

What Encourages Partnership?

Look Who Just Moved into the Neighborhood: A Charter School Comes to Haverhill

By Arthur Tate, Kerry Fitzgerald, and Janet Begin

The Superintendent's Stance: Dr. Arthur Tate

Bring up the word charter school in a community and it will evoke strong, but mixed emotions. To disenfranchised or dissatisfied parents, a charter school means opportunity, freedom, equality, and a new chance. For the organizers of an institute chartered by the state, the school represents fulfillment of a vision. To a community, the term charter school is merely a term, until one is approved in their city or town.

To a school committee and superintendent, a charter school is the specter of their greatest nightmare — a public school sanctioned by the state that will suck away funds at a rate that takes the budget breath away. Although my professional contacts are limited mostly to urban school systems, I don't know one community or superintendent who is pleased to have a charter school in its midst.

It was with mixed feelings that the Haverhill School Committee and I faced the fact that a charter school was going to be inevitable in our city with a population of 60,000, including over 8,000 students. The reality of the charter approval was unveiled last year, simultaneous with the system making over \$5 million in cuts to a budget that was about \$48 million. When the budget was completed in June, 2003, the Haverhill Public Schools had cut a total of over \$15 million in operations over three years. Over two hundred positions had been lost due to budget reductions, six neighborhood school buildings had been closed, and class sizes had grown to help save money. At the same time the organizers of the newly-approved Hill View charter school were trying to explain the logical rationale for having a Montessori school in our midst, I had to inform the school committee that the negative impact of such an endeavor in FY 2005 would be \$800,000. The news of the charter school approval and organization could not have come at a worse time.

In general, what angers cities and towns about charter schools is the fact that while the state lauds them and calls for increased numbers, the financial support that is supposed to help us weather the first few years has evaporated. So in essence, when the charter school comes on line, there is little or no help from the state to soften the impact. It is understandable that those who carry the charter school banner are often on the receiving end of transferred hostility.

As superintendent, it fell to me to provide some balance in the situation, and to make recommendations to the seven members of the school committee concerning how they should respond to the facts and feelings they were accumulating about the charter school. Each member had, or formed, opinions about charter schools in general, and the Hill View Montessori Charter School specifically. Some school committee members favored the charter premise because it was the manifestation of accountability in education. At least one member questioned whether the school would be able to find qualified teachers for the Montessori curriculum, and another suggested that low income and minority students would be marginalized by the charter school process. But the position that galvanized the school committee was that even with the obvious positive aspects of a new public school, the birth of the charter school was ill-timed.

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— Dr. Arthur Tate,

Lead by Example

The Hill View charter school founders and trustees were understanding about the school system's plight, while at the same time being firm in conveying their belief that they were in the process of organizing a public school that

would benefit the children of Haverhill. They were knowledgeable, professional, and unapologetic in their support for the Montessori method of instruction. The founders were relentless in their contacts with me to provide updated progress reports and to pursue the possibility of using a vacated school building for operating the charter school. I grew to like and respect the group, and I found myself wishing that the birth of this public school had come with fewer financial penalties that made enthusiastic support difficult, even for an educator.

Although I had gained respect for the efforts of the organizers of the Hill View Montessori Charter School, my admiration for them grew as I discovered that even though many of them had not gained access for their children to attend the new school through a public school lottery, they continued to represent the effort enthusiastically and with conviction. It was encouraging to me to see such unabashed belief in a cause. My attitude toward them helped me to establish my stance as an administrator whose job it is to provide help, support, information, and liaison, and to do my part to aid in the establishment of Haverhill's newest public school.

Throughout the period that the charter school founders were preparing, processing, explaining, and defending their application to the state, we crossed paths several times at state board meetings, school committee meetings, town political meetings, and social affairs. On every occasion, we were genuinely cordial and friendly toward one another. Not only was such cordiality pleasant, the most important impact was that it set a good example for others to follow. I certainly expect that all members of the school district will treat anyone involved in the charter school – founder, teacher, student, or parent – with respect and consideration.

I remind those who see the charter school as a net loss for the city that the children being served by Hill View Montessori are primarily from Haverhill. I point out that choice and options and individualized instruction are all healthy concepts that provide improved quality of education. The bottom line is that it is my expectation the charter school in Haverhill will improve student achievement, and that is the central objective of education.

A Voice from the School Committee: Kerry Fitzgerald

A little over a year ago, I was invited to attend a meeting with some people who were talking about starting a charter school in Haverhill. As a parent, I recognize that any single school is not necessarily the best place for all students to learn. Therefore, I like the idea of charter schools that are structured to teach using methods that the pre-existing public schools cannot. In this way, charter schools can complement city schools by offering another alternative for students. The Montessori method, which the Hill View charter school will be using, offers that alternative.

