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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF GREATER TUCSON
CHARTER SCHOOL STUDY REPORT

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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF GREATER TUCSON CHARTER SCHOOL STUDY REPORT

“The classroom is the intersection of society’s hopes, beliefs, fears, and every day realities. In the global economy, more students need to reach higher levels of achievement than ever before...”

Arizona’s 92nd Town Hall, “Who Will Teach Our Children?” page 1

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ARIZONA

School reform has been an issue since at least the 1970’s. We are in the midst of a major debate. The Obama administration is pushing for school reform, and charter schools are at the center of the debate. Some believe that the way to bring about improvement in education is to establish more public charter schools that will pressure traditional district public schools to perform. Charter schools are public schools that are privately operated, and they are often seen as a way to market choice for better education.

The League of Women Voters of Greater Tucson has followed this phenomena with great interest. LWVGT members began researching and reading about charter schools. The first of these public schools was approved in Minnesota back in 1991. By 2003 forty states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia had instituted charter schools.

During a special session in 1994, the Arizona Legislature established the ability to form public, state-funded charter schools that would be privately operated. This legislation came out of a compromise between the legislators that wanted to give parents the ability to use vouchers to place their children in any available private schools and those who wanted more parental choice regarding where their children could attend school. The law was hastily and loosely crafted, making revisions a necessity in subsequent legislative sessions.

Some of the legislators believed that a new kind of public school should be formed that was more innovative with fewer restrictions and regulations. They thought this would improve academic performance and provide school choice for parents and students. There were some lawmakers who also felt that this brand of public school would cost less. The charter school bill passed with bi-partisan support.

The law specified that anyone who was “sufficiently qualified” could apply for a charter. The applicant or sponsor could apply for a charter by contracting with the Arizona Board of Education, the State Board for Charter Schools, or via a local school district. If the business and organizational plan was approved, and it was determined that there was not a religious connection, the school could be chartered.

Charter public schools still would need to follow federal, state, and local laws and regulations regarding health, safety, civil rights, and insurance. Teachers would not need to be state certified, but they had to be qualified in their respective subject matters. Charter schools were required to accept all students (including those with special needs). All students were required to take the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test. The charter schools would need to meet the requirements and standards specified by the State of Arizona for successful completion of K-12 education.

In 1995-1996 just over 50 schools opened. That number has now grown to over 500 with more to come, particularly with the emphasis on the need for charter schools from the Obama administration. There are no limits on the numbers of charter holders in Arizona law; some charter schools have branches in different locations. Both for-profit and non-profit charter schools are in existence in Arizona.

Over the years the legislature has made a few modifications to the initial legislation. Because of the difficulty of seeking bonding with a five year charter, the charter was increased to 15 years in duration. Some requirements such as fingerprinting and background checks are now required for teachers, staff, and charter school board. Start-up costs are no longer given by the State. Charter schools must now be contiguous to a school district if they are formed by that district.

Charter public schools have many differences from the traditional district public schools with which we are familiar. A charter school operator can determine the number of students they want to enroll and set their requirements

accordingly. Every school has its own mission or focus within the requirement for a comprehensive curriculum that meets state standards. The curriculum is expected to match the school mission. Each has an appointed board with varied duties and members according to the goals of that respective school. Charter public schools do not have to meet with an elected school board-as the district public schools do-to make changes to their curriculum and policies.

Charter Schools cannot place bonds or overrides on the ballot for buildings and equipment although they can own their buildings. They can receive government and private grants. They do not have the land and space requirements-except for local city ordinances-that district schools have, so they can be located in store fronts and in industrial and commercial zoning.

Approximately 100,000 Arizona students are now enrolled in public charter schools in Pima County. Fully 25% of the state's public schools are charter schools, enrolling 10% of the public school students, one of the highest percentages of any state in the nation. Locally there are approximately 113 public charter schools in Pima County, with an enrollment of about 21,000. In the Tucson area the schools range in size from 22 students to over 600 students.

Statewide, between 1995 and 2010, more than 500 charter schools have opened and 121 have been closed. Also 19 charter applications were turned down by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools. Data is not available separately for Pima County.

The first year when charter schools came up for charter renewal was 2009. Fifty three charter schools were reviewed for renewal. Twenty-three were not recommended for renewal. Two failed to apply for renewal, and three consented to voluntarily surrender their charters. Twenty two others received conditional approval, requiring performance management plans to demonstrate more evidence of continuous academic improvement.

Renewal starting from 2010 is now good for 20 years. The State Charter School Board has currently established more stringent requirements. Charter schools will no longer get through reviews with vague promises to improve. There will be newly implemented 5 and 10 year school reviews for those who are not performing on the AIMS testing and for financial mismanagement and insolvency.

LWVGT CHARTER STUDY RATIONALE

The League of Women Voters has had longstanding positions on education:

“Support schools in their search for adequate resources, changes, and use of community resources to insure that all children have the help they need to succeed in school (1991)” (LWVGT)

The LWVAZ in 1999 established its position on charter schools based on study and concurrence. Some of these are listed here. The entire document is listed in the addendum to this report.

Limitations: The length of a granted charter should be 5-7 years. School District Charter Schools should be within the school district only, and district charters must conform with the Uniform System of Financial Reporting.

Funding: Stringent financial reviews must occur, monies should be granted monthly based on current enrollment, transportation funding to be used for actual transportation costs, not for profit status only, and withhold funds for non-compliance.

Qualifications: Detailed application should be required to obtain charter, maintain a proportion of certified teachers, fingerprinting, background checks for operators, board, and teachers.

Oversight: Annual financial and academic review conducted by State Department of Education. In cases of fraud, illegal use of money or abuse, there should be immediate school closure-with arrangement for transfers of students to other schools.

Input/Involvement: Citizen involvement must be an integral part of governing boards, and school information must be readily and easily accessible to the public.

