

15

YEARS OF TRANSFORMING PUBLIC EDUCATION

TRANSFORMING PUBLIC EDUCATION

CELEBRATING



YEARS

THE CENTER
FOR
CHARTER SCHOOLS
CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

MISSION

TO TRANSFORM PUBLIC EDUCATION THROUGH OUR STATE AND NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND GOLD STANDARD APPROACH TO CHARTERING SCHOOLS, OVERSEEING AND SUPPORTING THEIR OPERATIONS, AND EVALUATING THEIR PERFORMANCE.

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MICHIGAN'S CHARTER SCHOOLS MOVEMENT TURNS 15 THIS YEAR. IT IS OFTEN RECOGNIZED FOR ACTING MATURE FOR ITS AGE. IN A RELATIVELY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME, CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE DEVELOPED ACADEMIC, FISCAL AND OVERSIGHT PROTOCOLS THAT HAVE RESET THE STANDARD FOR EDUCATION EXCELLENCE — IN MICHIGAN AND ACROSS THE NATION. EXTENSIVE FEEDBACK FROM ACADEMIC AND POLICY LEADERS, FROM THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, GIVES PRAISE TO CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICES.

FOREWARD

15

YEARS OF TRANSFORMING PUBLIC EDUCATION

MICHIGAN'S charter schools movement turns 15 this year. It is often recognized for acting mature for its age. In a relatively short period of time, charter schools have developed academic, fiscal and oversight protocols that have reset the standard for education excellence – in Michigan and across the nation. Extensive feedback from academic and policy leaders, from the Michigan Department of Education to the U.S. Department of Education, gives praise to charter public schools and Central Michigan University's (CMU) leadership and practices.

Most importantly, students in charter schools are succeeding. During the last 15 years we have fought to diversify educational options, provide innovators the opportunity to open schools, and empower parents to choose where their children will go to school. There were times when it seemed the grown-ups' struggles would overshadow the fact that our efforts were for the kids.

The road leading to this point has not always been smooth, but it is important to remember that we built the road while we were driving on it. Since our inception, we have met our challenges by developing solutions where none previously existed. The result is a gold standard approach that has attracted interest from around the country. Michigan's charter schools are a model of accountability and progress, and we're very proud of them.

State leaders from every sector – business, academic, and elected lawmakers – have confronted consistent opposition to charter public schools and delivered an historic effort along the way. The charter schools movement has required those leaders to rethink every aspect of public education, which arguably is among the most entrenched of bureaucracies.

It's not a perfect system. Not every charter public school has succeeded. But the key to our achievements so far has been learning from our experiences and meeting new challenges with determination and creative solutions.

The road behind us has helped prepare us for the journey to come. As Michigan endures some of the darkest economic times in its history, and state budget cuts are forcing some traditional public school districts to shutter buildings, a growing number of leaders from both sides of the political aisle are taking another look at charter public schools as a way to ensure the future of public education.

This retrospective looks at the revolution in public education that has transformed hundreds of thousands of lives and demonstrated that schools driven by pragmatic business principles and solid curricula succeed and thrive. Each year, we tell the story of our yearly progress and future goals. This year, we're taking a look back at some of the key figures in Michigan who have been instrumental in helping us create what we have.

It would be impossible to recognize all the people who have had a hand in guiding us forward. School choice in our state has flourished because of the steadfast commitment, faith, and resilience of untold thousands of heroes. They were and are lawmakers, teachers, principals, administrators, school business managers, and every last parent who went out on a limb and trusted us with their most precious asset – their children.

Everything that we have done centers around helping kids find the best possible educational environment. This year's report is ultimately a tribute to Michigan students and families. By offering them a choice, providing competition, and demanding accountability, we have transformed public education these last 15 years. And the winners are the kids!



James Goenner

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
THE CENTER FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

THE VISION

for transforming education —
a state at risk

“It was clear from all the reading I’d done, all the conversations I’d had with leaders in business, that education was becoming the defining difference among the states.”

— Governor John Engler

THE revolution that has become the new standard in education began with a 1983 national report, *“A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform.”* Commissioned by President Ronald Reagan, the report painted a stark picture of American schools falling behind many other countries.

“Michigan had a very strong ‘local control’ mentality, with minimal state or national involvement,” said **Mary Kay Shields**, who was an education advisor under former Governor John Engler and a key figure in Michigan’s education reform efforts. “We wanted to know how the state of Michigan fared against the rest of America. Two things came back: the superintendents at the time either said, ‘it’s none of your business,’ or ‘we don’t know.’ Those were not the answers that any state leader wanted to hear, and it set off a series of actions.”

In Michigan, concerns over the future of public education touched off a series of state-level commissions, legislative inquiry panels and official investigations. These proceedings led the way to an extraordinary chain of events starting with the passage of the seminal Public Act 25, commonly known as the “School Improvement Act,” and ultimately to the restructuring of school funding with Proposal A, which made public school choice possible for the first time.

governor john engler

JOHN ENGLER WAS ELECTED TO THE MICHIGAN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES IN 1970 AT THE AGE OF 22. HE WENT ON TO SERVE IN THE MICHIGAN STATE SENATE FROM 1979 TO 1990 AND WAS SENATE MAJORITY LEADER FROM 1984 TO 1990, WHEN HE WAS ELECTED GOVERNOR. ENGLER'S THREE TERMS AS MICHIGAN'S TOP EXECUTIVE WERE MARKED BY AN UNPRECEDENTED FOCUS ON EDUCATION REFORM, RANGING FROM THE CREATION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS TO THE STATE TAKEOVER OF DETROIT'S FAILING PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM AND THE CREATION OF SEVERAL EDUCATIONAL INCENTIVES FOR STUDENTS, MOST NOTABLY THE MICHIGAN MERIT AWARD TO HELP MORE MICHIGAN KIDS GO TO COLLEGE. ENGLER PRESENTLY IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MANUFACTURERS.



Photo provided by National Association of Manufacturers

But the most controversial reform action in Michigan came 10 years after *“A Nation at Risk”* was released. The driving force for educational change at the start of the 1990s was **Governor John Engler**, who saw early promise in charter schools as they were initiated in states like Minnesota, and who rallied support from Michigan’s Republican-led Senate and an evenly divided state House of Representatives.

“It was clear from all the reading I’d done, all the conversations I’d had with leaders in business, that education was becoming the defining difference among the states,” **Engler** said. “For communities to be strong, they needed strong schools.”

Engler’s first step was the establishment of a law that allowed students to choose the school they would attend. **Dick Posthumus**, who was the Senate Majority Leader in 1993 and later became Michigan’s Lieutenant Governor, recalled that the first test was the simple idea of giving parents and students a choice.

“My view, from the beginning, was that we needed to change how young people were educated in the state in order to compete in an international economy,” **Posthumus** said. “I’m a product of the public school system, and my kids are, but I really felt that the public school systems had become so large and were using a cookie cutter approach to education.”

Like most Majority Leaders, **Posthumus** sponsored very few bills himself. But he sponsored Senate Bill 896, which created Michigan’s charter school law, because he felt strongly about the power it afforded students and families.

“It wasn’t a Republican / Democrat issue at the time, because the children who needed choice the most were often kids in urban districts that were represented by Democrat legislators,” he said.

State leaders had been talking about school reform for decades, but real action had been scarce and limited. Suddenly, legislation surfaced to offer students and parents a choice in public schools, and the message was clear and bold: families who were not satisfied with their local public schools would be allowed to vote with their feet.

