



(NOT) TOO BIG TO FAIL

When guarantees are hard to come by, schools do better.

Like the CEO of a small company, Linda Clautti knows that her school must perform in order to keep its doors open five or ten years down the road.

As executive director of the Northside Urban Pathways Charter School, Clautti knows her school, like all Pennsylvania charter schools, must have its charter renewed every five years by a local school district. If the school does not live up to its promises, it faces the ultimate penalty: closure.

Clautti says the added pressure on her school simply forces those who work there to do better.

“It’s a good tension,” says Clautti, CEO of Northside Urban Pathways Charter School. “Whatever it is that motivates people to achieve, that’s a good thing.”

Charters, after all, were created as incubators for new ideas in education. In exchange for facing renewal every five years, charters are free of many of the red tape that slows innovation in conventional school districts.

Local charters have used this autonomy to put in play a host of good ideas, from pay-for-performance for teachers, to novel uses of technology in schools, to innovative arts curricula. With more than 3,500 local students in charter schools, and 2,500 more on waiting lists, it’s clear that many families are receptive to this kind of innovation.

The threat of closure is far from empty one. In 2006, the Pittsburgh school board voted to shutter the Renaissance Academy of Pittsburgh Alternative of Hope, over problems with the charter school’s facilities, school debt, and programming (Post-Gazette,

November 6, 2006.) That same year, the school board—against the advice of its solicitor and its charter review team—voted to close NUPCS. The board later reversed the decision, which its members made as a protest vote against charter schools (Post-Gazette, March 24, 2006).

Despite the potential for irregularities in the renewal process, charter school leaders take the renewal process simply provides extra motivation.

“I have to make sure we do everything our charter says we’ll do, or we won’t have a much of a population to serve,” says Gail Edwards, CEO of Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh Charter School.

Contrast this with the inertia endemic to many local school districts. Districts like Duquesne and Wilksburg, where fewer than one in five 11th graders score proficient in math, continue to operate despite their near-permanent placement among the state’s worst performing schools, as measured by Pennsylvania’s assessment tests. In a way, these traditional public schools have become too big to fail.

The charter renewal process is not without its flaws. Local school boards, like Pittsburgh’s, have unfairly rejected charter renewals out of fear they will compete for their students. But the process may help students and families in the long run. Charter school leaders must work hard every year to make sure they stay open the next. They aren’t too big to fail, which is why so many of them succeed.

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



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