

renaissance 2010 in development

100 new schools featuring:

- shaky budgets
- high teacher turnover
- mediocre test scores

Shift course on renaissance

By **Lorraine Forte**
Editor-in-Chief

Ask Wanda Taylor to give her view on Renaissance 2010, and you get a brief sigh and a “Where do you start?” Her story is a parent’s-eye view of what has happened since Mayor Richard M. Daley and then-CEO Arne Duncan launched the plan in 2004.

Back then, Taylor had two children at Price, a struggling school at 44th Street and South Drexel Avenue in Bronzeville. She and other parents had heard rumors that “something big” was about to happen with schools. But they were “horrified” by Renaissance, Taylor recalls. Where would their children go? What curricula would the new schools offer? Most important, how would parents get their children into the new schools?

Taylor vehemently disputes the idea that parents didn’t realize how badly their schools were failing and wanted to keep them open regardless of performance. And parents felt the district just brushed off their questions. “They thought we were just these rabble-rousers,” Taylor says. “Our kids were going to these schools. We knew they needed help.”

Renaissance 2010 didn’t include a clear strategy for improving neighborhood schools. Price was given the chance to “transform,” Taylor says. That sounded good in theory, but in her view, it was a bad deal.

“We were promised a lot of stuff and didn’t get it,” Taylor recalls. “We were promised the principal would be able to hire [new] teachers, that we would be given resources to prepare kids to go to King,” just a stone’s-throw down Drexel Avenue from Price. (King had become a selective, college prep high school.) Some parents talked about bringing in the well-respected International Baccalaureate program, but the plan never materialized.

Price became a middle school and cycled through several principals. Taylor moved her children to Frazier, a newly created magnet school with the IB program she had wanted. “When I heard about Frazier, I jumped on it. I ran over there,” Taylor says.

Now Taylor is happy with Frazier, al-

TOP PERFORMERS

Just 16 of the 92 Renaissance schools have a majority of students scoring at or above the state average on the ISAT, according to a *Catalyst* analysis of 2010 scores. Eight of the 16 are charters:

- Alain Locke
- LEARN—North Lawndale
- Legacy—North Lawndale
- UNO—Marquez, Brighton Park
- Chicago International—West Belden
- University of Chicago—North Kenwood-Oakland
- Chicago International—Bucktown
- Noble Street Charter—Pritzker College Prep, Belmont-Cragin

though it’s a long commute—“we take the bus, or if my car is working, we drive”—from Englewood, where she moved when Bronzeville became too expensive. The commute is about to get even longer: Taylor’s apartment building is in foreclosure, and she is moving farther west to Marquette Park.

Looking back over the past six years, Taylor says Renaissance, “is a plan of the haves and have-nots. Being very honest, it’s not been a success. If you’re the type of parent who researches [schools], you can make it work for you. If you’re not so involved, no.”

There has been one unexpected benefit: Communities and parents began to organize around education. “It made us talk to one another about funding, about why things weren’t happening the way the district was saying. Like, they tell us more kids are graduating, but we’re still seeing kids hanging out on the corner. It made us take a hard look at education in general.”

TAKING A HARD LOOK at Renaissance 2010 is what we set out to do with this issue of *Catalyst In Depth*. Other assessments, including a 2009 report by the Consortium on Chicago School Research that found most displaced students ended up at another failing school, have not been encouraging. Neither is ours.

In this issue, Deputy Editor Sarah Karp gives another parent’s-eye view, from two

Far South Side mothers who are hard-pressed to find decent schools for their children. That’s because 11 of 25 neighborhoods most in need of better schools have yet to get them under Renaissance—and top officials acknowledge that politics plays a role in where schools end up.

Karp’s analysis of charter financial documents found that many are struggling to stay afloat. And her first-ever analysis of charter teacher lists found concrete evidence of a trend that has been only anecdotal until now: high teacher turnover.

So what to make of all this? For one, the time is ripe for an independent authorizer to eliminate politics from decisions on which operators get charters and where they locate. Charter schools should also be required, without exception, to comply with the state’s Freedom of Information Act. Karp went back-and-forth for weeks to get budget documents and teacher lists from some charters, although such information is readily available for regular public schools. Charters can’t make the case that they deserve more public money if they aren’t forthcoming about how they’re spending what they already get and how dependent they may be on the largesse of foundations and wealthy individuals.

Charters also need to be upfront about the training, experience, salary levels and other characteristics of their teaching force. Public school teachers across the country are facing seismic shifts in how they are evaluated and compensated. Charter teachers shouldn’t be left out.

Charters and turnarounds have taken the national center stage under President Obama’s Race to the Top program. Some charters are top-notch, and a forthcoming Consortium report will tell us more about turnarounds. But these schools cannot be expected to transform an entire city’s, or nation’s, educational landscape.

Renaissance was supposed to create equity by opening new, better schools in needy neighborhoods.

But real equity won’t be achieved by giving parents a confusing array of “options” to sift through until they find a good “choice” of school several bus rides away.

Real equity will happen when leaders provide the leadership and resources to improve the schools down the street. ■

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Students who attend middle and high school at the United Neighborhood Organization's Archer Heights campus watch as 180 immigrants are sworn in as citizens. Teachers say it is a good lesson in civics. [Photo by Elizabeth Rodriguez/courtesy of UNO]

Searching for equity

The Renaissance 2010 strategy—close low-performing schools, open new, better ones—has taken the center stage nationally under Race to the Top. But results here in Chicago are decidedly mixed. Almost half of the neighborhoods most in need of better schools have gotten none. One of those is the Roseland-Pullman area, where two moms are fighting to get the best education for their kids. **COVER STORY: PAGE 4**

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Charter schools are operating with deficits and depend on fundraising from corporations, foundations and wealthy individuals. Both experts and advocates worry about their financial viability.

13 Illinois charters lack transparency

Reporters and researchers had to fight for information about the operations of charter schools.

14 A revolving door

In the first-ever analysis of Chicago charter school teacher turnover, *Catalyst* finds that, on average, charters had to replace half their teachers between 2008 and 2010.

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www.catalyst-chicago.org.

