Buffalo. They were Pawloski, who founded Buffalo Collegiate, and Joelle Formato, founder of Persistence Prep.

“It’s a bit of a leap of faith, to be honest with you,” Luhr said. “It’s risky, but we had a very good feeling about it – and seeing is believing.”

In fact, Luhr said, the Cullen Foundation is sponsoring two more local people interested in starting charter schools in the fellowship right now.

And that’s not the only charter activity percolating in the region.

More on the horizon

Tapestry Charter School, one of the region’s oldest charter schools, recently opened its new elementary building on Great Arrow Drive in North Buffalo, as it expands enrollment.

Western New York Maritime Charter School is proposing a \$13 million expansion project that would move the high school from Genesee Street to South Buffalo, al-

Yet, those changes still haven’t been enough to stem the tide toward charters.

“We continue to authorize charters without really looking at the impact,” said Nevergold, the Buffalo board president.

All five of the new charter applications were withdrawn in recent weeks, although representatives for at least three of them indicated they planned on resubmitting.

That’s common, said Joseph Belluck, a member of the SUNY board of trustees and chair of its charter school committee.

“We get lots of applications and it gets whittled down to a much smaller number,” Belluck said. “It’s a pretty rigorous process and there are a lot of people who apply initially, but when confronted with the amount of work that’s going to need to get done, they just decide not to complete it.”

SUNY, however, is well aware of the concerns over charter expansion in the region, a factor taken into consideration during requests for approval, Belluck said.

But in the end, he said, approving a charter – or closing one, which recently happened with Oracle Charter School on Delaware Avenue – is done on a case-by-case basis.

“The question becomes when you have a school district that is very low performing and you can give 500 kids a chance at a transformative education and a chance to go to college and complete college, do you tell those 500 kids no?” Belluck said.

Raising the bar

Buffalo Collegiate, in mixed-use commercial space next to the Tri-Main Center, began its inaugural year in August with 120 students in fourth and fifth grades. The goal is to grow gradually through grade 12, Pawloski said.

Persistence Prep, meanwhile, opened in space in the Family Life Center on Michi-

gan Avenue, starting with 106 kindergarteners and first-graders this first year and plans to grow into grades kindergarten to eight, Formato said.

“I will never knock Buffalo public,” Formato said. “It is a very hard thing to turn around a district large scale. Starting fresh and having a blank slate offers an opportunity to get it right from the start.”

Both Buffalo natives with a background in urban education, Formato and Pawloski spent their fellowships learning best practices visiting successful charters in other parts of the country.

Built on the belief that all children can succeed when in a challenging, supportive school environment, both Buffalo Collegiate and Persistence Prep start students early on a college preparatory track.

Surrounded by college pennants on the walls or classrooms named after universities, the students are consistently reinforced by the idea they will go to college. Persistence Prep includes two certified teachers per class and 215 minutes of literacy instruction per day.

And both charters say they’re determined to provide disadvantaged neighborhoods access to more high-quality schools, particularly on the city’s East Side. If they can’t do that, they say, they shouldn’t be in business.

“We have a lot of schools right now,” Formato said. “Are they actually delivering on what they said they’ll deliver? Our board says all the time, ‘If we can’t do what we promised, we should be shut down.’”

In fact, the next few years will be an interesting time for charters in Buffalo, with new ones coming online and others coming up for review, Pawloski said.

“I think you’re going to see higher accountability for charters,” Pawloski said, “and I think that’s a good thing.”