“One of the reasons I never wavered is that this is voluntary on the part of the kids and parents,” **Engler** said. “Nobody is required to go to a charter public school.”

Michigan saw the opening of its first nine charter schools in the fall of 1994:

- Aisha Shule, Detroit
- Caledonia Charter Academy, Caledonia
- Casa Maria, Detroit
- Horizons High School, Wyoming
- Macomb Academy, Clinton Township
- New Branches School, Grand Rapids
- Northlane Math and Science Academy, Freeland
- West Michigan Academy for Environmental Science, Grand Rapids
- Windover High School, Midland

For those who had worked hard to deliver choice and innovation to Michigan’s children, it was a moment that inspired celebration. For those who wanted to focus on improving traditional education, it was the first salvo in a long controversy.



dick posthumus

DICK POSTHUMUS WAS ELECTED TO THE MICHIGAN SENATE IN 1982, BECAME SENATE MAJORITY LEADER IN 1990 AND SERVED AS LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR FROM 1998-2002. HIS DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT TO IMPROVING K-12 EDUCATION WAS A STRONG THEME THROUGHOUT HIS TENURE IN THE LEGISLATURE. POSTHUMUS WAS THE REPUBLICAN GUBERNATORIAL CANDIDATE IN 2002 AND CURRENTLY SERVES AS THE CEO OF COMPATICO, INC., AN OFFICE FURNITURE MANUFACTURER IN GRAND RAPIDS.

“I’m a product of the public school system, and my kids are, but I really felt that the public school systems had become so large and were using a cookie cutter approach to education.”

AN ENTITY

not fond of charter schools

SOME of the leading Democrats from the period recall that they had been discussing charter schools for several years before the movement began in Michigan.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, who was spokesperson for Michigan Education Association (MEA) from 1996 until 2007, was among many who noted that the education establishment also saw the need for change early in the discussion.

“When you think about the words of **Al Shanker** many years ago, long before the issue ever hit Michigan, he was talking about charter schools. And he was a union leader,” she said. “Fifty years ago, teachers were truly the education reformers and the leaders, and in large part the union was formed around really progressive issues for the times – things like lowering class sizes and creating the kind of environment teachers needed to succeed.”

Several states governed by Democrats had created choice in education. Indeed, President Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama both have been strong supporters of expanding educational opportunity through charter public schools.

But Michigan’s path to creating charter schools lay, in part, through a Legislature polarized along party lines. The early 1990s was a time of broader deregulation of many industries around the state, and partisan resistance to change was strong.

In the mid-90s, the MEA was among the leading detractors who quickly lined up to argue that the charter effort should not be allowed and would never succeed. They charged that charter schools were really private schools operated with public dollars. They said minorities and at-risk students would be left out of the opportunity. They said inner city kids would not see any of the benefits.

“The saddest thing of all is how it became a right versus left issue,” said **Trimer-Hartley**. “When the movement started in Michigan, MEA was categorically opposed to charter schools. Period. End of discussion. They would fight them at all levels, and there really was no openness to discussing it.”

The law was officially challenged in 1994, in a lawsuit filed by the MEA that assailed the constitutionality of the new charter law and stopped the flow of state aid to the new schools. The Legislature took action by putting the charter schools under their local intermediate school district to keep state aid flowing and by passing a new law that addressed the court’s concerns.

As more charter schools were opened over the course of the next few years, the legal challenge progressed through the courts. It eventually reached the Michigan Supreme Court in 1997.

The same year, the MEA developed an official organizational policy that attempted to support charter schools. It turned out to be a difficult position to maintain. Charter schools had a history of stirring partisan furor, and the MEA – an entity that supports its members and survives on member support – wrestled unsuccessfully to embrace a decidedly non-unionized education environment.

Adding to the excitement in 1997, **President Bill Clinton** visited Michigan in March and delivered an address to a joint session of the Legislature in which he called upon the state to take a bold new approach to education. He urged the use of national tests to help the states compare their performance with each other.

“This is not a partisan issue,” **President Clinton** told a packed State House chamber. “There is no Democratic or Republican way to learn. Reading is reading, math is math.”

The speech itself was received positively by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, but it struck raw an already frayed nerve when the President called for increasing the number of charter public schools as part of his national push to grow the system ten-fold. His State of the Union speech just a month earlier included a pledge to finance 3,000 new charter schools around the country.

“This is not a partisan issue. There is no Democratic or Republican way to learn. Reading is reading, math is math.”

— **President Bill Clinton**

CHARTERS REAFFIRMED

by high court

MICHIGAN'S Supreme Court ruled in 1997 that charters are, in fact, public schools. By that time, 106 charter schools had opened around the state – many of them in urban areas – and all of them were clearly demonstrating that they were open to the public.

Richard McLellan and **Leonard Wolfe** were the leading legal architects of the charter school legislation. Both worked for the Lansing law firm Dykema Gossett, PLLC. When the issue went to court, they led the defense team.

The Michigan Chamber of Commerce, a statewide trade association representing businesses, played a critical role by funding the legal costs to defend the charter school law. Then-Chamber President **Jim Barrett** noted that his organization had been involved in education reform well before the lawsuit was filed. The group was a strong proponent of creating competition in the education marketplace and had supported the charter public school bills in the Legislature.

“The Michigan Chamber has a long history of getting involved in litigation,” he said, “but this was different from the standpoint that it involved public education. That was the first time the Chamber had entered the judicial arena relating to K-12 education issues.”

The Michigan Supreme Court's 1997 decision affirmed the constitutionality of Michigan's charter school law and reaffirmed the long-held power of the Legislature to create different types of public schools.

“It was unfortunate that we lost a couple of years in court battles, and that we ended up having to change the law,” **Engler** said. “I think that if half of the energy that's gone into fighting charter public schools had gone into improving the traditional public schools, we'd be better off than we are today.”

While the issue proceeded through the courts, however, the charter school community had gotten busy with the business of educating kids. The effort had drawn support from leaders that included Ford Motor Company, which committed \$5 million to open a charter school on the campus of the Henry Ford Museum, and retired Gen. Colin Powell, who lent his own name to a school in Detroit.

Central Michigan University was among the initial group of authorizers in 1994. University President **Leonard Plachta**, who passed away in 2007, was the first university president in Michigan to take up Engler's charge for a state university to authorize charter schools. He did so amid pressure from his peers.



leonard plachta

LEONARD PLACHTA MOVED TO MT. PLEASANT IN 1978 TO BECOME CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S ASSISTANT DEAN, AND LATER, ACTING DEAN. HE WAS SELECTED AS CMU'S PRESIDENT IN 1992, AND SERVED IN THAT ROLE UNTIL 2000. HIS TENURE WAS MARKED BY BOLD BUT THOUGHTFUL LEADERSHIP – INCLUDING HIS DECISION TO BE THE FIRST UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT IN MICHIGAN TO RESPOND TO GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER'S CALL FOR UNIVERSITIES TO AUTHORIZE CHARTER SCHOOLS. HE MARRIED HIS WIFE LOUISE IN 1957 AND TOGETHER RAISED TWO DAUGHTERS. LEONARD PLACHTA PASSED AWAY JANUARY 22, 2008.

“The leadership of CMU was essential, and that was not without controversy, because the teachers’ union and the Michigan Education Association were not enthusiastic about any competition. But the Board of Trustees was strong, and the university administration was strong.”