- Do charter schools “counsel” students out?
- School-by-school data on charter budgets and teacher turnover

ON THE COVER:

Photo illustration by Joe Gallo

Searching for equity

Children in some of the neediest neighborhoods are still waiting for quality schools and a cut of the millions of private dollars being spent on them. By Sarah Karp





Parent Sharisa Lee works hard to get other parents involved at Smith Elementary in Pullman. Here, she marches her three boys through the hallway. From right are Anthony Vaval, 5; older brother Lynn Lee, 8; and the youngest, Antonio Vaval, 4. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

Mayor Richard M. Daley has vowed to continue with his Renaissance 2010 strategy. Yet six years after it was launched, nearly 3 out of 4 Chicago schoolchildren still attend low-performing schools. Top officials acknowledge that new schools are not the main spark for systemwide improvement.

In the short time Sharisa Lee's children have been enrolled at Wendell Smith Elementary School in Pullman, she's seen the hallways become sparse and classrooms left with empty chairs and desks.

Some families moved to new apartments outside Smith's attendance area. Some students were sent to live with relatives in other neighborhoods deemed safer than crime-plagued Pullman and adjacent Roseland, nicknamed the "Wild Hundreds" (a reference to the east-west streets numbered in the 100s). A few students now travel daily to magnets and other schools, their parents eager to see if they could do better than the steel-frame, blue-and-yellow school at East 103rd Street and South Cottage Grove Avenue.

Lee has thought about joining the exodus. But, reluctant to give up on her neighborhood schools, she didn't.

In Roseland, another mother, Charise Agnew, keeps her children in the neighborhood school because of proximity. Agnew works as a security officer at Horseshoe Casino in Indiana, and leaves in the wee hours of the morning to make it to her job on time. She is deathly afraid of having her two boys travel to school alone on buses and trains.

"I just worry," says Agnew.

Lee's and Agnew's stories illustrate some of the challenges raised by Renaissance 2010, which promised to create new school choices and options in communities with low-performing schools.

Mayor Richard M. Daley and then-CEO Arne Duncan stressed that goal when they announced Renaissance in a packed hotel conference room in June 2004. The launch came on the heels of a 2003 report from the Civic Committee that argued for a market approach to education: Force neighborhood schools to improve through competition from more charters.

But six years later, the initiative has not sparked widespread improvement or equity. Eleven of the 25 neighborhoods identified as most in need of better-performing schools have gotten none. (The 25 neighborhoods were identified in a report from the Illinois Facilities Fund, which provides assistance to non-profits, including charters.)

Charter schools, the primary strategy under Renaissance, have pulled in millions of private dollars. In 2007—the most recent year for which

complete financial data are available—charter schools brought in \$21 million from foundations, corporations and wealthy individuals, according to a *Catalyst* analysis of financial documents. CPS data show the 500 traditional neighborhood schools brought in just \$5.4 million.

In Roseland and Pullman, where no charters have opened, the 20 neighborhood schools have raised just \$100,000 over the past three years, in small grants of less than \$2,000 each.

Charter school advocates maintain that the movement has meant more equity for poor children, rather than less. Robin Lake, associate director for the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, says that charter schools want to be in low-income neighborhoods with concentrations of children of color.

Even if it is not across the board, it is these

children who are benefiting from the performing charter schools that are bringing in extra money, she says.

"I am not too worried about the distribution of resources, though it is something we should keep an eye on," Lake says. Lake adds that public school parents in wealthy areas have the ability to contribute money to supplement their children's education.

But it is this unevenness that troubles Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, who was once a proponent of charter schools and now is convinced that as a large-scale method of school improvement, they are a bad idea. Quality public education is not something that should be doled out to some and not others.

"It is an obligation," she says.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has heralded his initiatives in Chicago as the groundwork for his national agenda, Ravitch points out. Yet the evidence in Chicago is that thousands of children and entire communities did not benefit. In fact, as the choice movement has grown, neighborhood public schools have been decimated, she says.

WHY HAVE SOME COMMUNITIES BENEFITED more than others from Renaissance? "There is no easy answer," says Jaime Guzman, who recently left his post as director of the CPS Office of New Schools to work for former School Board President Gery Chico, who now heads the board of City Colleges.

The district has no formal process to ensure potential school operators go to the neediest neighborhoods. The new schools office issues requests for proposals, notes preferred neighborhoods—and then waits.

Lake says the fact that CPS issues requests for proposals, which note communities and types of schools, makes the district proactive.

Some operators don't consider certain neighborhoods because the population is declining and the area is isolated from public transportation, Guzman points out. Charters have citywide lotteries for enrollment and get a per pupil stipend for each student, so they have a financial incentive to fill their seats.

Roseland and Pullman are tough draws on both counts. Despite a decade-long fight to extend the Red Line, the el train still ends outside the northern edge of the communities, at 95th

WHY THIS MATTERS

Renaissance 2010, launched under Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's tenure in Chicago, foreshadowed the federal Race to the Top emphasis on charters. Yet a *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of charter financial documents, staff lists and test scores raises questions about the strategy's impact on equity and school performance.

- CPS does not require prospective operators to open schools in the neediest neighborhoods. Eleven of the 25 highest-need communities have gotten no new charter, performance or contract schools, cutting them out of the money flowing into these new schools.
- Charters bring in significant private donations, raising five times the private cash that traditional schools received in 2007. But half of charters still had deficits in recent years, putting them in danger of potentially shutting down.
- On average, charters lost half of their teachers over the past two years, a turnover rate that rivals many low-performing neighborhood schools.
- Only 16 of 92 new schools have reached the state average on test scores. Of those 16, just eight are charters. The rest are new magnet schools or new satellites of existing magnet and selective schools.

New schools: Drivers of change?

Not really. Over the past six years, the number of students in higher-performing schools—those in which the majority of students meet state averages on the ISAT—rose 22 percent. But Renaissance 2010, Mayor Richard M. Daley’s grand 2004 plan to close low-performing schools and replace them with better ones (mostly charters), has not been the main spark. Charters, on average, are performing slightly better on test scores than neighborhood schools in their same community. But of the 56 schools whose scores have risen above state averages since 2004, fewer than a third are new schools. Test score gains in existing neighborhood schools on the North Side did much more to drive scores up.

SNAPSHOT OF TOP SCHOOLS

Black and Latino students make up 86 percent of students in CPS, but only 63 percent of those attending better schools.

