

PARENT QUESTIONS OF THE LAKE WALES SCHOOL PROJECT

SUMMARY

The greater Lake Wales community has been working long and hard to substantially improve public education in our area. A Steering Committee and ten appointed subcommittees are comprised of qualified participants: 40 members with Master's Degrees mainly in Education, 44 current or former schoolteachers, 74 members with Bachelor's Degrees, nine former or current principals or school administrators, six members with law degrees, four bank presidents, two financial planners, two certified public accountants, two city administrators, and eight business owners. Following extensive research and review, these committees have recommended the creation of a system of public charter schools for the Lake Wales community. The benefits include the following:

Innovation

- Providing educational basics in early years and a core curriculum throughout.
- A curriculum that begins in kindergarten and moves continuously through elementary school, middle school, high school, and continues through Polk Community College.
- A curriculum designed by local teachers to more specifically meet the needs of the Lake Wales students and their families.
- Career paths that progress continuously through public school and include PCC and Ridge Vo-Tech.

Choices

- Student career paths include a choice of vocational, technical, or an academic focus that will be more useful for local families in our local economy.
- Providing a challenging academic career path for those going on to four-year institutions.

Achievement

- An enhanced, interesting, and practical curriculum designed to increase attendance rate, reduce dropout rate, reduce suspensions, raise test scores, increase graduation rate, and provide more college experience and college credits – all with lower pupil-to-teacher ratio.

Governance

- A local governing board appointed based on qualifications specific to education.
- An active teacher as a voting member of governing board.
- Separation from District bureaucracy.
- Reduction of reports and paperwork.

Discipline

- A behavior specialist is assigned to each school to assist with or remove disruptive students from classroom.
- Protesting parents must deal directly with local governing board.

Teachers

- Full retirement benefits.
- Equal or increased salary.
- Potential for signing bonuses, Christmas bonuses, and twice a month salary payments.
- Equal or improved health and life insurance benefits.
- Equal or improved vacation and sick time benefits.
- Rights of collective bargaining and due process.

Funding

- Student-generated local, state, and federal funds come straight to Lake Wales.
- Plus substantial federal grants for starting charter schools.
- Plus funds produced from cost savings after reduction of bureaucracy.
- Plus local governing board responsibility for raising private funds.
- Funds with which to recruit quality teachers to fill future vacancies.

Community Support

- Partnerships with local businesses will expose students to different career paths.
- Specific requirements promote greater parent and community support.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS

Q: What are charter schools?

A: Charter schools are public schools. Conversion charter schools are traditional public schools that vote to convert to charter status. The main difference is that charter schools are governed by a local board rather than the District School Board.

Q: How is the operation of charter schools controlled?

A: Charter schools operate under a performance contract (or “charter”) with the District School Board. Charter schools are freed from a number of local and state rules and regulations. They are held strictly accountable for academic and financial *results*, but have much more latitude as to how to best achieve those results.

Q: Who decides if a school will convert to charter status?

A: The school’s teachers and parents. The application for charter status must demonstrate the support of at least 50% of the teachers employed at the school, and 50% of the parents voting, as long as a majority of the parents eligible to vote cast ballots.

Q: Which parents are eligible to vote?

A: The District allows a broad definition of parent: the person who lawfully assumes parent-like responsibilities for a student, such as parent, grandparent, guardian, and the like. One vote is granted per student. For example, if a family has three students enrolled in one school, that family will be given three ballots. Deadlines will be stated on the face of the ballot. The votes must be in and counted before the end of August.

Q: What votes have been held thus far?

A: The teachers employed at the Lake Wales Senior High School, Babson Park Elementary, Hillcrest Elementary, Janie Howard Wilson Elementary, and Polk Avenue Elementary

voted to convert to charter status. A vote of the parents from these schools will be held at the beginning of school during the month of August, 2003.

Q: At what point does the school officially become a conversion charter school?

A: At the time that the District School Board approves the application, or, if the application is denied, at the time that the Board of Education overrules the denial and approves the application. In either event, the time requirements will result in a decision this coming school year that will enable the charter schools to open and be in operation for the next school year, beginning August of 2004.

Q: What will the Lake Wales public charter schools do to provide a better learning experience for my child?

A: As explained in more detail below, Lake Wales public charter schools will provide 1) educational innovation, 2) student choices, 3) school achievement, 4) local governance, 5) discipline, 6) teacher advantages, 7) funding advantages.

I. EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

Q: What will be different about the curriculum for the charter schools?

A: The curriculum has been designed by local teachers to more specifically meet the needs of the Lake Wales students and their families. Career paths will meet the needs of all students – whether or not they intend to go on to four-year residential universities.