Prior to that meeting, I thought the state paid for the first three years of a charter school before the cost went to the city. When I heard that Haverhill would be paying the entire tab, my heart dropped into my stomach. The budget for the Haverhill district schools has been cut every year for the past five years. We have eliminated important programs, closed six neighborhood schools, and increased class sizes to balance our budget. We are facing another year of more cuts in FY05. The thought of adding another school to the financial mix was, and is, frightening.

Frankly, I hoped the state would put a moratorium on approving new charter schools until the state's economy improved, and our school committee wrote a letter to our state senator and representatives asking them to do that. However, this did not happen and the Hill View Montessori Charter School was approved to open in August, 2004. There was nothing we could do to change that decision so we had to find a way to make it work. It was as simple as that. Our goals were the same — educate the children of Haverhill. We just had different ways of accomplishing this.

A public dispute between a charter school and the school district takes the focus off education.... It makes the individuals involved appear narrow-minded and mean-spirited, it can hurt the way people perceive the school district and the charter school, and it sets up an adversarial relationship between two groups that ultimately want what's best for children.

— Kerry Fitzgerald, school committee member

Form a Cooperative Working Relationship

I had heard from school committee members in other communities that there was a lot of animosity when charter schools opened in their cities. Apparently, the people who started those charter schools were often critical of the local school systems. Fortunately, for Haverhill and its children, that was not the case for us. We appreciate the

way this was handled and must credit the charter school's founders. Obviously, these people didn't want to create a battle and neither did we, so the remaining option was to form a cooperative working relationship.

When the charter school group took the initiative to join the District Parent Council (DPC), an organization that involves parents who are leaders in their schools and the district, I tried to explain the city's position about the charter school and, at the same time, encourage their participation. I sent Janet an email at the time, explaining,

You must understand that parents are already concerned about the major cuts we have made and will be making, and the money we are spending on the charter school feels like insult on top of injury. I can't tell you how many people are leaving the district because of the cuts we have already made and I know more who have their houses on the market. The city and the state budget problems have been disastrous for Haverhill. However, if you can put up with the silent censure I suspect you are getting for the next year or so, I believe things will be different. We certainly want you (and your school) to be part of the DPC. The DPC can help make your school and parents feel part of the school district instead of separate.... I hope you and other parents from the charter school will attend DPC meetings and get to know about the issues, big and small, that many parents are interested in discussing.

As a result of these communications and this invitation, Janet now attends the District Parent Council meetings and other members welcome her participation.

Part of the reason this has been a relatively easy process in Haverhill is the temperaments of the people involved. Dr. Tate, Superintendent of the Haverhill Public Schools, and the former president of the school committee, really shaped our communication about the charter school. They both remained positive and kept those of us on the school committee positive. In addition, if the charter school's organizers had begun the process by criticizing the schools, it would have put us all on the defensive. Their positive attitude toward the school system influenced the relationship and helped the process proceed without acrimony.

We made a conscious decision that we were going to do our best to forge positive relationships with the various members of our community and if it didn't happen, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

— Janet Begin, charter school founder

Focus on Benefits for Children

The law provides that the state will pay for the start up of charter schools, but this has not been happening. The entire burden is on the home community, yet the state doesn't seem to take into account the community's ability to pay for a charter school. This is a difficult pill to swallow during these challenging financial times, but it is not the fault of the individual charter school. A public dispute between a charter school and the school district takes the focus off education, allows political motivations to reign, and hurts everyone involved. It makes the individuals involved appear narrow-minded and mean-spirited, it can hurt the way people perceive the school district and the charter school, and it sets up an adversarial relationship between two groups that ultimately want what's best for children. For these reasons, I advocate for taking up the debate with legislators while committing energies locally toward building productive relations with those in the city who demonstrate commitment to children and their learning.

A Charter School Founder's Perspective: Janet Begin

We had heard that charter schools often meet with a great deal of resistance and that it isn't usually until some years after they are started that communities begin to accept them. One of our own founders was certain we would face hostility from members of the district schools and recommended we prepare ourselves for it. However, we are an idealistic group with plenty of determination and conviction that what we are doing is a good thing. We made a conscious decision that we were going to do our best to forge positive relationships with the various mem-

bers of our community and if it didn't happen, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Knowing that those in district schools often feel upset about charter

schools, we considered approaches that might help build constructive relationships. We arrived at three guiding principles:

- 1) be positive about district schools in all communications and public relations efforts; speak to the value of your school on its own merit, not by criticizing others;

- 2) get to know those who are committed to the city's children; build professional, respectful relationships with these people; and
- 3) put yourself in the shoes of those in the district schools; consider situations and decisions from their point of view.