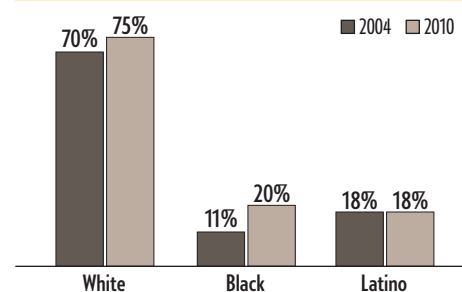
RACIAL BREAKDOWN OF PERFORMING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

	White	Black	Latino	Other
2004 (62,874 seats)	30%	26%	35%	9%
2010 (76,799 seats)	27%	33%	30%	10%

LATINOS LEFT BEHIND

The percent of all Latino students attending good schools has not increased under Renaissance. Population shifts are part of the story. The Latino population has increased by 6 percent districtwide and the African-American population has dropped by 15 percent.

STUDENTS ATTENDING PERFORMING ELEMENTARIES, BY RACE



GRADUATE SUCCESS

Charter high schools graduate more of their students. Official data is not available yet, but many also boast high college-going rates.

HIGH SCHOOL PERFORMANCE	Graduation rate	Meet state standards
Charter high schools	73%	29%
Citywide average	54%	29%

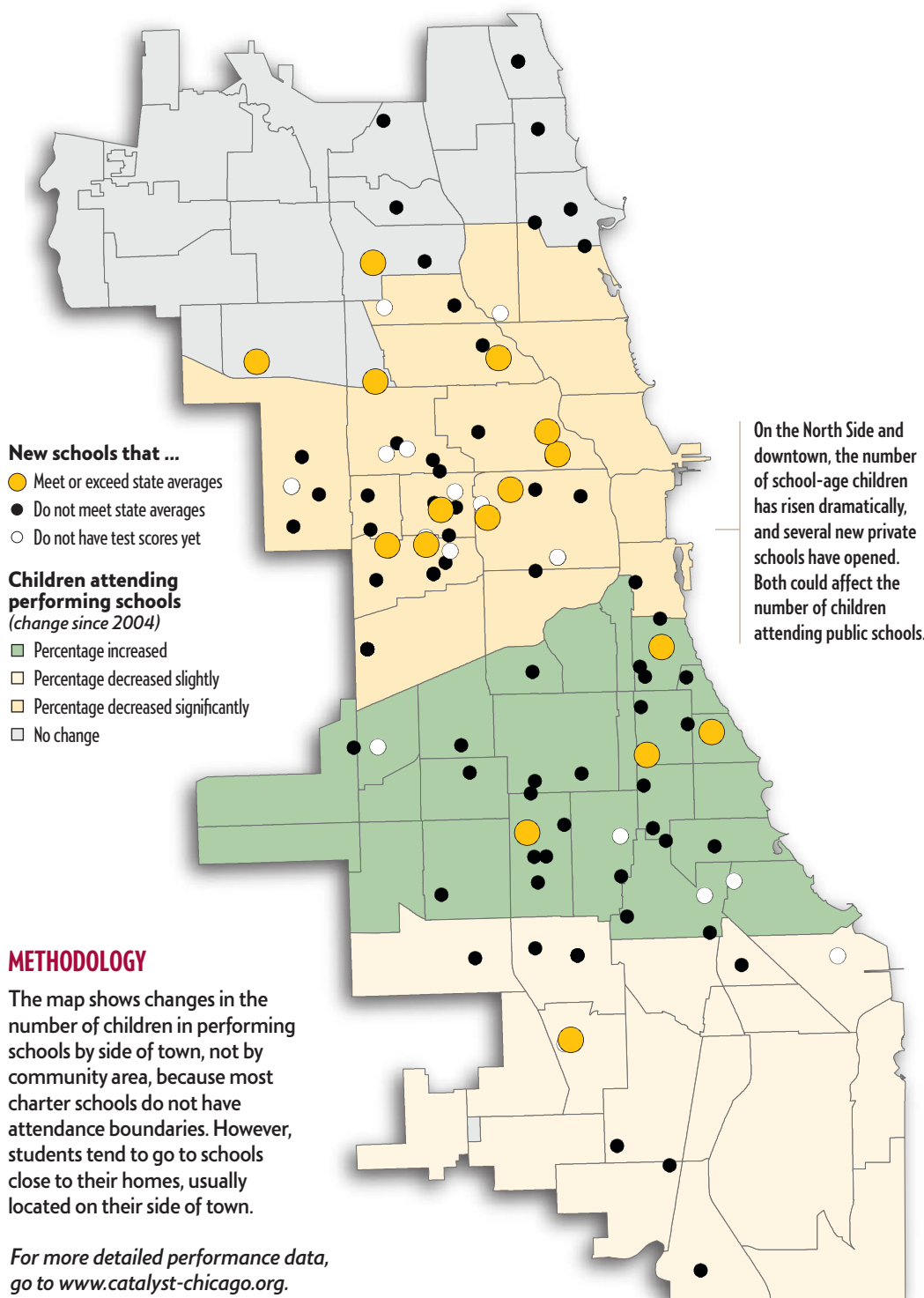
SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

The characteristics of students at new schools created under Renaissance 2010—the majority of which are charter schools—are not dramatically different from those at other Chicago Public Schools.

DEMOGRAPHICS	Bilingual	Special ed	Free/Reduced Lunch
Illinois	8%	15%	43%
CPS total	13%	12%	87%
New schools	8%	11%	85%

Note: For ISAT, the 2009 state average is 79.6 percent meeting or exceeding standards; in 2004, it was 66 percent. CPS has released its 2010 ISAT scores, but the state has yet to release its data. High school data are for the nine charter high schools that have been open long enough to measure graduation rates.

Source: Catalyst analysis of Illinois State Report Card, Chicago Public Schools and U.S. Census data.



New schools that ...

- Meet or exceed state averages
- Do not meet state averages
- Do not have test scores yet

Children attending performing schools (change since 2004)

- Percentage increased
- Percentage decreased slightly
- Percentage decreased significantly
- No change

On the North Side and downtown, the number of school-age children has risen dramatically, and several new private schools have opened. Both could affect the number of children attending public schools.

METHODOLOGY

The map shows changes in the number of children in performing schools by side of town, not by community area, because most charter schools do not have attendance boundaries. However, students tend to go to schools close to their homes, usually located on their side of town.

For more detailed performance data, go to www.catalyst-chicago.org.

Street. The number of school-aged children in the area fell by 22 percent over the past decade, according to the U.S. Census and CPS estimates.