— Governor John Engler

1994 CMU Board of Trustees

Mitchell Kehetian

Roger Kessler

Gordon N Lambie

Sidney Smith

Martin H Cholakian

Harriet B. Rotter

Kari D. Guido

Robert P. Young, Jr.

Plachta's wife, **Louise**, said her husband weighed the move carefully but never doubted his decision to put Central Michigan University in a leading role.

"Governor Engler at that time had requested one of the universities to step up, and Leonard was the only one who decided to do so," she recalled. "The other 14 universities were not in favor of it, and I got the impression that they were circling him and hoping that charter public schools wouldn't go through.

"Leonard was a risk taker, but he also was a very honest person. He was a man of integrity. So, he decided that for young people's sake, for students' sake, he would say yes to authorizing charter public schools."

The university's premise was straightforward and simple: transform public education by harnessing the powerful dynamics created through choice, competition, and accountability.

"Ultimately, each school needs to demonstrate that the kids are learning, and the taxpayers' dollars are being cared for," said **Jim Goenner**, Executive Director for The Center for Charter Schools since 1998. "The charter for each school contains a lot of things, but at the heart of it is a vision for a school and how it's going to be measured for delivering quality education to children and being good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars."

Goenner laughs when remembering the earliest days of his tenure with CMU. The law was passed, so the field was open. But without any clear roadmap to follow and adversaries watching closely, Goenner said the early years were marked by a struggle to create a framework for implementing the vision that early charter leaders shared.

"My assignment in 1995 was to get those schools open," said **Goenner**, who served as the senior associate director for the Charter Schools Office until 1996 when he left to create the Michigan Association for Public School Academies and serve as its executive director. "The university ultimately granted 31 charters that year. Needless to say, it was a busy summer."

The community leaders who were applying to operate early charter schools located and leased buildings and had them inspected and approved by state fire inspectors. They bought furniture, equipment and books, and hired principals and staff. The university focused on developing policies and procedures and contracts, all at the direction of the university's Board of Trustees.

"The only way the Board of Trustees or the university president would support the idea was to have strong oversight built into the contracts, and to dismiss these schools if they were doing improper things," said former CMU Board of Trustees member **W. Sidney (Sid) Smith**, who served from 1991 to 2001. "The whole function of the Board of Trustees was to focus on how the schools could best serve the kids."

Founded in 1892 and one of the oldest and most respected teacher training schools in the state, Central Michigan University had fully committed to taking up **Engler's** challenge to lead the way in authorizing new schools.

"Central Michigan University was absolutely instrumental in the early years," **Engler** said. "The leadership of CMU was essential, and that was not without controversy, because the teachers' union and the Michigan Education Association were not enthusiastic about any competition. But the Board of Trustees was strong, and the university administration was strong."

w. sidney (sid) smith

W. SIDNEY (SID) SMITH HAS A LIFELONG CONNECTION TO CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY. AS THE SON OF A CMU PROFESSOR AND UNIVERSITY VICE PRESIDENT, HE GREW UP ON ITS CAMPUS, EVENTUALLY EARNING A DEGREE THERE IN 1965 AND ACCEPTING AN APPOINTMENT FROM GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER TO THE CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY BOARD OF TRUSTEES IN JANUARY 1991. SMITH BECAME A KEY UNIVERSITY FIGURE WHEN CMU MOVED TO LEAD THE STATE IN AUTHORIZING CHARTER SCHOOLS – REMEMBERED FOR HIS LEADERSHIP AND STAUNCH COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE AS AN AUTHORIZING BODY. SMITH IS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF SMITH EQUITIES CORP. IN MT. PLEASANT, AND HE SERVES AS THE CHAIR OF THE NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE.



THE EARLY

Leaders

“I can see where I’ve made a difference for a lot of students who would not have made it in traditional public schools. And when you’re doing something that’s in your heart, the money’s not an issue.”

— Mohamad Issa

WHO were the first charter school operators in Michigan? Interestingly, most were not professional educators. Some were business owners, manufacturers, real estate moguls and entrepreneurs. Most of them were parents who had grown frustrated with traditional public education and felt so strongly about doing something more for their own kids. For them, the new charter public school law represented a much-welcomed opportunity.

“The early school founders had one thing in common,” **Jim Goenner** recalled. “They all wanted a better alternative for the kids in their community. They came from all parts of the state, and they all had this passion to try and do something different in a new way to serve kids. But there was no recipe to tell you how to do it.”

Mohamad Issa’s son struggled in traditional public schools. The Ann Arbor businessman recalled being surprised and frustrated when his son was placed in a special education program.

“I wasn’t satisfied with the public schools or the private schools,” he said. “My boy was in sixth grade and talking about dropping out entirely. I called some friends at the University of Michigan to ask what was required to open a private school. They told me about these new charter public schools.”

That was in 1996. Today, his son – who graduated from Central Academy in Ann Arbor with a 3.4 grade point average – is finishing his PhD at Eastern Michigan University after completing his bachelor’s and master’s at the University of Michigan. After years of operating a charter public school, Issa put his keen business sense to work in 1999 by opening a school management company.

“I love my job,” he said. “I can see where I’ve made a difference for a lot of students who would not have made it in traditional public schools. And when you’re doing something that’s in your heart, the money’s not an issue. Every person in my office feels that way.”

mohamad issa

MOHAMAD ISSA WAS A SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN BUSINESSMAN WHO SPECIALIZED IN REAL ESTATE AND RETAIL PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, UNTIL THE CHARTER SCHOOLS MOVEMENT – AND A SON STRUGGLING IN TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS – DREW HIM INTO A PIONEERING ROLE IN MICHIGAN'S CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS MOVEMENT. HE OPENED A SCHOOL IN 1996, AND TRANSITIONED TO HIS PRESENT FOCUS ON SCHOOL MANAGEMENT FIVE YEARS LATER.



“I remembered Milton Friedman made what I thought then was a pretty bold statement. He said if we want to see meaningful change in public education, we’ve got to privatize it. His reasoning was that only through privatization comes competition, which drives up quality and drives down costs. Those are the two biggest challenges we had – and still have – in public education.”

— J.C. Huizenga



Photo provided by National Heritage Academies

j.c. huizenga

J.C. HUIZENGA IS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL PIONEERS IN MICHIGAN’S CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT. THE WEST MICHIGAN BUSINESSMAN FOUNDED NATIONAL HERITAGE ACADEMIES IN 1995 AND IS NOW ITS CHAIRMAN. HE SAID HIS IDEA TO START THE COMPANY, NOW RANKED ONE OF THE TOP 500 FASTEST GROWING COMPANIES IN THE NATION BY INC. MAGAZINE, CAME WITH THE BIRTH OF HIS SON. MR. HUIZENGA LIVES IN EAST GRAND RAPIDS AND SERVES AS A BOARD MEMBER FOR SEVERAL WEST MICHIGAN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS.

Another early leader in charter schools was **J.C. Huizenga**. Today, the west Michigan businessman is known in education circles as Chairman of National Heritage Academies. But he admits he hadn't spent much time thinking about education or the need to reform it until he was approached by a trauma care physician named **Paul DeWeese** who had done his residency at Detroit hospital. DeWeese lived near the hospital and as he got to know his neighbors he was stunned by the realization that their children had a greater chance of doing time than graduating from college. Huizenga joined Dr. DeWeese's public policy initiative (called Teach Michigan) and served on its board. The group was instrumental in garnering support for Michigan's charter school legislation.