LWVAZ has additional positions on Public School Finance: “Provide for the equitable distribution of state funds, including capital funding. Ensure that all schools using public funds, irrespective of their formation such as charter schools, be held fiscally accountable” (1975, 1979, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000).

HIGH STAKES TESTING (AIMS: Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards): “No single high stakes test should be the deciding factor for graduation from high school.” (adopted 2005)

At the 2010 LWVUS National Convention, a study of the “federal role in public education” was approved. This study will focus on “ the role of the federal government in education policymaking, with possible consideration of funding, common standards, and/or governance relationships among all levels of government.”

Publicity noting that Arizona has the second highest number of charter schools of any state in the nation prompted the LWVGT to begin a study to see what impact charter schools have had on student education.. At a 2009 LWVGT annual meeting, members voted to authorize a one year charter school study. (In 2010 an additional year was added to complete the study.)The scope was limited to charter schools in Pima County, and one of the goals was to eventually update the 1999 state position on charter schools. Since the schools had been in existence since 1995, there ought to be some discernible evidence of their successes and impacts on the public school system.

The scope included the following questions:

1. What has been the success rate of charter schools since they were established in 1994?
2. How do charter schools compare with traditional public schools?
3. How are charter schools regulated and who is responsible for their oversight?
4. How are charter schools funded?
5. Why do some charter schools succeed and some fail?
6. What impact have charter schools had on traditional public schools or the school system as a whole?
7. What specific reforms have charter schools established and how can they be used in traditional public schools?

A committee of LWVGT members was organized. The committee recognized that the final report would be based on what was easily available to a citizen. It did not do its own statistical and scientific data. Members of the committee heard speakers from the U of A College of Education; other speakers talked to us about school finance and charter operations. Two members interviewed the Executive Director of the Arizona Board of Charter Schools. Other members attended a local charter school operators’ luncheon, which focused on accountability standards. Multiple articles on the charter school movement were reviewed. See bibliography in the addendum to this report.

The committee divided itself into sub-groups: research, finance, interviews, and later a consensus question committee to work on those respective topics and report back to the whole committee. This was a daunting task since our study looked at Greater Tucson while most data is state-wide. Often there is raw data school by school which we would have to aggregate, a mammoth task beyond the scope of a grass roots group like LWVGT.

In the early stages of the study it was decided that public charter schools and traditional district public schools would allow for a comparison of the two types of public schools. The scope was narrowed so that Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) schools would be the traditional public schools we would focus on. It was determined that visits to high schools of both types of schools would be conducted during the first year. An administrator or principal, teacher, parent, and two students would be interviewed from each school by members of the Charter School Study Committee.

Using a map showing locations of charter schools and TUSD schools, the group chose four TUSD widely dispersed high schools to visit. Public charter schools in close proximity to each of these high schools were also selected. The selection rationale was that by selecting schools throughout the community and pairing them with a TUSD high school, we would probably see a similar demographic for the attending students. (This, however, did not always prove to be the case since the charter schools frequently attracted students from throughout the community.)

The same procedures were followed for the interviews with the TUSD and charter elementary schools and middle schools in the fall of 2010.

Based on information we hoped to gain, the interview committee developed a series of questions for both types of public schools. These questions, along with the scope, were submitted to each school prior to the actual interviews. Committee members conducted the interviews in spring 2010 and produced written reports based on the information gathered. A composite written report was developed based on the information acquired during interviews. Summaries of those interviews are listed in the addendum of this report.

REGULATIONS

Due to the perception that traditional public education was hampered by bureaucracy, Arizona laws adopted in 1994 permitting charter schools had a minimum of regulations regarding curriculum and instruction. The laws were intended to promote choice and marketing. The “charter” public schools were to be operated by private entities as efficiently as a business.

Each charter school, or group of schools under the same sponsorship, was to be its own local legislated authority, which was autonomous with no publicly elected boards. Decisions were made regarding the management of the school by the “sufficiently qualified” sponsors/operators awarded the charter by the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools or school district through a process of written application. The owner of the charter school determined the focus, the curriculum which had to meet state standards, the hiring of staff, and the functions of the board members who are also appointed by the owner/operator.

Items in the application required by state statute include a detailed business plan, a description of the organizational structure and governing body, and a financial plan for the first-three years of operation. The staff hiring policy, faculty, location, and grades served at the school were included in the charter application. An outline of criteria for measuring the school’s effectiveness in meeting the required standards of achievement also had to be submitted.

Except as stated in Arizona Revised Statute 15-184 D-5, charter schools are “exempt from all state rules relating to schools, governing boards, and school districts.” Specifically stated in D 7 is **no** exemption to the education of children with disabilities.

Considerable attention in the law is given to issues of non-compliance, valid fingerprint and non-criminal clearance of instructional staff, the process for the charter’s renewal, the acquisition and the property site, as well as pupil admission limitations and preferences.

Initially charter schools had few accountability standards from the legislature or the State Board for Charter Schools; however, recently that has been in the process of changing. The standards for academic outputs and financial oversight are now being applied more stringently.

FUNDING FOR LOCAL CHARTER AND DISTRICT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Arizona’s school finance is very complex. Basic minimum per student funding for all schools is figured by the state. Where poor district property taxes cannot cover this per student funding, the state steps in to make up the shortfall for poor districts, thus “equalizing” funding for all districts. Even though charter schools are not district schools, they are included in the basic minimum per student funding guarantee. Thus they inadvertently are “equalized” with all other schools.

Both charter schools and traditional district schools receive similar per pupil funding for operation and maintenance. However because charter schools do not have taxing authority, property taxes do not provide any of the funding that goes to charter schools. Therefore charter schools have no tax overrides, no bonds repaid with property taxes, and they do not receive any desegregation money. Since it is assumed that their teachers are not certified, they also do not receive the added formula funds for teacher experience that district schools receive for teacher compensation.

