



# If they build it, Will you come?

## *Charter Schools tap into overflowing demand for options*

New products come on the market every day—and many of them fail. On the other hand, some products, such as the mobile phone or laptop computer succeed, and not because they are new, but rather because they solve problems people face in everyday life.

K-12 public education in America is a sector where one would expect ample demand for new options, because many of its consumers, especially those living in economically disadvantaged communities, have a fundamental problem. They have little choice but to send their children to a local school that isn't working for most of those attending. Consider the words of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, which seeks to improve the educational choices for poor and working-class black families:

“School choice is widespread in America—unless you are poor. Affluent families have choice because they can move to different neighborhoods or communities, send their children to private schools or supplement schooling with tutors and enrichment programs. Lower-income and working-class families, meanwhile, are typically trapped with one option—a school in need of improvement.”

On recent Pennsylvania state testing, the performance gap between children from more and less affluent families exceeded 20 percentage points. Half of African American children were not proficient.

While no single policy change can address the widespread ills of our public education system, one option many are turning to is charter schools.

As noted in previous installments of this series, charter schools are independent public schools that

operate more nimbly than local school districts. Charter schools are free to innovate—by implementing new teaching methods, by changing pay structures, and in other ways. One requirement that they do have is that they educate their students effectively.

Seeing a need, charter schools have gone directly to struggling communities, inviting parents to choose an educational alternative and become active partners in raising their children's academic achievement.

**It's not surprising that parents are flocking to charter schools. Waiting lists for local charter schools are overflowing. In Allegheny County, 11 charter schools with enrollments of 3,500 students have a combined waiting list of 2,450.**

It's also not surprising that demand is particularly intense among families from socio-economically constrained areas. More than 60 percent of the nation's 1.4 million charter school students are non-white. Almost half are economically disadvantaged.

The results at these schools are very encouraging. African American students in Allegheny County charter schools were 27% more likely to be at grade level than their counterparts in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's latest figures.

No wonder these schools all have waiting lists or that groups like the Black Alliance for Educational Options enthusiastically embrace charter schools. We should not only applaud these schools, but encourage their further growth.

*This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.*