He said the decision to get involved came from his days as a college economics major studying renowned economist Milton Friedman.

"I remembered Milton Friedman made what I thought then was a pretty bold statement," **Huizenga** said. "He said if we want to see meaningful change in public education, we've got to privatize it. His reasoning was that only through privatization comes competition, which drives up quality and drives down costs. Those are the two biggest challenges we had – and still have – in public education. It costs too much, and we don't get what we pay for. The quality isn't there."

The launch of the state's first charter schools coincided with the birth of **Huizenga's** son David. He said the question became a personal one at that point, and he began working toward the launch of his first school.

Huizenga remembers getting a call on June 1, 1995, with the news that his charter application had been approved by Grand Valley State University. The summer was spent locating a building, hiring principals, teachers, and assembling the necessary infrastructure.

"By the time we had something to market, we only had three weeks to recruit our students," he said. "We were too naïve to realize that most parents figure out where to send their kids before summer starts, much less three weeks before classes begin."

Nonetheless, 174 students showed up for its inaugural launch, and the network has grown steadily since then.

Huizenga said he believes that charter public schools have met the challenge they were designed for – providing choice, and driving up the quality of education in Michigan – but he said the truest test lies ahead, and charters will play a critical role in Michigan's future.

"If Michigan is going to recover economically, it needs to address the education question," he said. "In order for Michigan to be successful and more attractive to business, we need to foster an environment that values learning and prepares our workforce to be competitive in a knowledge-based economy. If we are to succeed in a global economy we have to be intentional about the quality of education we give our children, and unfortunately this state hasn't learned that lesson yet."

David Frederick was a veteran of Michigan's education community. He and wife, **Hildi Paulson**, both began their careers as teachers in the Grand Rapids Public School system.

Frustrated with shortcomings of the traditional public schools, in 1971 David started The Climbing Tree – a private school for urban families of modest means. They operated the school for more than two decades prior to the passage of Michigan's charter school law.

It turned out to be fortuitous. Among those with a bid to be early charter school operators, the Fredericks knew what it took to operate a school. Their experience was a huge contribution to the university's early foundation of knowledge.

"We knew how to put a budget together," he said. "A lot of the other startup operators didn't even know what went on the various line items. We spent the entire summer in 1994 working closely with CMU, sharing ideas and information back and forth. I think it was very helpful for all of us."

Partnering with the university was good business for the couple as well. Their frustrations as private school operators – constantly tight finances, too much time spent raising money, high teacher turnover – were aspects of school management that CMU focused on helping its charter holders address.

"We don't regret the charter school experience for a moment," **Frederick** said. "And we've always enjoyed a great relationship with Central Michigan University. Sure, there have been some frustrating times over the years, but we always appreciated strong support from the university and its folks."

1994

"IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO RECOGNIZE ALL THE PEOPLE WHO MICHIGAN HAS FLOURISHED BECAUSE OF THE STEADFAST COMMITMENT,

HAVE HAD A HAND IN GUIDING US FORWARD. SCHOOL CHOICE IN FAITH, AND RESILIENCE OF UNTOLD THOUSANDS OF HEROES." — JIM GOENNER

2009

1993

On October 5, Governor John Engler proposed a number of school reforms, including the creation of charter schools, in a speech before a joint session of the Michigan Legislature.

1994

On January 14, Governor John Engler signed the charter schools legislation into law, and Michigan became the 9th state to enact a charter law. In March, "Proposal A" was approved by Michigan electors, radically changing how Michigan funded its public schools. Most notably, it shifted the responsibility from local funding sources to state sources, and established a per-pupil "foundation allowance" for every student. This financial policy shift made it possible for choice to occur. In July, CMU's Board of Trustees adopted its initial chartering policies and authorized President Leonard Pachta to enter into contract negotiations with five schools that applied for a charter.

1995

In April, CMU's Board of Trustees chartered 31 public schools. In December, to ensure that funds would continue to flow to the newly chartered public schools, a bill was signed into law to create Part 6b of the Revised School Code, which allowed for these schools to operate.

1996

CMU played a leadership role in founding the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA) as an advocacy organization for Michigan's charter schools. In April, the Michigan Court of Appeals upheld the 1994 ruling by an Ingham County Circuit Court judge that ruled the charter school law was unconstitutional. The case was taken to the Michigan Supreme Court. In May, CMU hosted Michigan's first Charter Schools Expo in Lansing, which showcased charter schools for policymakers and parents. CMU launched the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools, which was designed as a support organization to help charter schools succeed.

1997

In March, President Bill Clinton spoke to a joint session of the Michigan House and Senate outlining his education plan, which promoted charter schools. In his State of the Union speech earlier that year, he had called for the creation of 3,000 charter schools nationally by 2002. In July, after three years of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce leading the defense of the state's main charter school law, Part 6a of the Revised School Code, the Michigan Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality. Part 6b was automatically repealed. In October, the Office of the Auditor General issued an audit report that was highly critical of CMU's oversight of the schools it chartered.

1998

The number of charter public schools in Michigan topped 106 for the 1997-98 academic year.

1999

In July, CMU adopted detailed and comprehensive Educational Service Provider (ESP) policies, which became a national model for establishing arms-length relationships between charter school boards and their service providers. The cap on the number of schools that can be authorized by state public universities (150 schools total) was reached. A bill was signed into law that created a new type of charter school, "strict discipline academies," to serve court-placed and suspended students. After drawing national attention for closing Sierra Leone Educational Outreach Academy, Jim Goenner appeared on ABC-TV's *20/20* with Ted Koppel.

2000

CMU played a leadership role in founding the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). CMU commissioned Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services to conduct a comprehensive, objective analysis of each of the schools it chartered.

2001

The number of charter public schools in Michigan reached 184 serving 54,000 students for the 2000-01 academic year - 44 of those schools were located within the School District of the City of Detroit. CMU launched AOIS - a web-based software application designed to manage accountability for public education. Bay Mills Community College, a federal tribally controlled community college located in Michigan's upper peninsula, began chartering public schools. Their ability to do so was legally challenged by charter school opponents. With federal support, CMU transformed the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools into the National Charter Schools Institute as a resource to improve the performance and quality of charter schools.

2002

CMU played a leadership role in founding the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers. A follow-up audit by the Office of the Auditor General concluded that CMU's oversight systems were first rate. The spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Education called CMU the "Gold Standard" for charter school oversight and accountability. CMU played a leadership role in the establishment of the Michigan Public Education Finance Authority (MPEFA). This authority allowed charter schools to borrow short- and long-term money at tax-exempt rates.

2003

CMU developed and implemented the Individualized School Performance Review (ISPR) - an assessment and evaluation system used to enhance school performance and accountability. A bill creating Part 6c of the Revised School Code became law. This allowed state public universities to charter up to 15 "urban high school academies" in the School District of the City of Detroit. Michigan charter schools celebrated the 10th anniversary of the charter school law being passed.

2004

CMU received a perfect score on the Michigan Department of Education's voluntary Authorizer Assurances and Verification audit. Ingham County Circuit Court judge dismissed the MEA lawsuit against Bay Mills Community College allowing it to charter schools within the School District of the City of Detroit. The MEA appealed the decision.