Q: How will the career paths meet the needs of the students who are not going to universities?

A: Career paths such as medical services, agriculture, law enforcement, and others are built into the curriculum. They progress continuously through public school and merge with the curriculum in PCC and Ridge Vo-Tech, so a student can receive an Associate of Arts degree or the necessary certification for jobs and careers.

Q: How will the career paths meet the needs of the students who are going to universities?

A: One of the career paths is an academic career path, which includes advanced placement courses, SAT preparation, dual credits, and university preparation work designed to be as academically challenging as the students can handle.

II. STUDENT CHOICES

Q: Who chooses the career path for a given student?

A: The student, after consultation with parents and the assistance of guidance counselors.

Q: What kind of preparation will the student have for making good choices?

A: Starting in elementary school, the curriculum will make students aware of the career choices to come. In middle school, students will explore different careers. In high school, students will make choices as to the career paths they will occupy.

Q: Will a student be able to change to another career path?

A: Yes. Each student will have a core curriculum of basic courses that will enable the student to change from one career path to another.

III. SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Q: Do charter schools have to meet state standards?

A: Yes. Charter schools must comply with Florida FCAT reading requirements, Florida Sunshine State Standards, and Florida requirements for high school graduation.

Q: What is the plan to raise FCAT scores?

A: The purpose of the charter schools is to place ourselves in the position where we can provide more resources to address the needs of students. The state has established “learning gains” by individual student performance on the FCAT. With these results the remedial areas can be identified and an educational plan can be developed. Once the educational plan has been developed through the use of technology, tutoring, remedial classes or smaller regular classes may be utilized. Parents will be involved in the plan and they will have a responsibility to assist in their child’s education.

Q: How will the performance of charter schools be measured?

A: Performance standards for the schools will be set forth in the charter for each school. If the standards are not met, the charter can be revoked. The charter schools will be measured against their own performance in previous years and the performance of other Polk County schools with like student populations.

Q: What other standards can be used for measurement?

A: Charter schools will seek to increase attendance rates, reduce class size, reduce dropout rates, reduce suspensions, raise test scores, increase graduation rates, and provide more college experience and college credits for high school graduates – these are some of the other ways that enhancement of the quality of education can be measured.

IV. LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Q: How will the charter schools be operated?

A: The charter schools will be operated by a Florida not-for-profit corporation known as Lake Wales Collegiate School System, Inc.

Q: What about the governing board?

A: The Lake Wales charter schools will be governed by a qualified, well-balanced, local Board of Trustees consisting of seven members.

Q: How do we know the board members will be qualified?

A: The charter and the charter system's bylaws will require certain qualifications. At least one member will be required to have education, training, and experience in finance, another member will be required to have education, training, and experience in law, another member will be required to have education, training, and experience in business. At least two of the members will be required to have Master's Degrees or better. At least two other members will be required to have college degrees or better. Since these requirements don't cover all seven seats, members of the Board can also have vocational or trade experience consistent with the career path curriculum.

Q: Will board members receive a salary?

A: No. The bylaws require that the members of the Board serve without compensation.

Q: What are the advantages of a local governing board?

A: The biggest advantage is that the Lake Wales area schools are of a manageable size. The schools are few in number, student enrollment is less than 5,000, and the schools are centrally located in the community. Since the system is very manageable, it will be able to operate quickly and efficiently. The savings made possible by the Lake Wales system's manageable size and efficiency will enable more funds to go into the classroom for instruction.

Q: Why are the Board members termed “Trustees?”

A: Trustees by law have a fiduciary responsibility to their beneficiaries. In this instance, the bylaws spell out that the beneficiaries are the students of the Lake Wales area schools. This means that Board members have a legally binding fiduciary obligation to act in the best interests of their beneficiaries – the students.

Q: Will the Board of Trustees have a teacher as a member?

A: Yes. The bylaws require that an active teacher be one of the seven voting members of the Board of Trustees.

Q: How long are the terms of office?

A: Six board members will have terms of three years. The teacher’s term will be for one year. A board member will be able to succeed him or herself only one time.

Q: How are board members selected?

A: The selection process is appointive, not elective. The purpose is to, as much as possible, take politics out of educational governance.

Q: How does the appointive process work?

A: The terms will be staggered. This means that each year, appointments will be made for two board seats, plus the teacher’s seat. One of the seats will be filled by nominations coming from parents and teachers on the School Advisory Committees (“SAC”) for the schools. The SACs will nominate persons who meet the required qualifications. The nominations will go forward to a nominating commission. The nominating commission selects the three top nominees whose names then go forward to the sitting Board of Trustees for appointment. The Board must choose from one of the three.