Charter schools get the majority of their funding from the state’s general fund. Unlike traditional district schools, charter schools are exempt from both the uniform building standards set by the School Facilities Board and the requirements to provide transportation to school for their students. Additionally because of their inability to tax,

charter schools receive a per pupil amount of added assistance for facilities and overhead costs plus transportation funds. They have great flexibility in spending this added state monetary assistance.

Both types of public schools receive .06% sales tax on the dollar from Proposition 301 passed by the voters in 2000. According to the provisions of the law, each school applying for 301 funds must reach goals that have been mutually established by each respective school's teachers and staff. Accurate documentation must be evident to receive the funds.

Since charter schools are exempt from the uniform building requirements established by the School Facilities Board, they receive no funding for building renewal, emergency deficiency corrections, or school construction from this state-funded entity. They must rely on grants, loans, and other sources of revenue to acquire and maintain their facilities.

Both district and charter schools can seek outside private funding by establishing foundations, seeking grants, tax contributions, tax deductions, etc. If qualified, both district and charter schools may apply for funding for school lunches plus Title I and Title IX funds for athletics.

Similar to the traditional district schools, charter schools must establish a base support level figured on basic student count. There is a process they must follow with a publicized public hearing and budget adoption that includes the percent of proposed increase or decrease in each budget category as compared to the current year's budget.

Then the charter school must hold a publicized public hearing and adopt a budget which includes the percent of proposed increase or decrease in each budget category as compared to the current year's budget.

An affidavit is filed with the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to be posted on its website as well as the website of the charter school. The adopted budget is also posted on the Arizona Department of Education website. Audits and annual expenditure reports are required.

Traditional district schools also receive state formula tax dollars based on per pupil attendance. Based on local property taxes and a formula figured on a mix of local and state monies, the voter-elected governing board of each school district has to designate the amounts to be levied for each purpose in the proposed budget.

By July 5 of each year the district school submits a budget to the state and county superintendent which includes the total amount of revenues from all sources to meet the current year's budget as well as the total amount needed to meet proposed school district budget expenditures excluding the property tax. By July 15 the school district sets a public meeting to present the proposed budget that includes the percent increase or decrease in each budget category as compared to the budget categories of the current year.

The adopted budget cannot exceed the general budget and capital budget limits. The aggregate budget will be submitted to the county superintendent and forwarded to the County Board of Supervisors who set the school property tax rates. Audits are required, and the budget is detailed on the district's website as well as the appropriate state websites.

A 1980 law, which caps funding for schools, allows for voter-approved overrides for operation and maintenance as well as capital outlay for district public schools. School districts also may apply for optional funding from federal, state, or local sources for their budgets. (Overrides are increases by a school district to their state imposed revenue limit or capital outlay revenue limit. The override is funded from a levy on property taxes within a school district which goes into effect only if approved by the voters in that district. These are approved for a limited number of years only, but can be brought before the voters again for another term.)

ACADEMIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND OVERSIGHT OF ARIZONA CHARTER SCHOOLS

All charter public schools must demonstrate alignment with Arizona's academic standards. Charter school students must take the same standardized tests (the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards or AIMS) as all public district schools each year. And they must annually report the test results and other information including numbers of students taking the test, drop-out rates, (and graduation rates, if secondary schools), to the State Department of Education. Thus both types of Arizona public schools are ranked together as far as academic results are concerned.

The two ranking systems (based on testing) are:

1. The federal average yearly progress (AYP) as required by No Child Left Behind. A school and/or district gets a Yes or NO grade that they have made adequate progress toward 100% proficiency by 2014.
2. The state AZ Learns ranking which determines whether schools have met state standards in Math, Reading, Writing and Science. A school gets ranked as excelling, highly performing, performing plus, performing, not performing, or failing. The latter can be designated only after two years of non-performing.

So each district and school (including charters) get two kinds of report cards each year. This provides a dual accountability system based on AIMS. Also, all Arizona charter schools are evaluated yearly by the State Board for Charter Schools, using the above two evaluations plus a value-added measure, which aggregates each individual student's growth toward proficiency.

If a charter school's performance does not meet the two ranking systems, (AZ Learns and AYP) and/ or their individual growth model, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools and the State Board of Education asks the school to plan for improvement. These improvements can range from planning and carrying out a remedial plan, offering tutoring, giving students an opportunity to transfer to another school, or working with a team of consultants. The most drastic plan is the closing of the school. The Arizona Department of Education assists schools who are rated less than performing through an improvement process.

The Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (SBCS) is just starting to implement a five year "high stakes" review of all charter schools. If a school has not shown improvement in growth and proficiency for five years, that school will, after a series of hearings and appeals, be closed. This new system is a result of pressure from charter schools themselves reacting to their public image-which they feel has been tainted by the poor schools-the so-called "bad apple in the barrel" effect.

Experience has been that the market system, which expected parents to remove their children from poorly performing schools, did not work to close all poor schools. So now the procedure will be to give charter schools flexibility to perform well, give warnings if they do not, and not wait for parents to act, but to close failing charter schools if after five years there is no improvement. However, even under this plan there are no mandates for how the operators should run the school.

In 2010 the SBCS has now extended the period for the renewed charters for 20 years. Rigorous reviews at the five and ten year points for non-performing charter schools will substitute for putting off all reviews for five years.. The State Charter School Board has made the initial application process more rigorous for academic and business plans which are intended to improve school quality.

In the twelve years between 1995 and 2007, there were 457 charter schools accepted, 18 shut down by the state and 78 closed voluntarily. Most closed because they did not meet their charter obligations, some for financial reasons, others for academic failures. So the market did work to close some in Arizona.

The entire academic accountability system in Arizona is currently under debate and is in the midst of changes in evaluation and oversight for charter schools as well as district schools in Arizona. It seems that many are aware that testing as it now exists is not an adequate or fair measure to determine the quality of a school. It is unclear what will result from the turmoil surrounding the issue.