Pursue Positive Communications

At Hill View Montessori Charter School, we feel it is not necessary to point out shortcomings in the district schools in order to build our own credibility. From the earliest phases of our work, we made a conscious decision not to speak negatively about the district schools. We knew the charter school would add value to the city and we spoke with passion about our plans for children.

This is not always as easy as it may sound. It requires extra work on our part and a vigilance in regard to thinking before we speak. For instance, in putting together our enrollment materials, we wanted to educate parents about aspects of our school that are different and special. We decided that a comparison chart between our school and a "traditional" school was needed because charter schools only succeed if families decide to leave their current school and enroll in the charter. However, a direct comparison with our district schools could be perceived as an attack or criticism so we approached this with care by asking some district teachers to read our chart and provide feedback. We also made certain that our comparison didn't characterize or target the Haverhill district schools so in our chart, we defined the term "traditional" as "a model that is currently being used in many schools, both public and private" and qualified this by saying "there are certainly exceptions within individual schools and classrooms."

A second, more direct example of maintaining positive communications occurred when we appeared before the Haverhill City Council regarding our facility needs. A councilor asked, "What is missing in the Haverhill school system that drove this forward as a dearly needed adjunct to the system?" The question specifically asked us to explain the shortcomings of the Haverhill district schools. However, we chose to explain that Hill View Montessori gives city residents an option that is very different than the current option. We explained some of the differences, such as mixed-age classrooms and use of Montessori materials. We emphasized that all students don't learn in the same way and that providing a choice within the community is a positive contribution to the city. Reporters some-

times ask questions in this same way, using phrasing that places charter schools and public schools in opposition. We try to recast these questions so we can provide responses that are both informative about Hill View and respectful toward district educators. We are all working hard to serve the educational needs of our city's children.

Maintain Honest Dialogue and an Open Mind

Most of Hill View Montessori's founders are residents of Haverhill. Many of us were already known as engaged community members and contributors and we knew of many others in town who were contributors as well — and they are on both sides of the charter school fence. Respect, we felt, would be fostered through honest and thoughtful dialogue within the community.

Early in our communications with the district public schools, the superintendent invited us to a school committee meeting where he said he would be recommending a letter be sent to the Department of Education in opposition to Hill View being granted a charter. Despite this news, we felt appreciative of the superintendent's communication with us. We anticipated the school committee's response because we understand it is difficult for district schools to embrace a school that will reallocate funds away from their operating budget. What we didn't anticipate was the tone of the school committee's letter. It stated, "We do not object to the charter school concept. In fact, we understand in principle such schools provide choice to students and parents, establish models for alternative ways to teach and learn, exhibit varying governance styles and insert healthy competition into a school system." Their only complaint with a charter school in their midst was that the state's funding formula created an oppressive burden and frankly, we support and empathize with their position. They gained our respect for the integrity of their voices.

A short time after this event, some members of the school committee continued to discuss their concern about the charter school's impact on the city. Their doubts surfaced at a televised school committee meeting when the Chair expressed his skepticism about whether the charter school was committed to reflecting the diversity of the city. We were upset by his comment, yet through discussion among ourselves, came to realize he spoke out of a dedication to the city's children. However, we were fully committed to diversity in our school so we scheduled a meeting with him. He was willing to listen and our message came through clearly. As a result, he accepted our request

that he share his expertise and commitments by giving us feedback on our enrollment planning and preparations. He was thoughtful, friendly, and encouraging when he did so. We are now proud to state that our projected first year enrollment successfully reflects the ethnic diversity found in the other schools in the city. We consider ourselves fortunate to be working with such fine public educators. We have learned they work to uphold educational commitments similar to our own.

Not long after, we realized how truly fortunate we are when we attended the Massachusetts Department of Education public hearings for the recently submitted charter applications. We were appalled at what we witnessed on that eye-opening day. A few cities had come out in full force to do battle with their charter schools. We saw disrespectful behavior of every type — name calling, yelling, blatant insults. We felt that if we chose to battle rather than collaborate, no one would win and the children would lose. We learned that day to be free with our praise for Haverhill's city officials, superintendent, and school committee. We understood that the respectful and cooperative reception we had received was radically divergent from the choices of their "peers." Haverhill is working to create a distinct path of its own.

Walk in Their Shoes

We also decided to try to put ourselves in the shoes of those in the district schools and to consider situations and decisions that we faced from their point of view. We made a commitment to communicate potentially high-impact issues early and not to invest in political game playing.