2005

CMU chartered its first strict discipline academy, ACE Academy, to serve students in Wayne County. The U.S. Department of Education highlighted the practices that made CMU one of America's outstanding authorizers. Central Academy, Countryside Charter School and International Academy of Flint - schools authorized by CMU - were ranked among the best performing high schools by U.S. News & World Report. 100% of elementary and middle schools authorized by CMU made Adequate Yearly Progress for the 2005-07 academic year.

2006

In August, the Michigan Court of Appeals reaffirmed an Ingham County Circuit Court judge's decision rejecting the MEA's claim that Bay Mills Community College could not legally authorize charter schools.

2007

CMU chartered its first strict discipline academy, ACE Academy, to serve students in Wayne County. The U.S. Department of Education highlighted the practices that made CMU one of America's outstanding authorizers. Central Academy, Countryside Charter School and International Academy of Flint - schools authorized by CMU - were ranked among the best performing high schools by U.S. News & World Report. 100% of elementary and middle schools authorized by CMU made Adequate Yearly Progress for the 2006-07 academic year.

2008

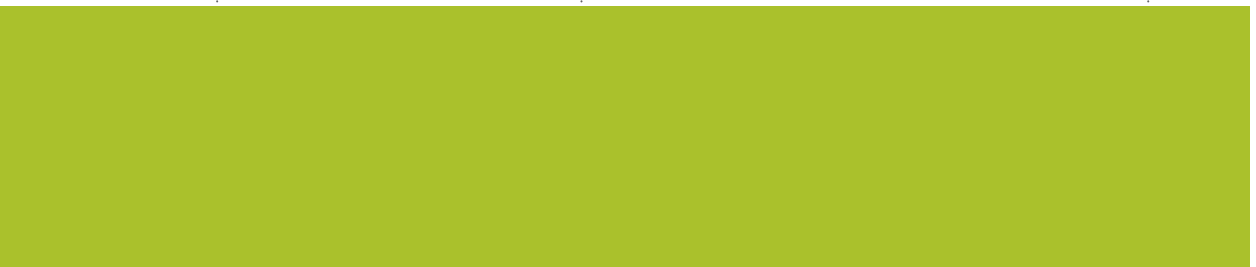
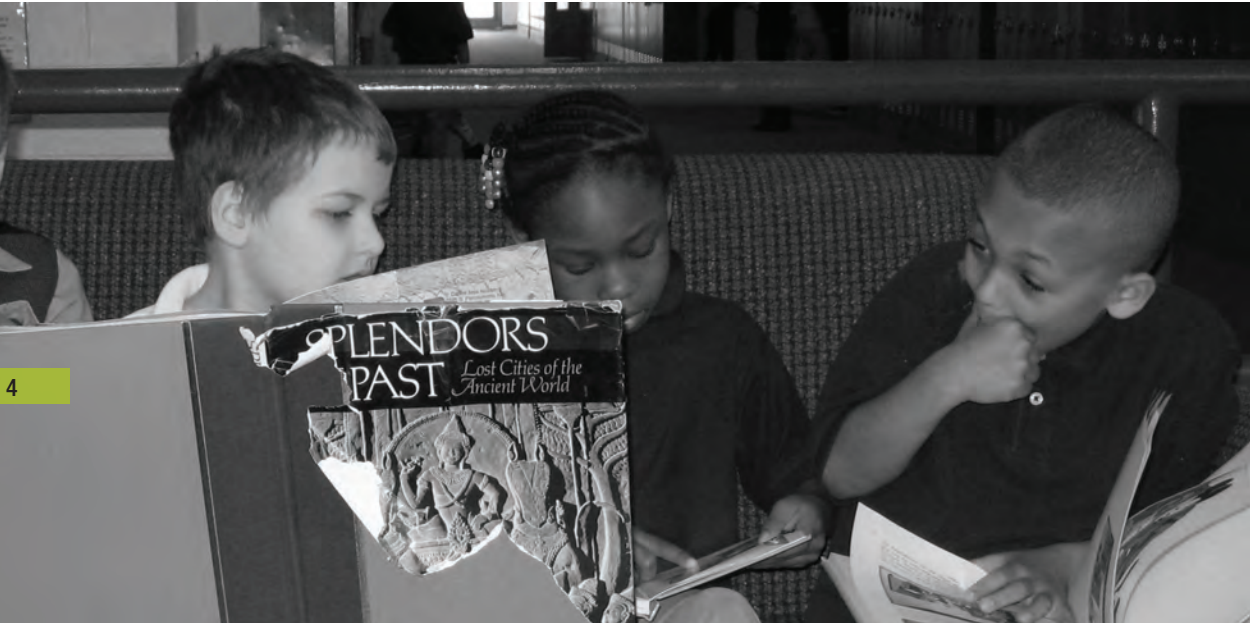
Countryside Charter School and International Academy of Flint - schools authorized by CMU - were ranked among the best performing high schools by U.S. News & World Report for the second year in a row. AOIS was selected by a competitive RFP process by the District of Columbia Charter School Board in Washington DC to assist them with their 82 charter schools. In the 2007-08 school year, the number of students attending Michigan's charter schools topped 100,000, or approximately 6% of total state enrollment, for the first time - 48 of those schools were located within the School District of the City of Detroit.

2009

On January 14, Michigan charter schools celebrated the 15th anniversary of the charter school law being passed. In April, Jim Goenner was invited to testify before the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor on how supporting outstanding charter schools could help build an innovative, world-class American school system. In July, Attorney General Mike Cox issued an opinion clarifying the charter school law and the definition of a first class school district, which allowed community colleges to charter schools within the School District of the City of Detroit.

2009

Michigan had 233 charter public schools for the 2008-09 academic year, which served more than 100,000 students - 48 of those schools were located within the School District of the City of Detroit and served more than 30,000 students. Canton Charter Academy, a school chartered by CMU, was Michigan's top performing school on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). That was the first time a charter school earned that distinction. Canton Charter Academy had tied for first place the year before.



IN THE 2007-08 SCHOOL YEAR, THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS ATTENDING MICHIGAN'S CHARTER SCHOOLS TOPPED 100,000, OR APPROXIMATELY 6% OF TOTAL STATE ENROLLMENT, FOR THE FIRST TIME - 48 OF THOSE SCHOOLS WERE LOCATED WITHIN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CITY OF DETROIT.



1 Leonard Wolfe, Governor John Engler and Richard McLellan during the signing of the charter school legislation into law, January 14, 1994. 2 Teacher and students at El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Academy, Lansing, 1996 (Photo By Robert Barclay). 3 Cover of Time, 1994. 4 Sixth grade students reading to kindergartners at Capital Area Academy, 2009. 5 Students at Linden Charter Academy, 2009. 6 Jim Goenner testifying before Congress, 2009. 7 Graduating seniors from Michigan Technical Academy, 2009.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

reacts to 'the new kid in school'

WHEN **David Frederick** and his wife, **Hildi Paulson**, started New Branches Academy in 1995, David recalled how the relationships they had always enjoyed with their local intermediate school district changed quickly from when they operated a private school within the district.

“It was always my hope that we could all work together,” said **Paulson**, who served on a curriculum council at the ISD. “We did eventually work together, but I always felt that tension. I always thought it would be good if we could just focus on what’s best for the children.

“I would tell parents that our school was not the best for every child. Different children need different kinds of educational settings and situations, and I don’t think any one school is the best school for every child. To me, that is exactly why it was important to have choice.”