"I saw the transition," says Clareth Morrell, a school clerk at Lavizzo Elementary. She notes that the community is not only aging, but hard-hit economically.

Need is not always the decisive factor in where new schools open.

Greg Richmond, the former head of new schools for CPS and now president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, acknowledges that politics plays a role. "It happens everywhere," he says. "Some places are better at managing it than others."

Many observers believe charters should be approved by independent authorizers, disconnected from local districts and school boards. In Chicago, where CPS controls charter approvals and Daley controls CPS, politics are ever-present. Communities that need new schools are often left to flex their own muscles.

Roseland has so many challenges—violence, transportation problems, joblessness, lack of grocery stores and other retailers—that it can be hard for activists to focus on a single issue and build grassroots support to confront the problem, says Darryl Gibson, a Roseland activist who is working at Dunne Elementary School and Fenger High School.

"The activists have been fractured," he says.

People rallied around the schools this past fall

after the beating death of Fenger student Derrion Albert. But even so, there's little agreement about how to improve schools and whether charters are the way to go, Gibson says.

Yet in a struggling community, a new school, of any variety, can represent hope and spark new energy.

"I embrace anything new," says Deloris Lucas, who lives around the corner from a Chicago International Charter School that opened last year in nearby Riverdale. She says that when Carver Middle School shut down five years ago, it cast a shadow over the community, another sign of its depressed state.

"I have a love for that building," Lucas says. "Charter or not, doesn't matter. It is a new school, a new curriculum. It is a shot in the arm."

THIS SPRING, CHARISE AGNEW was forced to confront the lack of school options in Roseland as she made an agonizing decision about where to send her older son, Dorian Metzler, to high school.

Dorian was one of the top 8th-graders at Lavizzo, one of the lowest-performing schools in the city. In 2010, only about 44 percent of students met or exceeded state standards on the ISAT.

Agnew had her heart set on Dorian attending Gwendolyn Brooks College Prep, a selective enrollment school just to the west of Lavizzo. She had him apply, and then she waited. But Agnew didn't know that Dorian needed to take an entrance exam. Few students at Lavizzo score above

the 70th percentile on the ISAT, the cutoff to take the selective enrollment test. So there was no buzz in the hallway. A teacher might have asked about it, but the original 8th-grade teacher was fired and the class had a substitute for two months.

The end result is that no one tapped Dorian or Agnew on the shoulder to tell them about the entrance test. "I just had no idea," Agnew says.

Brooks is the only higher-scoring high school in the area. Agnew's first reaction was to take Dorian's transcript up to Brooks and try to talk to the principal. But selective enrollment school principals can be inundated with pleas from parents to offer their child a slot. Schools set up shields, and Agnew didn't make it past the foyer.

Agnew started to bite her nails and worry. She called the Office of Academic Enhancement and asked for advice. They gave her some phone numbers of charter schools.

Agnew was not happy with that idea. She has nothing against charters; in fact, when she lived in Indiana for a brief time, her sons attended a charter school near the Dunes. The kids got out into nature a lot, which Agnew liked. But no charter high schools are particularly close by, and Agnew didn't know anything about the academics or climate at the schools.

Late in the game, Dorian was presented with another option. To increase the number of black and Latino students in the elite downtown and North Side selective schools, the district set aside 25 additional seats at each of them for high-performing students from the worst elementary schools. Dorian got into Walter Payton College Prep, the second highest-scoring school in the city, on the Near North Side.

On the early spring day that Dorian received the acceptance letter, Agnew brought it to Lavizzo. Dorian says he doesn't know what to think about going to Payton, but he had asked his mother to let his teacher make a copy of the letter to post on a hallway bulletin board that shows which schools the graduating 8th-graders will attend. By April, only three letters were on the board—one from Chicago Vocational High School, one from Carver Military Academy and the third from the DuSable campus of Betty Shabazz Charter High School.

All the other 36 8th-graders are planning to go to Corliss, the neighborhood high school. Corliss' truancy rate is 35 percent, fewer than half the students who start as freshmen graduate and only 10 percent of juniors passed the Prairie State achievement exam.

After Dorian and his mother receive the acceptance letter, Agnew walks into Lavizzo's office with it in hand. Principal Tracey Stelly meets her with an immediate smile. "Congratulations, Mom," she says.

But Agnew sighs. Payton is two buses and a train ride away. Dorian would have to travel more



Clareth Morrell, a clerk at Lavizzo Elementary, takes a walk around Roseland, where she has lived all her life. Joblessness and foreclosures have hit hard in the community and left many homes abandoned. [Photo by Cristina Rutter]



Holding an acceptance letter from one of Chicago's best selective high schools, Charise Agnew talks to her son Dorian about which school he will attend. She's proud that he was accepted at Walter Payton College Prep, but worries about his safety on the long commute to school and back. [Photo by Cristina Rutter]

than an hour to get there. In the winter, he would most likely leave and come back in the dark.

Agnew still wants him to be able to walk quickly up to Brooks, on a leafy campus that seems like a different, better world to Agnew.

She presses Stelly to send a letter to the Brooks principal, making the case that Dorian should get a seat. "Did you mail it?"

SHARISA LEE'S DECISION to keep her children at Smith Elementary, across the park from her apartment, is a matter of philosophical choice.

Lee is just 25, but has the aura of someone older and highly adept at navigating her way through the world. She has a broad face and an alto voice, and she revels in the fact that she does her homework. She presents her opinions about education and the neighborhood with confidence.

Lee's demeanor gives the impression that she could easily find another, better school for her three boys, and get them to the bus and to school on time. But she sees herself as a budding activist and thinks that to abandon the school would be

paramount to giving up on the community.

"I don't believe in running away from problems," Lee says.

Still, the idea of a high-quality neighborhood school sometimes seems like a fantasy to Lee. She knows enough to realize that Smith Elementary, where just about half of students met or exceeded state averages on the ISAT in 2010, is a disappointment. The clearest evidence is the library. On each shelf, a few books lean against each other, gathering dust. Worn, used chairs and tables are scattered about. There are no computers and no librarian—and so, no students.

"To tell you the truth, I think our children are way back" in terms of their educational opportunity, Lee says.

Sitting in the library one day, as her preschool-aged son pages through a dusty book, Lee says test scores and the lack of materials are not Smith's biggest problem. Most frustrating for her is the lack of parent involvement, essential for a high-performing school. Lee attended just two parent committee meetings before she was voted in as

chairwoman. The committee, required under the No Child Left Behind Act, is the only functioning parent group at the school. The local school council has had problems attracting members.

