As more suburban students attend charter schools in Rochester, home districts share the expense

Blurring the divide between city, towns

JUSTIN MURPHY STAFF WRITER

When Sylvia Marshall moved to Rochester from Ontario, Wayne County, she was looking for an intimate school setting for her children and found one at Rochester Academy Charter School.

She and her children liked it so much that when they later moved to Gates, they stayed there, joining a small but growing population of suburban students at Rochester charter schools.

"My daughter didn't want to leave," Sylvia Marshall said. "She liked the small atmosphere and she'd made friends. … It's all been positive for her and me."

Of the 4,000 or so students attending one of the 12 local charter schools, more than 95 percent live in Rochester. But about 150 live in towns throughout the county, giving suburban school districts a financial and logistical headache that threatens to worsen.

*** Suburban charter students fall into two categories. The majority enrolled when they were living in the city, then stayed at their charter school after moving to the

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Senior Hannah Marshall of Gates and junior Halima Hussein work on a case study in a genetics unit during an advanced placement biology class at Rochester Academy Charter School.

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"No matter what you think of charter schools, the financial arrangement is flawed."

JOHN ABBOTT, DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT OF THE EAST IRONDEQUOIT SCHOOL DISTRICT
suburbs.

Charter schools in Rochester must give priority to students who live in the city. But if a student moves from Rochester to another town, he and his siblings are still allowed to attend.

Genesee Community Charter School, located in the Rochester Museum & Science Center, is perhaps the most soughtafter charter school among Rochester families. Yet 16 percent of its 213 students live in the suburbs, more than twice the percentage of any other charter.

All those students, including several sets of siblings, started out living in the city but moved after they enrolled, according to the school. Of the 33 students, 15 live in Brighton.

Hannah Marshall never attended Gates Chili High School after moving out of Rochester. She said Rochester Academy Charter School on Portland Avenue gives her the individualized attention and support she needs.

She’s taken out-of-state college trips and spent six weeks last summer in an engineering program at New York University. She will graduate this spring and hopes to study architecture.

“My teacher, if I don’t understand something, he’ll take time out to help me more,” she said. “People always ask, ‘Isn’t it a hassle?’ But if I can keep my academics up, it’s worth the hassle.”

There is also a smaller number of students who signed up directly from the suburbs. They often hear about charters from friends or relatives in the city.

Liana Maria Triana lives in the West Irondequoit school district and is a kindergartner at Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts. Her grandmother and guardian, Marisol Cartagena, saw a flier for the school, applied and got in.

“It seemed like a good-sized school and a nice program,” Cartagena said. “I really like that school and my baby likes it, too. But it's far from me. I cannot be involved because it's so far I can't go visit.”

That problem is familiar to Rochester School District families whose students take buses across the city instead of attending neighborhood schools.

Beyza Maraslioglu lives in Chili and travels 80 minutes each morning to Rochester Academy Charter School. She often brings a blanket to get some extra sleep en route, said her mother, Ayse Maraslioglu.

“For me, she’s happy and her grades are up. That's what's important,” Ayse Maraslioglu said. “It is nice to have different choices. … I think in the whole Rochester area, parents don’t realize their options as far as education is concerned.”

*** The trend of parents exercising that option has caught the attention of suburban financial officials.

State law permits students from any district to attend a charter school. The home district then has to send its per-pupil state funding — usually between $10,000 and $15,000 — and bus the student back and forth, up to 15 miles each way.

That financial loss affects the Rochester School District most of all. It anticipates spending more than $65 million on charter students in 2015-16, a $9.7 million increase over 2014-15. But the cost is beginning to add up in the suburbs as well.

Of the 154 suburban students in charter schools, 60 are from Greece, according to numbers provided by the charter schools. The district spent about $578,000 on them in 2014-15, up from $229,000 in 2010-11, said assistant superintendent of finance Romeo Colilli.
“It’s $600,000 that we can’t deploy to our own classrooms,” he said. “It truly is a hit to the bottom line. ... But there’s not much we can do. Kids are entitled to go to charter schools.”

Compounding the problem in Greece are the two charter schools in the town, Renaissance Academy and Discovery Charter School. Most of their students come from Rochester — the schools only moved to Greece because they couldn’t find suitable buildings in the city — but state law mandates that residents of the town where the school is located get priority status.

Renaissance Academy is in its first year of operation in the former Kirk Road school building. Of its 181 K-2 students, 12 come from the suburbs.

“Our mission was always (Rochester) children, but wherever our children come from, we welcome them with open arms,” said chief educational officer Donna Marie Cozine. “For us, a charter school is about choice for the parents, wherever they’re from.”

The only Monroe County districts without any students in charters are Brockport and Honeoye Falls-Lima, which are mostly outside the 15-mile busing radius. The only charter schools with no suburban students are Rochester Career Mentoring and Young Women’s College Prep charter schools.

The East Irondequoit school district breathed a sigh of relief when Discovery moved from there to Greece; its number of charter students has since declined. But Deputy Superintendent John Abbott agreed with other suburban district leaders in disputing the fairness of the funding mechanism.

“No matter what you think of charter schools, the financial arrangement is flawed,” he said. “The presumption is that if you’re not educating the student, you save money and you can give it to the charter school. But if you have a dozen kids spread out over six grades, you’re not saving a nickel. It’s not like you can cut a teacher or much of anything else.”

As the number of charter schools across the state increases — Gov. Andrew Cuomo is an unabashed proponent — it is likely that more suburban students will find their way into those classrooms. Colilli, of Greece, echoed Rochester school district leaders in laying out the strategy to combat the trend.

“We just have to do — and we will do — better than what charters can offer,” he said. “The way to minimize it is to step up your game.”

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Director Mehmet Demirtas listens to suburban senior student Hannah Marshall of Gates during an interview with reporter Justin Murphy at Rochester Academy Charter School.

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Director Mehmet Demirtas with Ayse Maraslioglu and Sylvia Marshall, both mothers of suburban senior students Beyza Maraslioglu and Hannah Marshall of Gates, respectively, during an interview at Rochester Academy Charter School.

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