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Buffalo's charter schools post some of the city's highest test scores

By Jay Rey - News Staff Reporter

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Buffalo charter schools, once considered an experiment, posted some of the highest state test scores in the city this year.

At a couple of charter schools, results in math and English were among the best of any schools in Erie and Niagara counties.

While the latest state test scores show gains in student achievement at Buffalo Public Schools, city charters are showing considerable progress.

And as a whole, charters continue to significantly outperform the city's traditional public schools.

"We're really happy we've gone beyond the point of having to prove ourselves," said Corrinne Cristofaro, executive director of the Western New York Charter Schools Coalition, "and we are just happy we can move along with educating kids."

In 2006, 47.7 percent of Buffalo charter school students in grades three to eight scored at or above the proficiency level in math.

This year, it was 74.4 percent. In 2006, only 38.9 percent of charter students scored at or above the proficiency level in English.

This year it was 57.5 percent. "I think, overall, they've done extremely well," said Robert M. Bennett, chancellor of the state Board of Regents.

That's not to say there aren't examples where charters didn't perform as well as expected this year, Bennett said.

And on average, math and English proficiency at city charters is lower than it is for all schools statewide — 81 percent in math and 69 percent in English.

Bennett, who has been a big advocate of charter schools, pointed to several city charters performing well and expressed his desire to see more of the schools across the state.

"They're no longer an experiment," Bennett said. "They've proven themselves."

Publicly funded charter schools first opened in Buffalo Niagara in 2000, and as the growing movement enters its ninth year, charters will educate some 7,000 children during the upcoming school year, Cristofaro said.

The region will have 16 charter schools once the new Aloma D. Johnson Fruit Belt Community Charter School opens in August in the Bennett W. Smith Family Life Center at 833 Michigan Ave.

Enrollment at local charters may be as few as 100 or as many as 1,500. The Buffalo school system transfers tens of millions of dollars a year to charters.

After nearly a decade, it is that state funding formula for charters that still remains a bone of contention for a city school system struggling to raise student achievement.

While the Buffalo School District has seen marked improvement the past three years, the percentage of pupils scoring at or above the proficiency level in math — 50 percent — and English — 42.5 percent — is lower, on average, than the charters.

“I just don’t think it’s a good comparison,” said Philip Rumore, president of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. “You have to look at other factors.”

Traditional city schools have more severe special-education students than the charters, more pupils who speak English as a second language and more serious discipline problems, Rumore said.

If charter students are doing well, that’s good — they should be, Rumore said.

Charters face a higher accountability and are expected to succeed.

“In the case of the charter schools, if performance doesn’t increase and they don’t start meeting standards, they get closed,” Bennett said.

In 2006, the State University of New York closed Stepping Stone Charter School, which had been plagued by instability and low test scores. Sankofa Charter School was closed at the end of this school year.

“You really have to be at the top of your game — all the time,” said Joy Pepper, director of Tapestry Charter School on North Street.

Four of the city charter schools — Tapestry, South Buffalo, Elmwood Village and Buffalo United — consistently ranked in the Top 10 among all Buffalo schools in recent math and English tests, state numbers show. Three other charters — Community, Westminster and Pinnacle — appeared in the Top 10 multiple times.

In fact, in some of the math and English tests, scores at Tapestry and South Buffalo ranked in the Top 10 among all schools in Erie and Niagara counties, state numbers show.

At South Buffalo Charter, on South Park Avenue, many of the kids come from poor homes.

About 75 percent of the 660 pupils in kindergarten to eighth grade are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches, said James Neimeier, president of the school's board of trustees.

"It's not like we're cherry-picking the brightest, most shining children," Neimeier said. "The socioeconomic distribution of our children is very close to Buffalo schools." Parents, he said, are a huge part of a charter school's success.

Charters are open to students through a lottery system, so parents who sought a charter for their child are naturally going to have a vested interest in the school, Neimeier said.

"We have pretty good parent involvement," Neimeier said. "It's not 100 percent, but it goes a long way. They're interested in what their children are doing. They make sure the kids are doing the work."

At Elmwood Village Charter School, on Elmwood between Allen and North streets, there is no busing, so parents can talk to teachers as they're picking up their children or dropping them off, said John Sheffield, the school's director.

"That personal contact between parent and teacher is indispensable," Sheffield said.

Charter schools have fewer contractual restrictions than traditional public schools. There also is greater flexibility, whether in setting longer school hours or implementing programs that better meet the needs of the students.

"The freedom is we have our own budgets, and can directly choose how that money is spent," Pepper said.

Class size is a key for the charters. Elmwood Village will have about 150 pupils in kindergarten through sixth grade next year.

Over at Tapestry, there were about 220 pupils in kindergarten through eighth grade last year, with both a teacher and aide in the K-4 classrooms.

"Given the right environment for each child, children can learn," Sheffield said, "they can succeed."