Among other tasks, the committee works with the principal on the school improvement plan and decides how to spend the \$6,000 set aside for parent involvement activities. To drum up interest, Lee has gone door-to-door and won promises from people that they will attend. When they don't, she calls them on their cell phones to urge them to show up—with mixed success.

"Oh, girl," Lee says, wearily. "I have tried everything."

Lee says to some degree, the infusion of new schools through Renaissance has created a scenario that many in the community feared. Lee says Smith is now largely a school for children whose parents don't have the wherewithal to get them somewhere, anywhere else.

"A lot of students are children of really young mothers and they don't know how," Lee says. "This is a high-risk area. We had the children of



Sharisa Lee's three sons (from left) Antonio, Lynn and Anthony, watch rain fall on the courtyard of Smith Elementary in Pullman. Lee sees herself as a budding activist and does not want to give up on the struggling school. [Photo by Jason Reblando]

the crack addicts, and now it's the children of the children of the crack addicts."

SMITH ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL JOHNNY BANKS and Lavizzo Principal Tracey Stelly are well aware of their precarious position. Being at struggling schools in an area with a declining student population puts them at high risk of closure or turnaround. Either option would mean the loss of their job.

Banks, a thin, soft-spoken man with graying hair, is not sold on the idea that a dramatic change through turnaround will make a difference.

What he wants most is counseling for students, who, he says, "come to us with a lot of needs that are difficult to meet. They need someone to talk to. They are screaming inside." The district had a small-scale plan to bring in more social and emotional curricula for schools, but the lack of resources has hindered that effort.

In his five years at Smith, Banks says he has sought outside resources, applying for at least one grant a year. Some he has received, others not.

The general public might think that wealthy people and foundations line up to help school-

children in the most destitute neighborhoods, but Banks says that hasn't been his experience. "If you know where they are, let me know," he says.

For her part, Stelly is unique among traditional neighborhood school principals: She isn't afraid of competition from charters or turnarounds. She would have loved to walk into Lavizzo with a clean slate and a pot of extra cash, which turnarounds receive.

She can quickly tick off a wish list for Lavizzo—at the top are reading and math specialists to help teachers with instruction—and she is not inclined to sit around and wait for help. "In a minute, I will get on the phone and beg," Stelly says.

This is her first year at Lavizzo, and she got Xerox to donate \$4,000. She also secured a \$163,000 grant to turn Lavizzo into a community school.

But Stelly is also quick to note that it is not easy to go out and raise money. Principals have a seemingly unending list of tasks, and most of her time so far has been spent trying to get rid of poorly performing teachers and staff. Two have gone on medical leave, in an apparent move to sidestep the dismissal process.

Stelly was then left in an even worse position:

She can't hire a permanent teacher and has had to hire long-time substitutes for the classes.

"That is the most frustrating part," she says.

Stelly has also had another major task: Since the school had been sanctioned by the state for failing to include special education students in regular classes, Stelly decided she had to go through and work with caseworkers on each student's individual education plan.

CPS OFFICIALS ACKNOWLEDGE that new schools can only do so much: They can give areas a boost, Guzman says, but it is wrong to look to them to spur general, systemwide improvement. After all, nearly 300,000 students in Chicago still attend low-performing elementary schools and high schools. About 6,000 of them live in Roseland and Pullman.

Chief Administrative Officer Robert Runcie agrees. Going forward, he says, the discussion should move away from charter schools versus neighborhood schools and focus more on school quality, no matter the structure. He points out that the evidence on charter schools is mixed.

Continued on page 15

Budget landmines

A Catalyst analysis finds that many charters operate with deficits and depend heavily on private money to stay afloat

By Sarah Karp

Despite the cloudy sky, light streams into the imposing, two-story plate-glass windows of the school gym. Seated in several rows of chairs are immigrants, some in jeans and others in their best outfits, clutching papers and balled-up tissues.

Behind them on bleachers are students, middle school and high school-aged, neatly dressed in blue uniforms with white shirts. Their teachers hover nearby.

The occasion is a swearing-in ceremony for new citizens at the Archer Heights charter school run by the United Neighborhood Organization. It's emblematic of what UNO once was—a grassroots group focused on organizing in the Latino community, leadership training and preparing immigrants to become citizens—and what is has become under Renaissance 2010—one of the city's largest charter school operators.

But UNO's story also illustrates the financial landmine that awaits many charters: finding sufficient money to stay afloat.

Underscoring the problem is a recently released Ball State University study, which found that Chicago's charter schools depend on private funding far more than charters in other cities. (The study included 38 cities, New York and Miami among them.) Next in line was Boston.

When Chicago first began opening charter schools, there was concern about their potential dependence on private money, says Greg Richmond, who led the district's new schools effort and is now president of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Charters can look to foundations and

corporations to get them off the ground, Richmond says. But over the long term, they should be self-sustaining.

Katheryn Hayes, spokeswoman for the Renaissance Schools Fund, the private fundraising arm of the Renaissance 2010 initiative, agrees. But she notes that, so far, the business community's interest in supporting charters as they start up hasn't waned.

"Honestly, we have seen support grow for our movement," she says. "It has now become a national movement." Fueled by the business community's desire for better outcomes, however, the Fund is switching tactics: Instead of providing start-up grants to every charter, the group plans to focus on helping the highest-performing networks expand, as well as helping promising emerging operators.

AT UNO, THE BIGGEST CHUNK of a nearly \$40 million budget is a \$28 million contract with CPS to run eight charter schools serving almost 4,000 students. (UNO's leaders have plans for that number to double in the coming years, and recently secured a state grant to help them build eight additional schools.)

But that hefty contract is not enough to cover costs. According to a *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of projected budgets filed with the district and financial disclosure forms filed with the IRS and the Illinois Attorney General's Office, UNO would have had to raise \$8 million in private money to end the 2008-2009 school year in the black. Yet the group has never raised nearly that much in the past, and has had substantial deficits for the last few years.

UNO isn't the only operator walking this financial tightrope.

FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

Charters rely on outside funds, but have overestimated how much they can raise from the private sector. Researchers recently called for more transparency to allow comparison of spending at high- and low-performing charters.