Sid Smith, long-time CMU Board of Trustees member, said the hostility from traditional schools wasn’t usually subtle. He recalled the much-publicized actions of a local superintendent in Southeast Michigan, who in 1995 sent an angry letter to the university president, **Leonard Plachta**.

The superintendent wrote that the district would refuse to hire CMU graduates as teachers, prohibit CMU students from earning their student teaching credits in his district and refuse to recommend CMU to its graduating seniors as a preferred institution for higher learning.

While the superintendent recanted quickly under public and media pressure, the publicity echoed around the state. His actions prompted the Michigan Legislature to pass laws aimed directly at the types of boycotts the superintendent proposed.

The university’s commitment was tested early and often during the initial years.

“We saw a decrease in alumni giving from teachers who graduated from CMU during the first couple of years,” **Smith** said. “And we got some pretty bad publicity in some areas of the state. But we weren’t going to give up the ship, because we felt that we had the right mission. It was clear, it was specific, and we felt we were doing much more in the state of Michigan for kids and accountability than any other organization was. I think today we can proudly raise our heads and point to the data to prove that’s true.”

*dave frederick
and hildi paulson*

DAVID FREDERICK IS THE KIND OF EDUCATOR FOR WHICH CHARTER SCHOOLS WERE MADE. AFTER GAINING EXPERIENCE AS A TEACHER IN THE GRAND RAPIDS PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, FREDERICK STRUCK OUT ON HIS OWN IN 1971 TO FOUND A SMALL PRIVATE SCHOOL CALLED THE CLIMBING TREE. THE SCHOOL WAS LOCATED IN INNER-CITY GRAND RAPIDS, AND OFFERED A CREATIVE FOCUS HE SAID HE COULD NEVER HAVE TRIED IN A TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL.

TOGETHER WITH HIS WIFE, HILDI PAULSON, THEY BEGAN NEW BRANCHES ACADEMY 1994 AS ONE OF THE FIRST CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL ACADEMIES. WITH MORE THAN TWO DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN OPERATING A SCHOOL UNDER THEIR BELTS, THEY WERE EARLY LEADERS FOR THE CHARTER MOVEMENT. BOTH ARE NOW RETIRED, BUT NEW BRANCHES ACADEMY CONTINUES TO OPERATE IN GRAND RAPIDS.



Margaret Trimer-Hartley recalled the MEA's attempt in 1997 to make a supportive move toward charter public schools as a great example of how the union tried to find a way to reconcile itself to a growing educational movement. But she said its policy had trouble finding a home among a divided membership and resistant union officials.

"It was part of a journey toward acceptance that charters are here to stay," **Trimer-Hartley** said. "It was driven in a practical way by a need to secure and grow membership. There are a lot of teachers in Michigan who aren't unionized, but who care very deeply about innovation, and care very deeply about getting it right for kids. So there was that center of the membership that was advocating for some openness, and for some potential opportunity in the charter realm."

But she said the politics within the organization became steadily more confusing as members tried to employ the policy on the ground. One obvious challenge was the politically charged history of charters. But there was another question: how could the state's largest teacher union support a system of non-union educators?

While the union officially had endorsed charter public schools that operated under the law, leadership and membership battled regularly over how the official position was to be applied to specific schools and situations.

"To me, it was a lost opportunity to lead," she said. "What we need now, more than anything else and especially in urban schools, is creativity, innovation and personalization. These are things that so many education leaders care deeply about, but things are so politicized [at MEA] that you get shut down when you bring it up."

Margaret Trimer-Hartley left the MEA in 2007 to lead the development of University Prep Science and Math charter school in Detroit, now entering its second year. It was founded by **Doug Ross**, who served as Director of Commerce under former **Governor James Blanchard**.

She is quick to note that her own politics have not changed, nor has her commitment to helping children succeed. For her, the issue is strictly about helping kids.

"I just saw another route to the same end that a lot of my caring professional colleagues at MEA are also looking for," she said.

Joann Neuroth also served in **Governor James Blanchard's** administration and later was part of a private consulting practice that advised traditional school districts. She said that her consulting group, all Democrats, initially opposed charter public schools but eventually came full circle in support of the idea – around the same time a divided state Legislature was approving the legislation to create them.

"Our early thinking was that we didn't want to splinter out and just salvage some kids. We wanted to fix the whole system," she said. "But the more we looked at it, the more we realized charters were essential, because the traditional schools we were working with needed the flexibility of small settings to 'prove a concept' before imposing sustainable reform strategies on a district as a whole."

Justin King was President of the Michigan Association of School Boards for 20 years before he retired in 2008. A veteran leader in education circles around the state, King's organization opposed charters early in the debate. He noted it is important to remember that in the mid-1990s, charters were a new idea. Many districts adopted a defensive posture to charter schools simply because they saw them as a threat.

"We opposed it, initially, and I think that we made an error," **King** said. "Michigan was into charter schools so early among the states, it was a new idea and I think there was a fear about charter schools. Had we had the perspective of seeing other states get involved before it started in Michigan, I think we may have had a different perspective."



Photo by Madalyn Ruggiero

margaret trimer-hartley

MARGARET TRIMER-HARTLEY IS A CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPAL WHO BOASTS AN UNUSUAL PATH TO LEADERSHIP. SHE COVERED EDUCATION AS A JOURNALIST WITH THE DETROIT FREE PRESS FROM 1989 TO 1995 AND LEFT TO JOIN THE MICHIGAN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION. SHE SERVED AS THE UNION'S DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS UNTIL 2006. IN 2007, MARGARET JOINED NEW URBAN LEARNING AS THE SUPERINTENDENT OF UNIVERSITY PREP SCIENCE AND MATH MIDDLE SCHOOL IN DETROIT.

The development of OVERSIGHT:

How CMU built the road
while driving on it

*“Along with the increased
scrutiny came the realization
that no existing public education
resources or assistance would
be made available to charter public
schools. Thus, we rolled up our sleeves
and created new entities.”*

— **Mary Kay Shields**

CENTRAL Michigan University established itself quickly as the foremost university to charter public schools in Michigan. Its leaders note that while the drive to succeed and lead had positioned CMU as the lightning rod for the political attacks that marked the early years of Michigan’s education reform, it also gave CMU substantial experience to lead a conversation – in Michigan and beyond – about best practices for managing charter schools.

The initial challenge was not only to develop sound oversight practices, but create a structure that would account for future growth. With an ever-growing waiting list for students to get into charter schools, and the cap for university-authorized schools met, CMU leaders realized that parental choice for quality educational options was not going to diminish.

Charter leaders from CMU were caught between the demand for flexibility and responsiveness from their charters, and the demand of the CMU Board of Trustees for “audit-proof” oversight.

“The original idea was that charter public schools would be free from all the rules and regulations,” **Jim Goenner** recalled. “The reality in Michigan was that it simply wasn’t true. At times, as the university, we were the bearer of bad news. We were under a lot of scrutiny then, and still are today. We have to dot the I’s and cross the T’s.”

The early years included some missteps. Michigan's Auditor General released a report in 1997 that was critical of CMU's oversight systems. The audit called on CMU to meet a seemingly impossible standard – certify that each charter was in compliance with its contract and all applicable law. At the time, not even the Michigan Department of Education could define what that meant or how it expected CMU to operationalize the legislative requirements.

“Along with the increased scrutiny came the realization that no existing public education resources or assistance would be made available to charter public schools,” said **Mary Kay Shields**, who was also the first President and CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute. “Thus, we rolled up our sleeves and created new entities.”