The current approximately 500 Arizona charter schools face oversight from both the Department of Education staff and the State Board of Charter Schools staff. The Arizona State Board of Charter Schools staff is comprised of an

executive director and a staff of eight full time equivalency employees. When the new oversight system of the SBCS is ultimately in place, the charter schools may have more oversight than district public schools since two state boards will be overseeing them.

INNOVATION

Since charter schools have to follow fewer rules than traditional schools, many hoped that the charter schools would be free to innovate and to produce new ways of educating to help students learn. Many have tried new systems. And traditional district schools have been stimulated to try new ideas also.

For instance, some charter schools and some traditional district schools offer tutors during school hours or after school to help students falling behind in their studies. Schools with a special emphasis are evident in the special programs of magnet schools found in district schools; likewise there are science academies and college preparatory programs available in charter schools.

There are some innovations that charter schools have been able to make that perhaps traditional public schools should explore. The longer school day or year is one. Arizona requires a 185 day school year. Some traditional public schools are offering this in a year-around program. They hope students will not forget as much learning as the students on a long summer vacation frequently do. There is some evidence that the year around school can help.

Most charter schools have fewer students than the majority of traditional district public schools, and students, parents, and teachers like that. At least one district high school has worked to divide its programs into smaller collegial and scholastic areas of interest. These still must meet all state requirements for graduation.

Charter school teachers are not required to be state certified, although many of them are. Curriculum can be readily adapted to meet student needs unlike district schools which have less flexibility to change to more innovative curriculum for improved productivity without approval from district administration or the voter-elected board.

As for teaching innovations, charter schools don't seem to offer any more radical departures from traditional modes than district schools do. Although most schools use traditional approaches, some of both types of schools have computer based programs and constant student feedback.

Most charter schools require signed agreements by parents and students concerning the behavior code and attendance policies. This may be equally worthwhile in a district school. Booklets with school rules and discipline policies are liberally distributed to students and parents in TUSD schools. More emphasis should be placed on the contents of these booklets for both parents and pupils.

It is easier for charter schools to meet with parents and students to communicate. This is perhaps due to their smaller size and the fact that market forces are possibly at work. If parents and students are not happy, they can move on to another school.

Some parents whose students attend traditional district schools do not find it easy to get an appointment to discuss a student's progress or lack thereof. This was especially true at the high school level. Yet traditional public schools are trying to make some effort to communicate. Some traditional schools have begun to use emails, websites, and parent newsletters for communication, much as the charter schools do. The traditional elementary and middle schools have made good progress in this regard. It is, however, very important that parents in both types of public schools make an effort to communicate and meet the schools halfway to facilitate each student's learning success.

WHAT INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE FOR PARENTS?

Charter schools were established to provide a learning environment that would improve pupil achievement and accommodate additional academic choices for parents and pupils, according to the Arizona Revised Statutes, Article 8.

Now that we have school choice, is there adequate and accessible information readily available for parents to make sound decisions?

There are many resources available for the motivated and computer literate parents and students. The Arizona Department of Education site: www.ade.az.gov/charterschools/info/faqs.asp

provides a document, **Finding the Right Charter School**” with answers to frequently asked questions such as

What is the purpose of charter schools?

How does a charter schools get a charter?

What is the school’s mission? What is the organizational structure of charter schools?

Does the school meet its prescribed goals?

What is the role of parents in the charter schools?

Who may attend charter schools? Do charter schools have to enroll any and all students?

How can a parent find out about the qualifications and certifications of the teachers and other instructional staff at a charter school?

How are charter schools funded and is it a stable source of funding?

What is the length of a charter school contract?

What if I have a question, concern, or complaint?

The Arizona State Board for Charter Schools has a brochure available for parents and students which covers many of the same questions listed above. www.azbcs.az.gov/parent_resources/brochure_faq.asp

The Arizona Charter Schools Association has information on their web site www.azcharters.org

That lists the best Arizona charter schools and explains the Arizona LEARNS rating system for charter schools.

This site also has a guide, “What Every Parent Needs to Know About Charter Schools: A Step-by-Step Guide to Finding the Right Fit for your Family.”

Some of the topics are

“Why choose Charters?” (small class size, quality of teachers, specialized curriculum, unhappy with student progress at prior school)

“How Do I Choose a Charter School for My Child?”

How do I find a charter school in Arizona (a number of websites are listed.)

Also addressed is how to find out more about a selected charter school and a list of websites for performance data. The Charter Schools Association suggests what questions should be asked when a parent/student goes on a school visit. They also mention ways to determine whether the charter school is a responsible, viable organization.

A recent article in the ARIZONA DAILY STAR (July 11, 2010, page A-11, Report Cards on Schools Should be Scrutinized.”) suggests that “parents of Arizona students need to pay attention to three recent measurements of how their children and their schools are performing.” The three suggested yardsticks are AZ Learns, Adequate Yearly Progress, and AIMS.

These measurements can be found on the Arizona Department of Education site www.ade.state.az.us

An additional resource on this site is the School Report Cards for both traditional and charter schools in Arizona. The report card contains information about the specific school, the AIMS results, AZ LEARNS results, No Child Left Behind with Adequately Yearly Progress and School Improvement Status.

A resource for comparing schools by area or school district can be found on the Great Schools web site:

www.greatschools.org/arizona

The Center for Education Reform site has a helpful database by state.

A parent or student may want to compare the academic performance of a charter school with a district public school.

The Arizona Department of Education web site <http://www.ade.state.az.us/>

has a number of resources available.

In addition to those measurements mentioned above (AZ LEARNS, Adequate Yearly Progress and AIMS) , excelling and highly performing schools are listed for both traditional and charter schools at:

http://www.ade.state.az.us/ResearchPolicy/Excelling_HP/Excelling2010.xls

School report cards for both district and charter schools can also be reviewed at the Arizona Department of Education web site. The Great Schools website www.greatschools.org/arizona lists the top rated public schools (including charter schools), allows the user to compare schools in a district or by address, using a number of measures including AIMS scores. This site also posts reviews by parents.