Q: How is the appointment made for the other seat?

A: The Board of Trustees may appoint any resident of the Lake Wales school area who meets the qualification requirements for the other seat. In so doing, the Board may consider any of the persons previously nominated by the SACs, as well as the other two persons who were forwarded to the Board by the nominating commission. This is designed to provide a balance, since in one instance the Board is restricted to the three nominees and in the other instance, the Board may choose any resident of the school area.

Q: How is the teacher member appointed?

A: The appointment of the teacher is from nomination of the SACs, which are forwarded to the nominating commission. The Board is required to select one of the three names forwarded by the nominating commission.

Q: **What are the advantages of such a process?**

A: The appointive process is designed to remove the Board as much as possible from politics. Every member must take an oath of office containing a commitment to the mission and purpose of the school system. The no-compensation means that the positions are honorary and the only reason for seeking the seat should be out of a motive for service and commitment to the best interests of students. The participation of the parents and teachers in the nominating process is designed to involve those who have an immediate interest in the success of the system. Although no system is perfect, this one is designed to encourage the participation of qualified citizens with the highest credibility to serve for the benefit of the children of the community.

V. DISCIPLINE

Q: **What about discipline problems?**

A: The Lake Wales School Project conducted a study to explore the feasibility of a system of charter schools. One of the most consistent concerns expressed by educators and non-educators alike had to do with the need for more effective discipline in schools. To meet this concern, the Operation Subcommittee of the Lake Wales School Project has adopted a proven method for enhancing discipline in the charter schools.

Q: **How does the method work?**

A: Each school will have its own school behavior specialist who will be assisted by a paraprofessional. The discipline system is designed to keep one or two disruptive students from dominating the classroom and denying an education to the behaving students. Disruptive students will be dealt with in three phases.

Q: **How do the three phases of discipline work?**

A: The first phase is to counsel the classroom teacher for the development of behavior strategies attempting to modify the behavior of a problem student without having to remove that student from the classroom.

Q: **What happens if the student is still disruptive?**

A: The second phase will involve removal of the disruptive student from the classroom to an on-site school-within-a-school setting. There, the behavior specialist will be able to

explore the causes of the disruption, provide special instruction, and devise a plan for the disruptive student to return to the classroom without further disruption.

Q: What happens if the second phase doesn't work?

A: The third phase will be removal of the student to an offsite alternative school maintained by the charter system. The alternative school will employ special techniques designed to modify the antisocial behavior and return the student to the classroom as a productive member of that classroom.

Q: What happens if the student is still disruptive after all three phases of the discipline plan?

A: When Lake Wales area schools were traditional public schools, a number of disruptive students were sent to alternative schools in the District that are designed for that purpose. It is the purpose and intent of the Lake Wales school system not to exit its problem students to the District and other schools, but to handle all of its own problem students. Such exits would only be a last resort, and should not be a greater number than had been the case while the Lake Wales area schools were operating as traditional public schools.

VI. TEACHERS

Q: What will the charter schools do to retain and recruit excellent teachers?

A: First, we will start by making sure that our schools have outstanding educational leaders as principals. Excellent teachers pick schools that have excellent principals. Excellent principals have a way of recruiting the best teachers.

Q: What will the charter schools do for teachers in the way of salary, benefits, and retirement?

A: The charter schools have promised the teachers who convert to charter status full retirement benefits, equal or better salary, a potential for signing bonuses and Christmas bonuses, twice a month salary payments, equal or improved health and life insurance benefits, equal or improved vacation and sick time benefits, and the same rights of collective bargaining and due process as exist with the District.

Q: What about assistance in the classroom?

A: The increased resources put toward stronger student discipline (see above) is very important to most teachers. The charter system will also concentrate on smaller class size, greater paraprofessional help, and more resources in the classroom.

VII. FUNDING

Q: How are public charter schools funded?

A: The same as traditional public schools. State law requires charter schools to be funded “the same as students enrolled in other public schools in the school district.” Each student generates a certain amount of local, state, or federal funds that are used by schools for education. This amount of per student funding makes up the operating budget for public schools. Charter schools receive 95% of these funds. The District keeps the other 5%, but is required by law to provide services to the charter schools in exchange for the 5%.

Q: Will charter schools take money away from the other public schools?

A: No. The other public schools retain 100% of their student-generated funds.

Q: How will the constitutional amendment for reduced class size affect charter schools?

A: The same as traditional public schools. Charter schools are subject to the reduced class size requirements, and will receive their proportionate share of the funds necessary to achieve the reduced class size.

Q: If charter schools will have more resources for teaching students, where will those resources come from?

