

Charter Schools: Fad or Future?

BY JULEYKA LANTIGUA-WILLIAMS

FThe NAACP's decision to sue the Education Department to halt the closing of 22 underperforming public schools and to keep 20 charter schools from using public school space is pitting the civil rights group against some parents in New York City. The fight also touches the controversy surrounding charter schools: Are they the best solution for failing public schools?

For its side of the suit in NYC, Benjamin Todd Jealous, NAACP's president and CEO, explained that, "Students are being grossly mistreated, their parents are being deeply disrespected and the entire community stands to suffer" because of how authorities seem to

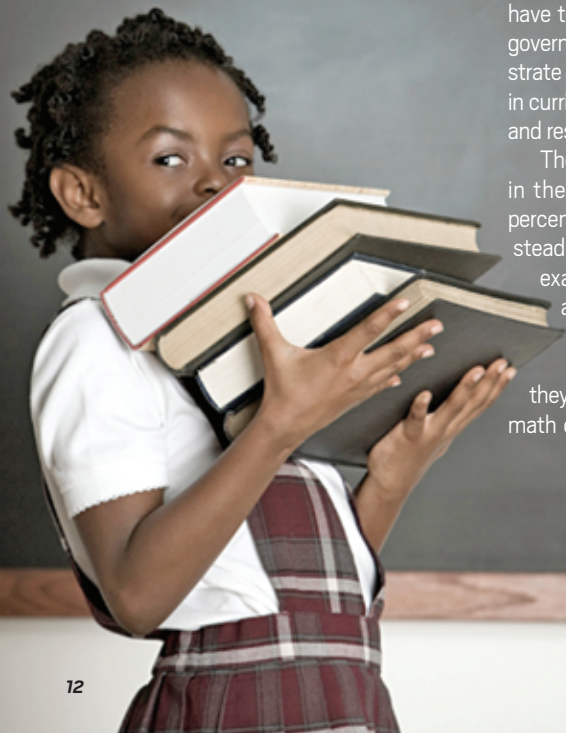
favor opening charter schools instead of helping failing public schools.

But Nichola McNeil, who has two daughters, one in public school and one in a charter school, shares the opinion of many parents who opt to place their children in charter schools. "They have a different attitude, a different karma to them; it's more structured," she explains. "The child gets accustomed to being in a structured environment. If you are in a structured environment, then no matter where you go, you take that discipline with you."

Charter schools are publicly funded institutions that must meet state and federal educational standards. However, they do not have to negotiate the bureaucratic web that governs most public schools. They demonstrate accountability in exchange for flexibility in curriculum planning, pedagogical approach and resource allocation.

There are almost 5,500 charter schools in the country, representing more than 5 percent of all public schools. And they are steadily growing in popularity. In D.C., for example, about 39 percent of students attend charters. In New York City, four percent of students attend charters.

What's more, results show that they "do significantly better in reading and math compared to their counterparts in tra-



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ditional public schools." That may be one of the main reasons the NAACP's involvement has made the issue a point of contention for many Black parents. About 2,500 parents, students and educators gathered outside a state building in Harlem in May to protest the organization's involvement because the lawsuit could lead to the closing of some high-performing charter schools that serve Black children in Harlem.

Lawan Bailey, a NYC kindergarten public school teacher and mother to a fourth-grader enrolled in a charter school, feels conflicted and frustrated.

Bailey supports the NAACP's role in the lawsuit. "It's separate and unequal," she says. "Imagine what would happen if the Department of Education put those same resources into the public school, then the playing field would be leveled," she contends.

But Brooklyn resident Jacqueline Jackson, who decided to enroll her two grandchildren in charter schools, sees the NAACP's involvement as misguided. "The charter schools give people who cannot afford private schools a choice for a quality education," she says.

Charter schools are not blemish-free and are routinely closed for reasons that include poor academic performance, non-compliance with education laws, inadequate enrollment and inflating enrollment or performance data. Earlier this year, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted to close six charter schools accused of cheating to improve student scores on standardized tests.

The debate will continue, but until the same energy is invested into our schools, the real losers are the students.

The Name Game

BY IMAN JEFFERSON

The Internet will enter a new domain next year.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) gave the OK to add more generic top-level domain

name endings, such as .com, .org and .net, a shift that may change the "dot com" landscape.

According to Omar Wasow, co-founder and strategic adviser of BlackPlanet.com, "It will (now) be possible to have domains that are organized around any category, like topics, interests, professions or hobbies. For example, a law firm might have its domain at .law."

Wasow does caution that the new regulation doesn't mean .com will become obsolete. "Top-level domains—like .biz— have never taken off, so there's no guarantee that this policy change will lead to a wave of popular new site names."

ICANN will begin accepting applications for new domains for 90 days beginning Jan. 12, 2012, but not without a price—the application fee is about \$185,000.



Omar Wasow

PETER KRAMER/AFP