It is more difficult for the parent or student who does not have access to the Internet or a computer to acquire this information. They can telephone the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools at 602-364-3080 and request that a parent brochure be sent to them.

The ARIZONA DAILY STAR publishes a list of charter schools in Pima County which includes address, phone number, and area of specialization. Brochures are available from some of the charter schools. Some charter schools maintain advertisements on billboards, television ads, and in malls. One example is Compass Charter School ads at Park Place Mall.

Public libraries have computers available that could be used by parents who do not have a home computer. Some parents we interviewed said that “word of mouth” was the way they chose a school for their children.

We accessed a number of magazines and newspaper articles on charter schools, including “How to Choose a Charter School” by Jessica Retting, US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, December 2009 “Scholar’s School Reform U-Turn Shakes Up Debate” by Sam Dillon, the NEW YORK TIMES, March 2010

A popular new movie about charter schools, “Waiting for Superman” was released in the fall of 2010. The companion book is available at Barnes and Noble.

OPEN ENROLLMENT AND ITS EFFECT ON NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

The introduction of charter schools and school choice has had major impacts on the education system in Pima County in terms of the movement of students among schools. Students may opt to go to any school within or without their district, if there is room for them.

The changes in laws pertaining to public schools not only included the development of charter schools, but also an increased ability for parents to choose any available public school for their children. This includes open enrollment meaning that parents can look outside the boundaries of their present neighborhood school and school district for educational options for their youngsters.

There are now a number of public schools that advertise a special program for students. The result of the open enrollment law is that parents research public schools outside their neighborhood areas, and in many cases choose one of these schools. Hence charter schools and some traditional district schools have waiting lists.

Many parents are willing to transport their children whether they decide on a charter school or a traditional district school outside their school boundaries. There are still some schools that provide school bus service to balance the student population in TUSD magnet schools.

As a result, neighborhood schools for all students is a concept that is rapidly dwindling. Some parents still choose to send their children to a school within their neighborhood boundaries, but they do so because that is their choice. In at least nine aging neighborhoods in the TUSD, the neighborhood school has closed because parents have chosen other options for educating their children. Enrollment was low enough to affect the ability of the educators to provide the necessary learning environment for a good education, so the TUSD Board opted to close the neighborhood schools.

Interviews conducted as a part of this study reflected that each child in some families might be attending a different school. Parents have made choices depending upon what they believe is in the best interests of a specific child, ie., the best learning environment for that student at this point in time. It is not uncommon to see students within a family who attend a charter school for a while and then go back to a traditional district school and vice versa. Or some children attend a charter school while their siblings are enrolled in a traditional district school.

SOME GENERAL FINDINGS OF THE LWVGT CHARTER SCHOOL COMMITTEE

The LWVGT study of charter schools has come at a time when there is high interest in the topic. However much of the idea of reform is in flux at the present time, so it is difficult to foretell what changes for the better in education will take place.

Charter schools are here to stay. Charter schools with a special emphasis such as science, the arts, or college preparatory attract students with that particular interest. Smaller class sizes and a focus on the individual students and their needs is appealing.

The introduction of charter schools and school choice has had a major impact on the Pima County education system because students may opt to go to any school within the area if there is room. There is movement back and forth between charter schools and district schools. This movement can also affect future planning guidelines and hiring for both types of schools, but it has also brought more marketing of special programs to students and their parents so that they are aware of the choices that they have.

There is some evidence that district schools are now competing with the charter schools with better quality programs, more flexible schedules, emphasis on extra-curricular activities, and better marketing to retain students. Some high schools now feature online classes and night classes to help those students who are falling behind and who may otherwise have difficulty meeting graduation requirements.

THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR reports that TUSD has budgeted \$420,000 for school choice exploration and how to transform its own programs by changing to learning models that will retain students.

The school report cards distributed by the Arizona Department of Education do not show that the average academic performance of charter schools is significantly better than traditional district schools in Pima County or at the state level.

We also learned that there is ongoing debate in the state and nation about whether the current testing instruments (AIMS) and school ranking evaluations are adequate or fair ways to measure either district or charter schools.

Charter schools do bring more diversity in types of schools, smaller school enrollments and class sizes, and flexibility of schedules to their schools. They also offer different styles of teaching and operations rather than radical new innovation. Charter schools seem to have somewhat fewer extra-curricular offerings, athletics, art, music, libraries, and physical education. Some schools have found alternative settings for these programs such as public libraries and parks. A few offer some of these programs after school at their respective charter schools as well.

Some charter schools contract with the traditional public schools for special education and sometimes will rent equipment such as science kits from the traditional district schools. A few may also contract for lunch programs. ReSolutions, a private business, can also contract with charter schools for these services and support.

In our visits (an admittedly very small sample) we did not see any more innovative teaching or programs in charter schools than in district schools. Some personnel in district schools said they would appreciate greater autonomy, like the charter schools, for changing their approaches to classes and learning when they deemed it would be more productive.

Charter schools, for example, do not have to check with an elected school district board whenever they want to change the sequence of their curriculum, extend class times, etc. Many charter schools appear to offer more traditional approaches-some more demanding and in smaller classes that are conducive to more individual student attention.

It is difficult to tell whether charter schools or district schools get more public funding. Both get equal per student payments under the state equalization funding system for operation and maintenance expenses, but their total state funding depends upon the configuration of their student bodies.

District schools get some state funding that charter schools do not get, and charter schools got money from private and public foundations that district schools may not get. What is received depends upon the charter school's specific circumstances with the type of student bodies they serve, (e.g. special education), or their size, or their ability to research and apply for additional funding.

