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Unity charts a different course

Thinking out of the box producing smart kids

BY LAURA BRUNO
DAILY RECORD

Students at Unity Charter School shared their dreams for the future during a recent school assembly honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

In addition to their hopes for world peace, children also said they dreamed of a world without litter and with clean air and water.

Eight years into living the dream of creating an alternative public school dedicated to promoting the sustainability of the environment, Unity Charter School in Morristown is considered one of the successes in the state's 10-year-old charter school movement.

Not only do children get a unique school experience -- where they plant their own vegetable garden, dine on organic lunches and participate in school decision-making -- they also perform well on standardized tests.

Unity was one of only two schools in Morris County where 100 percent of general education fourth-graders passed all three sections -- literacy, math and science -- of the state's standardized test, NJ ASK4, last spring. Riverdale Public School also saw 100 percent of its general education fourth-graders pass all three tests.



BOB KARP / DAILY RECORD

Unity Charter School students Sarah Shatz, left, and Pocchettino take part in the Dance, Dance Revolution and dance while watching the instructions on a television screen.

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"We don't teach to the test, and our curriculum is overlaid with our mission," said Frank Arcoleo, president of Unity's board of trustees. "In the process of us doing it our way, our kids get the content. We're very proud of that."

Tests as a measuring stick

With the charter movement celebrating its 10th anniversary in New Jersey this year, test scores offer one measure of their progress. Charter schools posted higher average passing rates at the third and eighth grades than the state's special needs districts, known as the Abbott districts. The majority of the state's 51 operating charter schools are located in Abbott districts.

At the fourth- and 11th-grade levels, the charters' average passing rates were nearly identical to the state's Abbott districts.

"We expect to see scores rise more quickly than in the past," said Jessani Gordon, program director of the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association. "With 10 years behind us, hopefully a learning curve is behind us."

The association is working to help charter schools that struggle academically with best practices that are successful. Gordon analyzed the standardized test data and found that more than 80 percent of the charter schools met or exceeded the passing rates of their resident districts on all but the eighth-grade exams.

"We would love to see all of them beating their districts," Gordon said.

The state Department of Education is pleased with the academic achievements of charter schools, said Rochelle Hendricks, who oversees the charter schools for the department.

"Charter schools are starting to demonstrate that they are well worth the financial investment," Hendricks said. "I'm delighted at this juncture that we're seeing results in the charters that we're proud of."

The next step, Hendricks said, is for successful charters to share what works for them with other schools.

Quality education

At the 10-year mark, the state is focused on making sure charter schools present a quality education, Hendricks said. For several years, fewer new schools were approved as the state tightened requirements for applicants.

Last month, six new schools were approved and 12 existing schools were renewed for another year. Only one school was not renewed due to financial, academic and governance failures.

For a school going into its 10th year of operation, the state must see dramatic improvement, Hendricks said.

At Unity, now in its eighth year of operation, the test scores have been consistently good. Test percentages can fluctuate each year because there are small numbers of students tested. This year, a total of 95 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The students come from 29 townships and counties. Roughly 40 percent of the students live in Morristown or Morris Township.

Last year, 17 fourth-graders were tested, 11 third-graders and 11 eighth-graders.

In third grade, 90 percent of Unity's 11 third-graders passed the literacy test and 91 percent math test on the state's NJ ASK 3. That's just one student shy of 100 percent passing. In the grade, two students failed the literacy test and four failed the math. All students passed the test.

While the scores are important, equally of concern for Unity is their ability to carry out their

"Charters in general have all the same responsibilities of other public schools and I think we're just as well, but we have other goals that we're working hard to meet," said Robert Agree, the school's director.

Everyone has a say

Part of Unity's mission is to offer everyone a stake in how the school operates. Trustees, parents, teachers and students all get to participate in making decisions about how the school runs. For students and teachers, the democratic governance gives them a sense of belonging.

Atiya Cole, 13, of Newark, said one of the reasons she has stayed at Unity the past four years is because she gets a say in the school's future.

"I like that I get to voice my opinions about the school and make changes to the school," Cole said.

Sonia Goldberg, 13, of West Orange, started at Unity this fall and said she liked the small class sizes and that teachers respect students' opinions.

"I love it; people here are so much more diverse," Goldberg said. "And you can be yourself here."

The school encourages students and teachers to explore their interests. Every Wednesday breaks up into various interest groups. Students of all ages can end up in a group that practices sewing, dancing, singing, knitting or gardening.

"This brings our community together," Agree said. "Teachers get to work with different levels of children and it's enriching for everybody."

Kevin Forrester, 11, of Parsippany, chose sewing last week and was putting the finishing touches on a pillow he made for his grandmother.

"I chose this interest group because I was always interested in how to sew things," Forrester said.

Likewise, Veronica Fojtu, 10, of Mendham, was working on a small pillow.

"I like sewing because you can be creative," Fojtu said.

Pearl Ball, the teacher leading the sewing group, has taught at Unity since the school opened. Ball said she's stayed at the school because she believes in the mission.

Choosing a course

"I love the freedom of being able to explore things that appeal to you," Ball said.

She had recently taken up sewing and decided to offer it as a choice to the students.

"This gives you a chance to express your creativity and explore new avenues. In some schools,

have to fit in a certain box," she said.

Unity is not without its challenges. There have been four directors, with Agree beginning in this January. The trustees have also sought to grow the school, but have been blocked by funding and bureaucratic red tape.

"We still continue to meet our mission, but with considerably less funding than what other schools get," Arcoleo said. "The financial pressures of being a small charter school have not gone away. We still need to grow. We're exploring every possible avenue but, given the current legal limitations, it's no easy solution."

Charter schools receive less funding than traditional public schools. Charter schools get just about half of what a traditional district spends per pupil. The local school district pays the state standard for students who attend a charter school. The state then makes up the difference between the state standard and what a local school district spends per pupil. Charter schools also do not receive funding for facilities.

The state's budget deficit makes it unlikely legislators will find money for charter schools, Agree acknowledged. It doesn't mean they are giving up. With a new director in place, Unity is exploring various strategies for accommodating growth.

No way to judge

In addition, the school is researching how to measure the success of its mission. While the standardized test gives them feedback on how well they are teaching students the state's curriculum standards, they have no statistical way to measure whether they are fulfilling their environmental mission, Agree said. They have anecdotal evidence, but they are working on a measurement standard.

The school is currently working with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and the Cloud Institute on Sustainability Education on a three-year program to retrain all staff and revise the school's curriculum.

Although some of the staff have been at Unity since it opened in 1998, there are new teachers who have come on board recently, including Agree, who admits he is not an expert on sustainability.

"We hope that we are giving students what they need so that when they're grown up and in the workforce, that they're involved, responsible citizens," Agree said.

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