CHARTER REVENUE, SPENDING

Projected private money, 2007	\$26m
Actual private money raised, 2007	\$21m
Projected private money, 2009	\$36m
Estimated government revenue, 2009	\$214m
Budget from government funds	85%
Percent of budget spent on salaries	63%
Percent of budget spent on facilities	13%
Percent spent on administration	10%

Note: Neither Illinois nor CPS require charter schools to submit budgets in a uniform format, making comparisons difficult. Salaries include all campus-level salaries.

Source: Catalyst analysis of charter school budgets provided by CPS.

Catalyst's analysis found that half of charters have run deficits in recent years. Two-thirds of charters could not cover core expenses without private money. A third of charters look to foundations, corporations and rich individuals to fill more than 20 percent of their budgets.

Yet CPS officials and national experts say that to be considered financially sound, charter schools should be able to cover general operating costs solely with public money. If they raise private cash, it should be just for extras.

Both charter advocates and opponents agree that the situation is troublesome and raises questions about the long-term viability of these schools.

Advocates say inequitable funding is the root of the problem. Charter schools are forced to rely on private funding because they receive

less public money than traditional schools, says Larry Maloney of Aspire Consulting Company in Washington D.C., one of the authors of the Ball State study.

"The question is, are we intentionally setting up charter schools to fail?" Maloney asks. Chicago's charters face potential cuts in public money this year because of the district's budget shortfall.

Others say deficits are to be expected when schools have an extra layer of bureaucracy. In addition to principals and assistant principals, charter schools often have executive directors and financial officers on staff—all of which cost extra money.

"I think the charter school system was always built on a house of cards, and once the economy took a dive, it would crumble," says Jackson Potter, a staunch opponent and co-chair of CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators), a faction of the Chicago Teachers Union whose leader, Karen Lewis, is the new union president.

Charters "have to be held accountable," Potter says. "Parents need to know if their child's school is about to implode."

ROBERT RUNCIE, chief administrative officer for CPS, says the district needs to take a "serious look" at the fiscal health of charters. Economies of scale are part of the problem, and Runcie tries to negotiate deals so that charters can purchase services under CPS contracts, although not all charters take advantage of the opportunity.

CPS is intent on getting a better handle on charter finances because budget problems can endanger the quality of education or force a shutdown, says Jennifer Dai, direc-



A flag draped in front of two-story windows provides a dramatic backdrop for a citizenship ceremony at a new United Neighborhood Organization Charter School campus in Archer Heights. The school opened last year in a renovated former bakery. [Photo by Elizabeth Rodriguez/courtesy of UNO]

tor of evaluation for the Office of New Schools.

"We just want to make sure they are sustainable," Dai says.

In the past, the office considered just three factors to measure the fiscal health of charters: compliance with federal mandates, having a balanced budget, and use of sound financial practices. Starting next year, Dai says, the office plans to look at 12 to 15 measures, including cash flow and whether fiscal projections are realistic.

Some charter school operators, however, are not happy about the new criteria, says Andrew Broy, the new president of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools.

"The district wants a one-size-fits-all approach and we think that we need to be more nuanced in how charters are approached," Broy says. "We want to be judged on outcomes, not process."

Also in question is whether the

district will move to close charters that do not meet these tougher criteria. (CPS has closed just a handful of charters for a mix of academic and fiscal problems.)

State Sen. Iris Martinez, a Northwest Side Democrat, says lawmakers and the public depend on CPS to make good decisions about closing struggling charters, including those with financial problems.

"You would hope that CPS officials would be working in an aggressive fashion and not let charters continue in a deficit, adding salt to a wound," Martinez says. Operators need to adjust their budgets if they can't raise enough money, she adds. And while she supports charters, and UNO, Martinez says CPS needs to keep an eye on the group if it is not living within its means.

Some authorizers have moved aggressively against charters with fiscal problems and mismanagement, Broy says. But those cases usually

involve independent authorizers. In Chicago, the district is the authorizer and therefore every decision is enmeshed in politics, he adds.

INCS is leading an effort to have an independent authorizer established in Illinois, so that charter schools turned down by the district can appeal the denial. Broy says a bill should be in front of the legislature this year.

In the end, Broy says, funding parity with traditional schools is the solution. To achieve that end, he adds, the charter school community must do a better job of convincing school officials and the public that they can do what traditional public schools cannot, such as provide a longer school day and year.

UNO'S CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER Juan Rangel, who earns almost \$250,000 annually, says charter schools should be measured solely on their educational outcomes.

"Ultimately the question is about results," Rangel says. "Are we getting a big enough bang for the public's buck? We should be held accountable for whether we are turning over a great product, and that is educating students."

The proof is in the test scores, Rangel says. In four of the five community areas where UNO elementary schools are located, they are outperforming the nearby traditional schools, according to a *Catalyst* analysis of 2009 ISAT scores. However, only one of UNO's eight campuses is performing better than state averages. UNO's high school did not have a class of juniors in 2009, the most recent year for which Prairie State exam scores are available.

UNO's charters also relieve some of the district's overcrowding burden. If these charters go belly-up, CPS would have to scramble to find space for their students. UNO just received \$5 million of a \$98 mil-

lion state grant to help with the new school construction.

Rangel says that if it weren't for the cost of facilities—which can be steep for charters that must pay rent or a mortgage—UNO would be able to live within its means. He says there are few buildings in the Latino community that are built to function as schools, and rehabbing a building is expensive.

“There is nothing available in the Hispanic community,” he says.

CHARTERS' NEED TO RAISE big money is evident from a quick glance at a well-known website where nonprofits advertise job openings. On any given day, ads abound from charter schools seeking development officers, grant writers and fundraisers. UNO, along with Noble Street and Perspectives, each had fundraising jobs advertised on the site in June.

“We are always looking to try to replace the next big wad of money,” says Rhonda Hopps, an MBA from Stanford University who was hired in April by Perspectives to be its first CEO and quickly found that her major task was to raise money to make ends meet. The projected budget that Perspectives submitted to CPS shows the school needs to fill 10 percent of its budget with outside funds, a goal Hopps says is doable. With higher graduation and college-going rates, Hopps says she is selling something tangible to potential funders.

But other operators question the wisdom of relying heavily on private funds. Leaders of Chicago International Charter Schools, the city's largest operator, estimate receiving about 3 percent of funding from non-government sources—mostly student fees and charges for after-school programs.

Beth Purvis, the executive director for Chicago International, says her board of directors believes that “public education should occur with public money.”