For CMU, the leadership position and the early experiences with contracts, policymaking and oversight gave birth to a vision for a new way to lead. The National Charter Schools Institute was founded in 1996 on CMU's campus. Originally named the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools, its mission was to provide help to charter school pioneers who needed information and assistance to start a charter public school.

In 2001, as the result of federal support, the Michigan Resource Center for Charter Schools grew into the National Charter Schools Institute, and is currently a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to cultivate the success of charter schooling. Since 2001, it has worked throughout the country with authorizers, boards, school leaders, teachers, policymakers and others to provide technical assistance and support in identifying and implementing effective strategies that provide children with the world's best educational opportunities.



Former CMU Board of Trustees member **Sid Smith** is on the leadership board for the Institute. He noted that each meeting opens with someone writing the word “kids” on a white board so that everyone is continually reminded of why he or she is there.

“We’re not here to be a shiny organization,” **Smith** said. “We’re here to help children get the opportunity that America is supposed to give them. The most important thing anyone in a school of any kind can do is to keep the kids first.”

Smith noted that the federal funding that created the Institute came during President Clinton’s administration, and he is encouraged by President Barack Obama’s remarks about educational choice and the role for charter schools in the future.

In addition to disseminating its expertise through training sessions, the Institute also publishes its research and best practices. To date, it has also published numerous monographs that address charter public school issues and two nationally acclaimed books: *Charter School Board University* and *The Seven Outs: Strategic Planning Made Easy for Charter Schools*.

“We’re really proud of what we’ve done and we’re doing better every year,” **Smith** said. “Our focus is on authorizers, schools and how to teach school boards to be a board. We’ve got several books out, and we travel around the country, talking to states, authorizers, school leaders and board members helping them form their boards and structure their accountability and raise their performance.”

In 1999, CMU issued a comprehensive set of Educational Service Provider Policies to help charter school boards navigate and oversee their management contracts. It was the first of many policies and guides developed to help charter public schools monitor their compliance and help CMU fulfill its oversight mandate.

In December 2001, CMU launched its Authorizer Oversight Information System (AOIS), a web-based software program that streamlined and automated the regulatory reporting process for CMU’s charter schools. It was a voluntary move to self-monitor and enable the authorizer to help the schools ensure their own success.

“We’ve been blessed as a university to have the capacity to build systems,” said **Goenner**. “Our goal was to streamline and automate the regulatory reporting process so that school leaders would have more time to spend with students than filling out paperwork. That was the genesis of what we know as AOIS today.

“It really has helped put the regulatory reporting on auto pilot so the schools can put more of their time on working with students. To see AOIS be implemented by authorizers, charter schools and even traditional schools across the nation has been, in itself, a reward.”

Where the 1997 audit from the Auditor General’s office was critical of CMU’s authorizing practices, a follow-up audit by MDE in 2002 gave CMU a nearly perfect score for establishing sound policies and procedures to oversee charter schools and hold them accountable for improving student achievement. The spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Education dubbed the university’s system “the gold standard in public school academy accountability.”

In 2005, a voluntary “assurances and verification” audit performed by the Michigan Department of Education also found CMU’s oversight to be excellent. CMU’s audit report noted that its 18 critical oversight processes were “complete, well-documented, used consistently, and continuously improved on the basis of experience,” and concluded that CMU’s “systems will help us [MDE] reassure Michigan citizens who express concern about the public accountability for PSA boards with regards to their operations and policies.”

Joann Neuroth, who retired in 2008 as head of the Michigan Department of Education’s charter schools office, noted that many of CMU’s schools had indeed found a path to success.

As the state official responsible for gathering and analyzing data submitted by charter public schools for the department’s mandatory annual report to the state Legislature, she said her data analysis was unable to show that most charter schools were outperforming their traditional counterparts. However, she did find that some schools under CMU and other authorizers were doing better than one would predict, given their socioeconomics. The department calls them the “Beating the Odds” schools.

BEATING

the Odds

Studies indicate that the single best predictor of student academic performance is socioeconomic status—achievement generally falls as poverty levels rise.

But a handful of charter schools have found creative ways to defy the historic predictor. Year after year, the Michigan Department of Education reports that charter public schools are making real progress at closing this achievement gap while serving a predominantly large share of our state's poor students.

Central Michigan University is particularly proud of its “Beating the Odds” schools – places where more than **50 percent** of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch but still demonstrate academic gains. These students demonstrate high levels of proficiency, greater than **60 percent** achievement in the key subjects of English, language arts and mathematics.

Of the **52** schools that beat the odds in 2008, **18** were authorized by CMU. Twelve of those schools have beat the odds every year since MDE started compiling the list, demonstrating how charters are both improving and sustaining high performance over time.

It's great news for the kids and parents who came to charter schools seeking a better education, and CMU sees its “Beating the Odds” schools as a symbol for what every charter public school can offer – innovative ways to reach and inspire all students to seek excellence in themselves.

joann neuroth

AS AN EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT AND FORMER APPOINTEE UNDER GOVERNOR JAMES BLANCHARD, JOANN NEUROTH ADMITS SHE WAS AN UNLIKELY CONVERT TO SUPPORTING CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS. HOWEVER, SHE SAID HER EXTENSIVE WORK WITH TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS LED HER AND SEVERAL COLLEAGUES TO THE INEVITABLE CONCLUSION THAT INNOVATION IN THE EDUCATION ARENA NEEDS A PETRI DISH, A PLACE TO TEST NEW IDEAS, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE A NATURAL IDEA TO FILL THAT NICHE. MS. NEUROTH LEFT HER CONSULTING PRACTICE TO WORK FOR ANOTHER BLANCHARD APPOINTEE, DOUG ROSS, ON THE OPENING OF NEW URBAN LEARNING / UNIVERSITY PREPARATORY ACADEMY, A DETROIT CHARTER SCHOOL. SHE SPENT FIVE YEARS AS HEAD OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S PUBLIC SCHOOL ACADEMIES PROGRAM, RETIRING IN 2008 AND RETURNING TO PRIVATE CONSULTING.

“We’re here to help children get the opportunity that America is supposed to give them. The most important thing anyone in a school of any kind can do is to keep the kids first.”

— **W. Sidney (Sid) Smith**

Closer inspection of these exceptional schools revealed a diverse array of programs, focuses and methodologies for reaching and inspiring students, but no “magic bullet” for success.

“Charter schools were doing very well the same things we are telling every other school in the state to do if it wants to do school improvement,” **Neuroth** said. “Things like using data to know their kids, making relationships in small classrooms with them, individualizing curriculum, figuring out ways to get kids to apply what they’ve learned. Perhaps most importantly, charter schools were finding ways to break through the natural reluctance of kids that are not used to thinking of themselves as succeeding in school, teaching them to have aspirations for college. Those things were common, even when particular approaches or looked different in every school.”

While CMU was excelling as an authorizer, many of the schools around the state were reporting continued challenges with getting access to long-term financing for facilities. CMU, through the National Charter Schools Institute, approached the Engler administration with a unique solution to jump start the access to private financing by demonstrating a solid track record through public financing. Engler responded in 2001, with an Executive Order creating the Michigan Public Educational Facilities Authority (MPEFA).

“Here was another door closed whereby traditional public schools have available separate financing avenues for buildings and the charter public schools were caught in a catch-22,” said **Mary Kay Shields**, who left the National Charter Schools Institute to launch the new finance authority. “Charter public schools could not receive public funds at reasonable rates, and due to no credit history could not receive fair private financing.”