Charter schools are more dependent upon the state for their funding while district schools can receive local primary and secondary property taxes and conduct school budget override elections. In addition, district schools receive funds from the School Facilities Board for their buildings, which charter schools do not receive. Charter schools can utilize creative financing for their buildings and expansion. For example, they can borrow against the equity in their buildings to provide funds for expansions or renovations.

We were unable to gain any information for this study on how the for-profit charter schools work as far as financing is concerned. There are private investors, and what their relationship to these schools might be or how their investment is returned is unknown. While there are a few documented non-profit institutions, these are not a major phenomena in Pima County.

If a charter school closes, the property may be kept by the operator/owner. However, some charter school by-laws dictate that this property would be awarded to another non-profit entity, should the charter school close. Since charter schools are not funded for purchasing and start-up, this may not be questionable.

Some critics of charter schools allege that charter public schools only attract the best students, and that is why some have high performance. However, we visited charter schools that are designed to work with low achievers and diverse minority populations. Although it is difficult to draw any conclusions because of inadequate data, it does appear that some charter schools do have a mix of students with varying abilities.

We find, (and the Executive Director of the State Board for Charter Schools confirms) that a major problem with the school choice model is that while diversity of school types exists now, the information about the schools for parents to sort through is not easily accessible, nor do some parents expend the time to be fully informed..

It appears that most students find their schools through word of mouth from their friends. The resources to fund an information system probably will not be available in the near future considering the financial circumstances at the state level.

The charter legislation was permissive, leading to variation among charter schools, and there is also the variation among district schools; therefore it is almost impossible to compare district and charter schools in many aspects. It has been extremely difficult during our research to acquire credible data.

We have spent many hours researching and visiting public schools. We submit this report for your consideration for possible policy positions regarding charter schools. For more information, we encourage you to review the added information in the addendum.

Addendum

SYNOPSIS OF LWVAZ POSITION ON CHARTER SCHOOLS

(Reached by participating in AZ League's concurrence in 1999)

I. LIMITATIONS

Length of granted charter be limited to 5-7 years
District schools' charter within own boundaries only
Districts' charters in compliance with USFR (Uniform System of Financial Reporting)
Number of schools chartered annually (no number given)

II. FUNDING

Charters compliant with USFR
Annual external financial review required
AZ start up/stimulus funds eliminated
Granted monthly on current enrollment
Transportation formula consistent among charters and tied to actual expenditures for transportation
Not-for-profit basis
Non-compliance withholds funds and return of property to state

III. QUALIFICATIONS

Must include in charter and submit the following:
A mission statement A sound business plan
Curriculum Evaluation plan
Governing board recruitment and procedures
Compliance with AZ open enrollment law
Maintain a proportion of certified teachers
Require non-certified teachers to be similarly educated and/or experienced
Require applicants (sponsors,) operators, governing board members, and teachers to be fingerprinted and background checked

IV. OVERSIGHT

Annual financial and academic review conducted by State Department of Education
Non-compliance leads to involvement by State Department of Education
Immediate closure in case of fraud, illegal use of money or abuse followed by charter school to arrange transfers of students

V. INPUT/INVOLVEMENT

Mechanism for citizen involvement be integral part of governing boards
Information regarding schools readily and easily available to public

Comparison of District and Charter Schools in Brief

	District Schools	Charter Schools
<u>Schools in Arizona 2010</u> <u>Schools in Pima County 2010</u>	2147 257	502 113
<u>Students in Arizona 2010</u> <u>Students in Pima County 2010</u>	972,654 153,505	113 ,393 20, 814
<u>Location of Charter Schools in Pima County 2009</u> (county was divided into quadrants intersecting at Alvernon and Broadway		Total: 94* NW 43 NE 14 SW 24 SE 13 * see below in sources
<u>Administrative Structure and Oversight Authority</u> Local State	District Boards (LEA) Authorizing District Board State Bd. of Education	Individual School’s Governing Board (LEA) 1. State Bd. Of Education 2. Az. State Board for Charter Schools 3. District Board (when it is the authorizing sponsor)
<u>School Funding</u> Operating and Maintenance Can raise added funding through state and local and private grants Capital Funds	Paid per student amt to districts (weighted std count) a) local property taxes pays up to amt. it can afford within state imposed tax limits— b) and state funding makes up the remainder so as to equalize funding between rich and poor districts. yes get construction and repair and equipment funds through State Facilities Board Allocated by State formula	Paid per student amount to each school (weighted student count) Covered only by state funding. since charters have no authority to tax locally yes charters get an “additional assistance” amount per student to cover all capital and transportation needs.

<u>Fiscal Accountability</u> Who oversees How Reports	School District Board and State Bd. of Ed Financial Depts track all money- state and federal Central district office distributes to schools according to formulas. Annual audit Annual Expend. Report	State authorizing board (mainly ASBCS) Independent audit yearly Annual Expenditure Report
<u>Academic Accountability</u> Required to do student testing on AIMS test (grades 3-8, 10) and report results to state Get ranked by school report cards based on testing results, attendance, grad rates and drop out rates AZLearns Get ranked as making or not making adequate progress under No Child Left Behind standards Consequences of poor performance Over time can be school take-over or closure	Yes Yes Yes Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes
<u>2010 AZLearns school rankings</u> Excel Highly Performing Performing Plus Performing Underperforming Failing	No. (%) 36 (15) 26 (11) 80 (34) 73 (31) 20 (8.5) 0	No. (%) 8 (9.6) 10 (12) 13 (15.7) 43 (52) 8 (9.6) 1 (1.2)
Sources: Schools and Enrollment in AZ Schools and Enrollment in Pima C. Location of charter schools School Funding Fiscal Accountability Academic Accountability AZLearns 2010 school report cards	AZ Board for Charter S, 2010 AZ “ (estimates) ADE 2009 used for location * disclaimer re total # of charters listed by location in 2009 states ‘charter schools without mission statements not listed’ ADE, AZ Educ. Network ADE ADE ADE	

CHARTER SCHOOL QUESTIONS for Elementary and Middle Schools

Administrators

1. Why have you chosen to be an administrator in a charter school?
2. Tell us about your school's educational goals.
3. What are your grade levels and enrollment?
4. How long has your charter school been active?
5. Describe your governing body. Is the school for profit or non-profit?
6. How do you deal with discipline at your school, and is the process effective?
7. What are your admission and retention policies and your completion rate? Do you have a waiting list?
8. What is the total pay range for teachers and administrators?
9. Describe your physical plant, its adequacies and inadequacies, and the ownership of it.
10. How do you choose your faculty?
11. How is student success measured?

Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?
2. Did you teach at a traditional public school before? What are the pros and cons of each of these situations?
3. What is the total pay range for teachers and administrators?
4. Tell us about your job description and requirements.
5. What is your average class size?
6. How do you deal with discipline at your school, and is the process effective?
7. Describe your physical plant, its adequacies and inadequacies, and the ownership of it.
8. Describe your ongoing communication with parents.
9. Do you have training and continuing educational opportunities at this school?
10. How would you make the school better for the students and for you?

Parents

1. Why did you choose a charter school for your child?
2. Are you pleased with your child's progress in this school? Why or why not?
3. Does your child engage in after-school activities such as athletics, clubs or student council?
4. Describe your ongoing communications with faculty and administration.
5. How do you comply with the school's parental expectations?
6. Do you feel discipline is adequate at your child's school?

Students

1. Did you participate in the selection of your school?
2. Have you begun to think about where you'd like to go for further schooling?
3. How do you get to and from school?
4. Is there access to a library, or to a music, art, PE or sports program at your school?
5. Have you ever attended a regular (traditional) public school?
6. Tell me what you like best and least about your school.

TRADITIONAL DISTRICT SCHOOL QUESTIONS Revised 8/19/10

Administrators

1. Why have you chosen to be an administrator?
2. Tell us about your school's educational goals.
3. What are your grade levels and enrollment?
4. What is the average number of years your teachers have been at this school?
5. What kinds of decisions does your School Council make?
6. What are your admission and retention policies and your completion rate? Do you have a waiting list?
7. How do you deal with discipline at your school, and is the process effective?
8. What is the total pay range for teachers and administrators?
9. Describe the adequacy and inadequacy of your physical plant.
10. What qualities in faculty are you seeking?
11. How is student success measured?

Teachers

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?
2. Have you ever taught at a private or charter school? If so, what were the pros and cons of each of these situations?
3. What is the total pay range for teachers within this school?
4. Tell us about your job description and requirements.
5. What is your average class size?
6. Describe the adequacy and inadequacy of your physical plant.
7. How do you deal with discipline at your school, and is the process effective?
8. Describe your ongoing communication with parents.
9. Do you have training and continuing educational opportunities at this school?
10. How would you make the school better for the students and for you?

Parents

1. Why did you choose this school for your child?
2. Are you pleased with your child's progress in this school? Why or why not?
3. Does your child engage in after-school activities such as athletics, clubs or student council?
4. Describe your ongoing communications with faculty and administration.
5. How do you comply with the school's parental expectations?
6. Do you feel discipline is adequate at your child's school?

Students

1. Did you participate in the selection of your school?
2. Have you begun to think about where you'd like to go for further schooling?
3. How do you get to and from school?
4. Is there access to a library, or to a music, art, PE or sports program at your school?
5. Have you ever attended a private or charter school?
6. Tell me what you like best and least about your school.

SUMMARY OF DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

Four high schools in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) were selected because of their diverse geographic locations. Teams of LWVGT committee members interviewed the administrator, one or more teachers, a parent, and two or more students. Here is a summary of the information that was gathered:

The high schools are large in size and student population. They have a great challenge to provide a curriculum that meets the needs of a diverse student population. The many opportunities that are available for the students include such things as honors courses, career/skill classes, and English language classes for students who enter school speaking a language other than English.

Parents and students like the different classes that are available and they also like the fact that the high school is a neighborhood school. The extra challenge comes when schools are asked to cut back on those teachers who provide this wide range of courses.

Schools carry out the discipline policy that has been established by the TUSD governing board. Students and parents are given a booklet called "Guidelines for Students' Rights and Responsibilities." There is an effort to consistently carry out the District's policy even when there are occasions for outside gangs to enter the school grounds. For the most part, students and parents feel that the school provides a safe environment.

Schools are trying to provide alternative options for students who are in danger of failing or dropping out of school. Such things as evening classes, computer classes for make-up credit, and a variety of offerings in what is called a "small learning community" have been tried. Students can visit with a counselor when they need extra help or want a new direction. Students who have attended a charter school often want to return to their neighborhood high school so they can participate in sports and graduate with their friends.

The schools are trying to communicate better with parents through a web site, or in areas where home computers are less available, a newsletter is distributed periodically. Parents and students can get an update on their progress by accessing the information through the student's identification number. Site councils are organized in each high school and are comprised of parents, the community, and students to help make decisions that involve each school.

Teachers understand the established pay scale and know that the 301 money is available for additional pay through a successful school goal established by the staff. Some teachers take on extra duties for a salary increase. Most of the teachers have several years of experience. Teachers with less experience are part of the cutbacks.

Teachers believe that they provide a good academic background for students who want to continue with higher education, job training, or military service. While communicating with parents is often difficult at a high school level, they believe the additional e-mail communication improves those contacts. Teachers believe that different approaches to learning could be tried at a high school level, but the financial cuts in education have made many of these ideas impossible to carry out.

SUMMARY OF CHARTER HIGH SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

Four charter high schools were visited during the 2009-2010 school year. They were selected because of their diverse geographic locations and because they were in proximity to the TUSD high schools that were interviewed.