“Our No. 1 goal is to provide a better education with the same amount of money,” she says. “You can't say we are getting better outcomes with the same kids and the same money, if in fact, you are not.”

Illinois charters lack transparency

In Massachusetts, the public can easily find financial information for charters, including how much money they bring in, where that money comes from—including private sources—and how much the schools spend on teacher salaries and other expenses.

In Illinois, it is nearly impossible to get a good read on similar financial information from charters. Doing so, however, could help direct policy, serve as a guide for future charter schools and give authorizers specific information about which charter schools are in financial trouble.

According to Illinois' new charter school law, charters are only required to submit an audit and a copy of their tax forms to the state. Audits are done by independent companies. Some are detailed, others not.

While CPS, the state and the federal government provide the biggest chunk of the operating budget for charters, some charters maintain they shouldn't be subject to the same reporting requirements as other public schools. In 2009, more than \$200 million in public funds were provided to Chicago's 71 charter schools.

State Sen. Heather Steans (D-Chicago) notes that last year, Illinois lawmakers approved new legislation meant to increase accountability by forcing charter schools to report data by campus. But she concedes that none of the newly required information will detail expenditures and revenues.

A task force recently recommended that lawmakers pass legislation that would create an independent charter school authorizer. Steans says she could see including language in that legislation to raise the financial accounting required from charter schools. “There is probably more we could be doing on it,” she says.

For its May study on charter school funding, Ball State University contracted with Meagan Batdorff, the founder and lead consultant of Progressive EdGroup, to collect data on funding from 25 states. Illinois' charter schools were among the hardest to get information on, Batdorff says.

Some of the states post detailed information online. But in Illinois, Batdorff had to submit a Freedom of Information Act request to the state and the district. In response, she received only audits, which are not standardized and hard to pull detailed information from.

On audits, it is often difficult to discern the source of revenues or specifics on expenses, Batdorff says. As a result, Illinois' information is murky. According to the study, some \$9,000 per student in charter schools is from non-public but indeterminate sources. Much of that is likely from private fundraising, but Batdorff could not tell specifics.

Without specific financial information, such as textbook spending or average teacher pay, other questions about charter schools can't be answered, Batdorff says.

“There is no way to tell how school funding is impacting

actual performance or how teacher pay impacts performance,” she says.

Five months ago, *Catalyst* ran into roadblocks as we sought information that is readily available for traditional public schools, such as revenue, expenditures and the names and positions of employees.

Catalyst submitted FOIA requests to each of Chicago's charters. Twenty charter operators provided the requested information, in hard copy or electronically. Those that responded included larger networks—Noble Street Charter and the University of Chicago among them—and small, individual schools such as Namaste.

Even so, transparency was uneven among the 20 operators. Several schools declined to release teacher names, arguing that the names are private. Yet, the names of all public employees are regularly published in budgets released by government agencies.

Another 13 operators either denied the FOIA request or failed to respond after numerous attempts to reach them. Among the five that denied the request were United Neighborhood Organization's charter school network and three of the four education management organizations that run the campuses of Chicago International, the city's largest operator.

In UNO's denial, Homero Tristan from TGC Partners, a downtown law firm, argued that UNO is not a public body. Civitas, whose teachers unionized last year, made the same argument.

Catalyst appealed the denial to the Illinois Attorney General's Office, which has not yet issued a formal ruling but suggested that *Catalyst* make its request to CPS. As the government agency that contracts with charters, the district is required to provide the information. Armed with language from the attorney general, *Catalyst* went back to CPS, which in June provided budget information and employee lists.

Andy Shaw, executive director of the watchdog Better Government Association, says charter schools are clearly subject to the FOIA. He points out that they receive “our” tax dollars so they are “our” business.

“Academic outcomes are only one measure of their success, and watchdogs like *Catalyst* or the Better Government Association are entitled to review and assess other measures that depend on disclosure and transparency to gather the necessary data,” Shaw says.

However, some of the data was difficult to analyze because there is no standard form for reporting, and therefore no uniformity. (Teacher service records compiled by the Illinois State Board of Education for all public school teachers include standardized, detailed information on, among other data, salaries, years of experience, grades taught and degrees held.)

Leaning on outside sources might work in the short term, while charters are still the toast of the philanthropic community. But Purvis is not so sure that strategy will work long-term.

“We don't want to just be in a community for 15 to 20 years,” she

says. “We want to be in a community for 50 to 100 years. It is a philosophical difference.”

In the end, perhaps charter school leaders are bolstering what CPS officials have been saying for years: The city's schools are grossly under-funded, and it is nearly im-

possible to provide a decent education on the money provided.

“The sad fact is that the per-pupil amount that we have is not enough to take care of all the needs of our students,” says Runcie. “Even if we had the same amount as Naperville, our children have more needs.” ■



The two charter schools at Perspectives Calumet in Auburn-Gresham celebrate their first graduating class. The campus experienced high teacher turnover the past two years, but their principals say things are beginning to stabilize. Newly opened charter schools experience more teacher turnover than those already established. [Photo by Marc Monaghan]

A revolving door

***Catalyst's* analysis of employee lists for charter schools confirms what some charter observers have long suspected: High teacher turnover is the norm.**

By Sarah Karp

Charter schools had to replace an average of more than half of their teachers between 2008 and 2010, a turnover rate on par with some of the most troubled district-run schools.

Experts say that high teacher turnover is associated with a school in turmoil and that instability often hampers student performance.

Of the 10 charter schools with the highest turnover, only one—LEARN Charter—had the majority of its students score at or above the

state average on the ISAT.

Chicago's charter teacher turnover—from an analysis of charter employee lists obtained by *Catalyst Chicago*—mirrors a nationwide trend.

In a recently published study, researchers from Vanderbilt University found that charter school teacher turnover was almost double that of traditional public schools: 25 percent vs. 14 percent, respectively. (The study used data from National Center for Education Statistics surveys for 2003-04, the most recent available.)

Charter school teachers were also more likely to leave the profession altogether, according to the study from the National Center on School Choice at Vanderbilt.

Many factors could play a role in driving up turnover.

Some charter school operators cite leadership changes. Chandra Sledge, co-director of Young Women's Leadership Charter, says the school lost a big chunk of teachers at the end of 2009 because the principal left.

"That was the most that we've ever had leave at one time. This

year, we didn't have much turnover," Sledge says. (She notes that several of the teachers who left were promoted to managerial positions within Chicago Public Schools.)