Shortly before we were granted a charter for our grades 1-8 Montessori school, it became apparent that children's education at Hill View could be strengthened by adding a kindergarten. We spent many months wrestling over the logistics and impact of such a decision. The most sensible and simple way to make this change was to add an additional forty children to the enrollment projections, but

we were deeply concerned about compounding an already severe financial situation for the Haverhill school district.

We did not want to destroy the positive relations we had established, yet we were also responsible for making the best decisions for children's education at Hill View. After much deliberation, the founders decided to add kindergarten by redistributing the projected enrollments and staying within the original enrollment numbers, thereby creating no change in the original financial projections for the city. However, this meant there were 25% fewer slots in each grade, thereby decreasing the founders' chances of gaining enrollment for our own children in the school. As luck would have it, and after eighteen months of intensive work developing the school, only one of the five founders' children was drawn by lottery for enrollment. Regardless, this was the right decision for our district and the right decision for our school, and it wasn't the first or last time this group would make this type of choice.



From l to r: Dr. Arthur Tate, superintendent; Kerry Fitzgerald, school committee member; and Janet Begin, charter school founder and board president.

Looking Down the Road

At this point, the charter school and the district schools are working well together. We are beginning to talk about partnering, trying to find ways our respective activities can bring mutual benefit. Our city is unique in its reaction to a new charter school and we sometimes wonder if the response has been an odd sort of fluke — a chance

meeting of the right minds at the right time — or something purposeful in the intersection of attitudes and circumstances that might be replicated and encouraged, at least in part, in other communities. We don't know for sure, but we are certain of one thing. Haverhill's public school leaders — both charter and district — care deeply about the children of our city and share a common goal of supporting them with great education. Surely, if that remains the focus, we are confident everything else will work out.

Dr. Arthur Tate has been the superintendent of the Haverhill Public Schools since 2000. He served in the US Army for 26 years, and after retiring from the service he taught mathematics in Broward County, Florida. Dr. Tate also was headmaster of a private school in New York and has been superintendent in Hillsboro, New Hampshire and Harvard, Massachusetts. He can be reached at atate@haverhill-ma.com.

Kerry Fitzgerald is a first term member of the Haverhill School Committee. Prior to running for office, she was an active parent both within her children's schools and on a district level. Kerry has also been Case Manager for Head Start. She is currently a member of the Haverhill Foundation for Excellence in Education and is active recruiting and supporting mentors for children considered "at risk" at Children's Friend and Family Services in Haverhill.

Janet Begin is a Founder and Board Chair of the Hill View Montessori Charter School of Haverhill which is scheduled to open in August 2004. She earned a BS in Computer Science from Rochester Polytechnic Institute, an MS in Computer Engineering from Boston University, and an M.Ed. in Elementary Education from Lesley University. She worked in the high technology industry before becoming a Massachusetts certified teacher. Janet can be reached at jcbegin@comcast.net. ★

Note to the Reader:

As of publication time, a MA House Budget Debate voice vote on 4/28/04 approved a Consolidated Amendment on Charter Schools, including the following text: "the authority of the board of education to grant commonwealth charters to any applicant pursuant to section 89 of chapter 71 of the general laws is suspended until July 31, 2005, or until such time as a new tuition formula consistent with the recommendations of the house and senate working group authorized in this section has been enacted into law... There is hereby established a house and senate working group to study all aspects of, make recommendations on how to improve, and develop legislation to change, the current tuition financing system for charter schools. The first meeting of the working group shall take place within 30 days of the passage of this act." The Bill now goes before the Senate for further action.

6 Tips for Building Respectful Relations Between Charter and District Public Schools

While these suggestions may seem obvious, recent political events in Massachusetts would suggest they are more difficult to achieve than it may first appear. At times, it is difficult to remain vigilant and reflective about our actions amidst our busy days in schools. If we agree to help each other maintain these commitments, for the benefit of children's education, all of our efforts will be strengthened.

- 1) Lead by example: maintain your professionalism and demonstrate your respect for others working for the best interests of the community's children.
- 2) Keep an open mind: speak honestly, consider others' perspectives, engage in thoughtful dialogue, and be reflective learners.
- 3) Pursue positive communications and public relations: there should be no need to criticize someone else's school to validate your own; if you need to stand apart and voice divergent views, do it respectfully.
- 4) Put yourselves in the other person's shoes: consider the impact of key decisions on the other public schools; meet to communicate high-impact issues early, and do so from the very beginning.
- 5) Form a cooperative, working relationship: seek win-win solutions, especially in tough financial times; make each other feel welcome in common endeavors.
- 6) Focus on benefits for children: we're all in it for the same reason.