The four schools were very diverse, making it difficult to adequately summarize our findings. If we had visited all of the charter schools in Pima County, it might have been possible to group them or categorize them. Charter schools were each established for specific purposes, and as a result, they provide a different focus for individual students.

We found that a charter school could set a standard so high that only gifted students could benefit. We found a charter high school that provided a safe haven for students who could not fit in or succeed in a large high school. There are schools that provide critical or make-up credits for students who are in danger of dropping out of school. There are schools that focus on specific curriculum such as math, science, sports, cultural studies or fine arts.

Because all students in charter schools are required to take the AIMS test, the schools must offer the required curriculum that meets the Arizona State standards. Not all students pass the AIMS test at the required level. Teachers at charter schools often provide encouragement and extra help to students who are in danger of not graduating.

Charter schools are public schools, funded with the same state general fund money as the traditional district schools. An additional amount is given to charter schools for transportation and some capital funding. If money is borrowed for additional capital expenses, it must be paid back by the same student funding. Some schools have applied for and been successful in receiving grants for additional offerings. Some charter schools have been eligible for federal funds.

Although owners of charter schools have control over the hiring and firing of their faculty, the teachers must be “highly qualified” in their subject area, even if they are not state certified. The school must comply with a yearly financial audit. If the owner decides to close the school, all property belongs to the owner. (In a few cases the individual charter school by-laws specify that the facilities can be given to another non-profit.)

Parents are very involved in choosing a charter school for their children. For the most part, the student is also involved in the choice. In some instances, parents decide that one of their children will attend a charter school while other children in the family go to a traditional district school. It is not unusual for a student to transfer to and from a charter school to a neighborhood school, depending upon their perceived need or interest.

Charter schools seem to provide a choice for parents on what they believe is best for their particular child. It becomes more imperative that parents find out and visit the school that they believe could be the right placement for the student. Not all charter schools have been found to be the best quality for a student’s academic success.

SUMMARY OF TRADITIONAL DISTRICT ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

The interviews were conducted by the LWVGT interview teams. In many ways, there is a strong link between the traditional elementary and middle school. That may be the reason for the success of the mergers that have taken place connecting some elementary and middle schools.

Restorative Practice, which is a type of discipline that relies on student responsibility, has been successfully implemented throughout the K-8 TUSD schools. It is an attempt to prevent negative behavior while rewarding positive behavior.

All the schools that were interviewed have suffered from major cutbacks. Some have lost teachers. All have lost librarians, either full or part-time. Teachers and parents have been volunteering to keep the libraries open and functioning. Computer equipment is old, and sometimes the computers are non-functioning with little chance of being repaired or replaced. Sports programs and physical education have been cut. Unless a school had Opening Minds Through the Arts (OMA), there is no art or music available outside of the classrooms. In many classes, the number of students has increased.

Most of the teachers have considerable experience. They have become more cohesive teams, supporting each other with the curriculum and the discipline. Many have taken on extra school projects to fill in some of the programs that have been cut. However, all educational personnel seem stretched thin as they try to present a full educational program.

Schools have been closing around the TUSD. Those that are left have been filled to capacity. We found schools that are competing with charter schools by presenting programs that are attracting parents and students with basic curriculum, computer instruction, and fine arts programs. With open enrollment, parents are evaluating both traditional district schools and charter schools. Many times they choose a district school even if it is not in their neighborhood. Sometimes one child may attend a charter school while others in the same family attend a district school.

SUMMARY OF CHARTER ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL INTERVIEWS

The charter schools that were visited were concerned that they be evaluated at a high level of performance. It was important that their students pass the AIMS test. Students are given extra help if they need it.

When the facility did not have space for sports or physical activity, an alternative location was found. There was an effort to provide music and art although sometimes it was provided in an after school program.

Although teachers were not required to be certified, there was an effort and desire to hire those who were well qualified. In fact, some charter schools require their teachers to be certified. The experience level and pay scale seemed to be lower than in traditional public schools. Teachers followed the core curriculum and were innovative and creative in presenting their lesson plans.

Parents were involved in the selection of the school for their students and tended to stay involved as volunteers or for transportation. They believed the communication at the school was very good. They liked the small school atmosphere and the smaller class sizes. They believed their students were receiving a good basic education with few discipline problems.

The students were involved in the selection of their school. They liked their teachers, the dress code, and felt safe when they attended school.

Upcoming Changes and Trends

It is important to be aware that nothing stays the same in education circles. Change is always a factor; however, soon after the Race To The Top Request For Proposals (RFP) was released by the federal government, states raced to put together a submission, hoping to garner additional funding for the impoverished educational system across the US. The western states weren't as fortunate as the eastern states when it came to actual funding, but the changes required by the federal government in order to respond to the RFP have had an impact across the nation.

The Arizona State Board of Education adopted the Common Core Standards in English and Mathematics in June, 2010. "Consistent standards will provide appropriate benchmarks for all students regardless of where they live"...in the US as reported by Vince Yanas, Executive Director of the State Board of AZ.

Move On When Ready legislation (HB2731) establishes the Grand Canyon Diploma offered to students who demonstrate readiness for college by having completed additional course work and passing a State Board Proficiency Exam. If they pass this exam, they may graduate early and enroll in a community college either on the students' high school campuses or the community college campus. All the details have not been worked out yet.

Legislation titled Move On When Reading (HB 2732) and taking effect in 2013-2014 provides that students may not be promoted unless they have demonstrated they are capable of reading at a 3rd grade level. The assessment of this reading proficiency is to be reported to the State Board of Education in February, 2011.

For the first time ever, meeting academic standards will mean the same state to state as the consortia of states partner to develop a common assessment aligned to the Common Core Standards. These assessments will be designed to reveal whether or not students are ready for entry level credit -bearing college classes. These assessments will be computer based and are thought to be both formative and summative.

Dr. Linda Arzoumanian

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