Linda Wing, director of schools and community engagement at the University of Chicago, says that the North Kenwood-Oakland Charter School, has had a stable staff over the past 12 years.

But at the University of Chicago's charter high school in Woodlawn, which opened in 2006, turnover has been a concern. Wing says it has been difficult to find the right fac-

ulty to work with urban teenagers.

“There is a small and inadequate pool of teachers who have the cultural competence and know-how to connect with our students,” she says. “It is a very challenging job.”

Charter schools are often demanding, which can cause swift burnout. Like many charter schools, the University of Chicago charter expects teachers to work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., 190 days of the year. By comparison, CPS teachers work five hours and 45 minutes a day, 170 days a year.

“You need a lot of stamina to be up and going from 8 to 5,” Wing says. “We ask a lot of our teachers.”

CHARTER SUPPORTERS ARE QUICK to say that high turnover is not always bad—in fact, sometimes it is good because not everyone is cut out to work in an urban school with high expectations of students and staff.

Jaime Guzman, who recently left his post as director of CPS’ Office of New Schools, says that he does not consider teacher turnover to be bad, as long as the school is producing results.

Also, charter schools can get rid of bad teachers without having to deal with a union, says Andrew Broy, president of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools. Some consider this to be one of the advantages of charters.

(Two Chicago charter schools have unionized in the past year: the Chicago International schools operated by Civitas, where teacher turnover is higher than the average for charters; and Aspira, where turnover has been slightly lower than average.)

“Our charters don’t always get it right,” Broy says. “But in the best-case scenario they can move out low performers and identify high performers.”

The national Vanderbilt study, however, found that charter turnover was more likely to be voluntary and based on dissatisfaction with working conditions, not due to schools ridding themselves of underperforming teachers.

Juan Rangel, CEO of UNO, says that while teachers might leave, senior staff do not move around as much and help provide stability. In addition to directors who meet weekly, UNO also has a cadre of master teachers who coach and mentor new teachers.

Rangel says he values the charter network’s “young, vigorous teachers,” but also likes to see teachers stay around and move up in the ranks, even if those moves create an appearance of staff instability.

Katie Raiche, a teacher at the UNO charter school in Archer Heights, says her experience has been good. Raiche says she always knew she wanted to work in an urban environment, and at UNO, she got that experience without having to deal with some of the problems associated with urban schools.

“Our discipline problems are very low,” Raiche says. “There are no gangs and no violence. Really, sometimes you forget you are working in a Chicago public school.”

Raiche has seen turnover firsthand. This is her third year at an UNO school, and yet she’s one of the veterans. Last year, when she taught at another UNO campus, 75 percent of the teachers were in their

COMPARING TEACHER TURNOVER

Average CPS elementary, 4 yrs	51%
Average CPS high school, 4 yrs	54%
Average charter school, 2 yrs	57%

HIGHEST CHARTER TURNOVER

Elementary school: Passages	94%
High school: Perspectives	70%

Source: *Catalyst* analysis of charter school employee lists for 2008 and 2010; Consortium on Chicago School Research

first year. Research has shown that teachers typically don’t perfect their craft until after their first two years on the job.

To Raiche, though, having brand-new teachers is not necessarily bad. “New teachers are enthusiastic and open to new ideas. They are not stuck in their ways.”

But youth can be a strong predictor of turnover. Teachers in their 20s are still settling down, and changes in life circumstances often lead to their departure. That’s happening with Raiche: At the end of the school year, she left UNO to move with her fiancé to Philadelphia.

CHRISTOPHER MAZZEO, associate director for policy and outreach for the Consortium on Chicago School Research, says that the teacher turnover revealed by *Catalyst*’s analysis “seems high, and that is worth being concerned about.”

Mazzeo co-authored a study, published in 2009, on teacher turnover in CPS. The study found that 51 percent of elementary school teachers and 54 percent of high school teachers leave their schools within four years. If charter schools are reaching similar rates in just two

years, that raises a red flag.

High turnover makes it hard for schools to build continuity over time and for lessons learned in professional development to take hold, Mazzeo says. Charter schools set aside money each year for professional development, ranging from a few thousand to \$50,000, according to a *Catalyst* analysis of charter budget documents. But that money is wasted if teachers quickly leave their jobs.

Teachers in schools with high turnover inevitably blame a bad school environment for driving teachers out, Mazzeo adds. Research has consistently shown that teachers value a good school climate over higher pay.

Natasha Cavitt, a teacher at Noble Street College Prep, makes that case. She has been there for five years and loves it. Before coming to Noble Street, Cavitt taught at another charter high school that she says had significant discipline problems—which made her job more difficult and less enjoyable.

Noble Street, however, stresses the need for discipline and lets students know the expectations. “The structure is clearly defined and they know how far they can go,” Cavitt says. “They perform better.”

Now that Cavitt is a veteran with a track record of teaching, she could try to get a job in a traditional public school and earn more money. But she won’t think of it.

“To other teachers, I know my job is a dream,” Cavitt says. “They tell me that they don’t feel like they can teach because they have to deal with all these other things. I feel bad for them.” ■

RENAISSANCE *Continued from page 10*

Runcie says later this year, the district will hold community meetings to get residents to talk about how to improve regular schools. The meetings will include discussion about closing under-enrolled or under-performing schools, opening new schools and improving existing ones.

“We are trying to take a more holistic approach,” Runcie says.

Ultimately, for parents, the type of the school is not as important as whether they feel their children have a chance at a good education, he says.

That is the bottom line for Charise Agnew and Sharisa Lee.

Agnew wishes that she could keep her son close by. She worries that Dorian—who at 14 is still shorter than her 5 feet, heavy-set and shy—will be an easy target for bullies while waiting at bus stops.

But in the end, Agnew signed Dorian up for Payton. “We will see how this whole thing works out,” she says. “We will try it.”

Lee also is holding her breath as she waits for the coming school year. She is trying to be patient for improvements at Smith. And she remembers

the situation she was in eight years ago, when her oldest son was born. At the time, she was a homeless teen mother. While living in a shelter, she was offered a subsidized apartment in Pullman.

Getting that apartment saved her and is one reason she is so committed to the community.

When Lee thinks about pulling her oldest son out of Smith, she thinks of her neighbors’ children. “I worry about the children left here. What will happen to them?”

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