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Newark district and charter schools join together for universal enrollment plan

A reference to nuclear warheads may seem out of place at a meeting of Newark educators, but not when you consider what's at stake.

The Newark Public School district and the city's charter schools are considering a plan that would blow up the status quo in what they say is an effort to provide equity to the city's schoolchildren.

School officials are creating what some say is a first-in-the-nation voluntary effort to offer universal enrollment for students citywide to all of Newark's 71 public schools and 21 public charter schools.

Under the plan, there would be one application, one timeline and one central clearing space for information about all city schools. Essentially, it would eliminate the need for parents to go from school to school filling out applications and participating in separate lotteries in the hopes of getting a spot in a particular school.

The collaborative effort is messy — and even risky — proponents say. Ultimately, they say, it's the right thing to do to ensure all 44,000 Newark school children have an equal opportunity to attend a good school.

"It's about locking arms and committing to a movement, to do what no one else has done," Newark Superintendent Cami Anderson said. "The payoff is so much bigger than the risk."

About 40 educators from the district and charter community gathered last week over pizza and salad to discuss the plan, which has been crafted over the last six months with input from district schools and charters, which currently teach about 9,600 students.

The district has set a deadline of tomorrow for the charters to sign a memo of understanding for the fall enrollment.

Seated next to Anderson was state Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf, who offered assurances about the state's willingness to back the effort.

It was Cerf who brought up nuclear weapons.

"To take an analogy from nuclear disarmament, trust but verify," he said with a smile.

While his metaphor was exaggerated, his point was real: Anderson and company are asking the charters to trust the district and to join an effort that charter leaders say comes with serious legal, financial and operational questions.

“It’s a remarkable thing she’s proposing,” said Ross Danis, CEO of Newark Trust for Education, an advocacy group. “It’s a level of collaboration in the service of children that we haven’t seen anywhere in the country. For a district to say ‘Instead of resisting charters and complaining about them, let’s embrace them’ is remarkable.”

At least one charter school, the Robert Treat Academy, has decided not to sign the memo, but will continue its own enrollment process for the fall because it said there too many unanswered questions. But the leaders of TEAM charter schools, the Roseville Community and Newark Educators charters and Visions Academy Charter High School have signed on. More board votes are scheduled in the upcoming days.

“Equity needs to be done in the public schools and in the charter schools,” the Rev. Ronald Slaughter, pastor of Saint James AME Church, which runs Visions, said. “Some of these institutions are picking the students they want, although there is a quote-unquote lottery. Some of the schools are interviewing families. Universal enrollment will bring equity across the board.”

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School officials started discussing the universal enrollment plan last spring and have been meeting weekly. It’s a goal that cities like Denver and New Orleans are also trying to attain, to varying degrees of success. Newark’s attempt is unique because it asks the charter schools to voluntarily sign on and because it would give the neediest students preference, supporters say.

While all of the details are still being decided, the district will run the enrollment system, meaning charters (and those district schools, like Ann Street School in the Ironbound, which can’t meet demand) would give up individual control over the application, deadlines and lottery program.

The new system would provide big benefits for families, who would submit one application with up to eight school choices, both charter and district, ranked in order of preference. One central lottery would be used to determine placement.

Mashea Ashton, CEO of the Newark Charter School Fund, said the plan’s principles match a contract 17 of the city’s 21 charters have signed outlining support for equity, transparency, and commitment to high quality. She said by joining this effort, “we can collectively ensure that every student in every ward has access to a high quality public education. This is making sure the charters are a part of the solution.”

It is likely not everyone will welcome the plan. Critics will say it validates charters, said Katrina Bulkley, professor of counseling and educational leadership at Montclair State University.

“From an ideological standpoint, something like universal enrollment validates that this is the nature of public education,” Bulkley said.

“If they see all these schools as part of the district, that they are all of comparable quality because they are all part of one system, that might raise concerns,” she said. “They (district officials) are saying the community this is part of one system, and yet we don’t have the ability to say what schools are part of it, which are serving students well, which poorly.”

Lack of details about the way the plan will work led the board of the Robert Treat Academy to decide to continue its own enrollment process rather than join the group, a spokesman for the school said in a statement.

“The Board of Trustees of Robert Treat Academy has deferred action on universal enrollment because it felt there were too many unanswered questions. The board plans to continue the dialogue going forward,” the statement said. The Academy has 75 kindergarten seats, with about 35 taken by siblings of current students, as allowed by law.

Ashton, of the charter school fund, said legal issues may be the biggest roadblock. Some charter school officials are concerned about the details of implementation and giving control to the district that hasn’t always been efficient, she said.

“We are very much committed to the values and principles that the system is trying to achieve,” University Heights Charter School executive director Misha Simmonds said. “But the challenges are around the implementation.”

Cerf and Anderson tried to allay those fears at last week’s meeting, but both said they couldn’t predict the future.

Ryan Hill, the executive director of six TEAM schools, said his organization is behind the plan and he, like Ashton, believes it will move forward.

“The parents and kids are the real winners, and that’s what matters,” Hill said. “It’s complicated, getting from a system from 20 different enrollment processes to one, and there’s anxiety around what the logistics are. But we’ll hammer those out. There’s been a lot of meetings, a lot of good collaboration. I’m very confident it will happen.”

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