Could NY have prevented troubles at charter school?

EXCLUSIVE D&C INVESTIGATION

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The original promise of charter schools was to breed innovation in education, allowing schools to try new ideas without the weight of a traditional school district administration.

Some have succeeded wildly. A number of schools in Rochester and around the country have greatly exceeded the academic standards of their host districts through creative staffing, curriculum and community outreach.

The nature of experimentation, though, is that some projects will fail. The state Board of Regents and the State University of New York between them have authorized the creation of 335 charter schools; of those, 34, or about one in 10, have subsequently been closed, with Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School a recent and glaring example.

It is the third Rochester charter school to be closed, and the first since two were shut down in 2005. There are 11 others still open and another scheduled to begin in the fall.

Many of RCMCS’ most intractable difficulties were directly related to it being a charter school, not a traditional public school. Its poor performance and fast demise raise the question of whether the state charter school framework is robust enough to protect students against bad schools — or, alternately, whether it should provide more leeway for rocky starts.

Charter schools in New York are given an initial five-year term before they must apply for renewal. It did not take long, though, for the problems at RCMCS to catch the state education department’s attention.

In 2014, the school was required to develop a corrective action plan to address issues around school climate, academic shortcomings and a lack of board oversight. But in a series of formal and informal visits over the following three years, state observers found the school falling far below acceptable standards.

Finally, the state department of education concluded in its written recommendation not to renew the school’s charter: “Although there has been marginal improvement in school-level expectations for student behavior and in staff retention over the latter years of the initial charter term, the school is still far from meeting the requirements of the Board of Regents Charter School Performance Framework.”

Duncan Kirkwood, advocacy manager for the Northeast Charter School Network, said the state accountability system acted as it should have.
“If a school isn’t living up to what it promised in its charter, it should be closed,” he said. “Charter schools in Rochester are doing a great job (overall). The fact that one had issues and was closed is not a representation of all the hard work being done in the city.”

Some of the trouble at RCMCS was enabled by the charter school model itself.

For instance, charter school boards of trustees are appointed, not elected. That creates the potential for a number of problems ranging from self-dealing to inattentive oversight. The New York state Education Department repeatedly chastised the RCMCS board for its lack of independence from school founder and CEO Dennis Francione.

The board president, Kevin McCormick, is a longtime associate of Francione’s. He declined to comment on the state’s allegation.

Teacher and administrator turnover was perhaps the most significant challenge for RCMCS, with the vast majority of teachers and school leaders departing within the first three years.

Nearly everyone hired to teach at the school was young and inexperienced. Those who did not quit under the pressure were fired by Francione, who said his initial batch of teachers did a poor job of following the school’s pedagogical mission.

Both of those concerns — the inexperience and the turnover — are much less common in traditional schools with higher pay and union protections. Employees there have the additional incentive of public health care and retirement plans. Going into the 2015-16 school year, 65 charter schools in New York had more than half their teachers leave, and 152 schools had at least a third of their teachers leave.

The school also failed throughout its five years to meet enrollment targets for students with disabilities and those who do not speak English well. It had 9 percent students with disabilities and 3 percent English language learners in 201516, compared with 20 percent and 13 percent, respectively, in RCSD.

There is no evidence the school intentionally excluded those students, but the disparities are reflected in charter schools around the state, almost none of which enroll as many of those students as their home school districts.

Francione and other RCMCS supporters said the school was just coming into its own. Similar schools elsewhere, Francione said, have taken 8 or 9 years to firmly establish themselves.

“That’s why we were surprised they closed us,” he said. “I hate to say this, but the first three years of any business or organization is the storming years. And I think we’re getting to the norming years.”

The school pointed to areas where it outperformed RCSD, including its graduation rate. State officials repeatedly warned, though, that it would be held to a higher standard, including the 85 percent June graduation rate goal it established in its initial charter.

The Board of Regents vote to close the school was unanimous. Vice Regent Andrew Brown, who represents Rochester, said the state did as much
as it could to make RCMCS successful before revoking its charter.

“The state education department visited this particular charter more than any other charter in New York state,” he said.

“A lot of time and effort went into trying to help the school turn around. ... The last thing we want to do is close a school, whether a traditional public school or a charter. But (RCMCS) was underperforming, and it had been underperforming for a long time.”

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Rochester Career Mentoring Charter School, which closed at the end of the school year, is located on Hart Street. It is the third Rochester charter school to be closed.

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