A: To start with, each charter school will receive a substantial federal grant to assist with starting up the school. In addition, the local governing boards of other charter schools have been able to more efficiently manage their schools, and these efficiencies have produced additional resources for the classroom. Beyond this, the bylaws of the Lake Wales charter schools impose a responsibility on the Board of Trustees to raise private funds as supplement to the normal public school funding.

Q: Are there special costs or requirements to attend a conversion charter school?

A: No. Charter schools are free public schools and may not charge for attendance. Also, the law requires that transportation cannot be a barrier to attending a charter school that is within a reasonable distance – as defined by the charter – from the student’s home.

VIII. ELITIST SCHOOLS COMPARED TO ZONED SCHOOLS

Q: I hear that members of the School Board are concerned that Lake Wales charter schools will evolve into elitist schools. What about that concern?

A: The last thing the Lake Wales School Project wants to do is to create elitist schools. Lake Wales' students have left town to attend elitist schools elsewhere. The purpose of charter schools in Lake Wales is to benefit all students. We will provide the educational advantages in Lake Wales schools that have been provided elsewhere. These advantages will elevate the quality of the schools for all students, keep Lake Wales students at home, and provide a larger benefit to the community as a whole.

Q: How will the Lake Wales charter schools benefit all students, and leave no students behind?

A: There are many different kinds of charter schools. Our charter schools will be "zoned" schools that serve all students living in the same attendance zones that were served when the same schools were traditional public schools.

Q: How can the Lake Wales charter schools be certain about serving the same attendance zones that were served while the schools were traditional public schools?

A: The charter law allows a school to target "preferred students." Each Lake Wales area charter will identify its preferred students as those who reside in the same attendance zone that the school served while it was a traditional public school.

Q: What about transportation?

A: The charter law states that both the District and the charter school must see to it that transportation is not a barrier to the attendance of the student living within a reasonable distance of the school. Our charters define a reasonable distance as those distances existing within the attendance zones that were previously served when the schools were traditional public schools.

Q: I hear that the application for a student to attend a charter school is more difficult and is one of the things that serves to create elitist schools. Will the application make it more difficult to attend the same school?

A: No. The paperwork for the application process will be no more difficult or extensive than the paperwork for the enrollment of a student to a traditional public school.

Q: I also heard that applications for charter schools could only be made during certain times of the year and had to be sent to Bartow for review and approval. Is that true?

A: Not any more. A "preferred student" living within the school's attendance zone may make application on site at the school any time during the school year. This will be done so

that the application process will turn out to be no more difficult than the enrollment process was for a traditional public school.

Q: Are there limits to the number and type of students that a charter school may accept for enrollment?

A: Yes. All public schools have a maximum capacity and must also meet racial balance requirements. Charter schools are no different. The charter entered into by the school with the District will specify a maximum enrollment for each school, and will also require a certain racial balance for each school. A student may not be enrolled in a charter school if that student would serve to exceed the school's maximum or violate the required racial balance. The attendance zones have been carefully drawn to enable each school to meet these requirements.

Q: Is it true that a charter school can exit any student that it wishes to expel?

A: Yes. However, the whole purpose and design of the Lake Wales charter school system is to retain all of the Lake Wales area students. We do not want to "dump" any of our problem students on any of the surrounding schools, nor do we wish to impose transportation costs on the District for transporting these students to outlying districts. The discipline program set forth above has been designed to retain all of our students.

Q: Is it true that a parent may withdraw a child from a charter school?

A: Yes. Nonetheless, the charter school system will do all within its power to retain its students and provide a high quality education so that no parents will wish to withdraw a student. If for some reason a student is withdrawn, the student will be reassigned to another public school in the District. At present, the District is incurring the cost of transporting a number of Lake Wales students out of town to magnet schools. After the institution of the charter schools, it is our goal for the number of students returning to Lake Wales from the magnet schools to exceed the small number that may elect to withdraw from the charter schools, so that the net effect will be a saving of transportation cost to the District.

IX. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Q: What if I have specific questions about the conversion charter school process for my child's school?

A: Parents may review the full charter application that has been prepared for each school. The applications are on file at the schools, or can be obtained by contacting the Lake Wales School Project office at 734-0000. A descriptive brochure is available at the School Project Office. Public forums will be scheduled for parents. Representatives from the School Project will be speaking at area service clubs. Informational materials,

together with ballots for voting, will be sent home with students at the beginning of the school year. Additional information can be obtained by consulting the website for the Lake Wales Area Chamber of Commerce at www.lakewaleschamber.com, by calling the Lake Wales School Project office at the above telephone number, or by contacting the Office of School Choice at the Polk County School District at 534-0631.