Since its inception, MPEFA has provided charter schools with significant access to the credit market. It immediately resulted in nearly \$5 million in credit enhancement funds, which established a revolving fund for charter schools’ long-term borrowing needs. In addition, providing charter schools with access to a reasonable credit rating and tax-exempt status resulted in substantial reductions in interest rates.

The lower interest rates were also aided through successful authorizing practices. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that Central Michigan University’s oversight model resulted in lenders feeling more secure, and consequently, providing lower rates to schools chartered by CMU.

Perhaps MPEFA’s largest victory, though, is that it continues to exist. Its solid implementation strategy successfully prepared it to weather future challenges, including the current “credit crunch,” which has deeply affected the mortgage and personal credit markets.

mary kay shields

MARY KAY SHIELDS SERVES AS DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS AT CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY. AS SPECIAL ADVISOR TO MICHIGAN GOVERNOR JOHN ENGLER, SHE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT IN MICHIGAN – A ROLE MOST OFTEN DESCRIBED AS THE ARCHITECT OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE NECESSARY TO SUPPORT CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS. SHE WAS THE FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MICHIGAN PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES AUTHORITY AND SERVED AS FOUNDING PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOLS INSTITUTE.



Authorizers unite to help

STUDENTS

THE state's public university authorizers reached their legislatively imposed cap of 150 charter schools in 1999. However, in 2004, through the openings created under the cap by closing schools that failed to perform and non-university authorizers issuing charters, 17 new schools opened. The student count in charter public schools rose to 83,000.

As the schools themselves grew and built their respective track records around the state, the community of authorizers began to establish itself. In 1995, an informal roundtable of authorizers -- **Patrick Sandro**, the special assistant for charter schools at Grand Valley State University; **Wayne F. Vasher**, director of school and university partnerships at Saginaw Valley State University; **Robert Mills**, director of charter schools at Central Michigan University; and **Joseph Pollack**, director of charter schools at Eastern Michigan University -- met frequently to discuss their challenges, practices and successes.

Seven years later, in 2002, with a handful more authorizers chartering schools in the state, the roundtable officially became the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers (the Council) and evolved into a professional organization. The Council's current membership includes all eight public university authorizers, two intermediate school district authorizers, and Bay Mills Community College.

The Council's work helps build capacity throughout the charter sector by leveraging the knowledge and experience that allows authorizers to study what is working elsewhere to improve quality in charter schools, in Michigan and across the nation. Ultimately, the Council has set the standard for charter school authorizers in developing practices, policies, and procedures.

The Council also has published several resources to help dispel misinformation about charter school oversight and accountability. Among these are *Balanced Leadership for Lasting Change*, a comprehensive guide to charter school oversight, and a publication on the history and experiences of Michigan's authorizers. Both of these have informed the policy discussion, and have also been a resource for potential authorizers, ensuring they have an accurate picture of what it takes to be effective.



COUNCIL

Members

Authorizer # of Schools

Central Michigan University	58
Bay Mills Community College	41
Grand Valley State University	28
Ferris State University	18
Saginaw Valley State University	18
Eastern Michigan University	8
Oakland University	8
Lake Superior State University	7
Wayne RESA	7
Northern Michigan University	5
Midland County RESA	2

BAY MILLS

becomes an authorizer

THE only fully accredited tribal college in Michigan, Bay Mills Community College was established in 1984 by the Bay Mills Indian Community to serve the Native American population throughout the state.

Because it is a community college, Bay Mills was not bound by the statewide cap on charter schools. Community colleges as a class of authorizers are not subject to a cap; they can charter an unlimited number of schools within their enrollment districts and their schools do not impact the cap.

Bay Mills' road to chartering began in 1996, when it engaged in extensive deliberation with the state Legislature, the governor's office and the attorney general in an attempt to issue contracts under state law. At that time, opponents vigorously resisted the authorization of any new charter school by the governing board of a federal tribally controlled community college.

"Our community has always placed a high value on education, both to help future generations advance but also as a way for us to pass down our culture and heritage from one generation to the next," **said Mickey Parish**, President of Bay Mills Community College. "Our college exists to serve a historically underserved population, and to help them improve their lives. Chartering K-12 schools is an extension of this mission, and we are proud that the schools we charter provide urban, minority, and poor students throughout Michigan with educational opportunities they would not otherwise have."

“Our college exists to serve a historically underserved population, and to help them improve their lives. Chartering K-12 schools is an extension of this mission, and we are proud that the schools we charter provide urban, minority, and poor students throughout Michigan with educational opportunities they would not otherwise have.”

— Mickey Parish

An amendment to the Revised School Code in 2000 specifically outlined the school’s authority, and an opinion issued in 2001, by then-Michigan Attorney General **Jennifer Granholm** paved the way for Bay Mills to become a charter school authorizer. Its first two charter schools opened in the fall of 2001. The Attorney General’s opinion stated that Bay Mills could charter a school anywhere in its service area – which means anywhere in Michigan.

In early 2005, the MEA filed another lawsuit. This time the union challenged the Attorney General’s opinion relative to Bay Mills’ service area, alleging that Bay Mills illegally contracted with an outside firm to perform its oversight responsibilities; that the community college board members are not publicly elected or appointed; and that members of the community college’s board cannot be removed by the state’s top education official.

Richard McLellan and **Leonard Wolfe** of the Lansing law firm Dykema Gossett, PLLC, who helped author the original charter schools legislation and defended it against the MEA’s first court challenge, returned to court to argue for Bay Mills.

The court tossed the suit in August 2006, noting that MEA’s lawsuit had “not a shred of evidence” that the union had grounds to sue.

As of 2009, Bay Mills has expanded its presence from the initial two schools to 41 schools serving approximately 15,000 students. Consistent with the college’s mission, most of the schools are in urban communities serving minority and at-risk student populations.

Charters **GAIN** as urban schools **DECLINE**

MEDIA attention in 2005 drew a strong focus on the demand for charter public schools in Detroit. The district closed 34 schools that year, and the local diocese closed 18 Catholic schools. Surrounding suburban districts made headlines for trying to keep Detroit's youth out of their schools, while a charter school in Southfield – Bradford Academy – invested \$3.6 million in a new building to accommodate an increase from 440 to 850 students.

Statewide, 98,000 students greeted the 2006-07 school year in one of 229 charter public schools around the state.

That also was the year the Michigan Department of Education issued a report on charter schools noting that charters had an average 86 percent graduation rate – 12 percent higher than their host districts. Further, the schools had achieved this success while operating on \$2,612 less per student each year.

At the same time, Grand Rapids public schools tried to curb the number of students it would allow to leave under the state's schools of choice law. The public backlash was scathing, and the situation underscored the continued strain between failing schools and frustrated parents.

This period marked some notable turns in public opinion on charter schools. In Detroit, a district staunchly opposed to charter schools early on, former Mayor **Kwame Kilpatrick** in 2007 called for 25 new charters, saying he would support "all kinds of schools."

By the 2008-09 school year, Michigan was home to 233 charter public schools, serving more than 100,000 kids. The system still has its challenges, but it also has developed operating systems, accountability measures unlike anything ever offered in Michigan, and business protocols that help charter public schools do more with fewer per-pupil funding dollars.

"Michigan's charter schools have endured and succeeded, defying naysayers and opponents," said Michigan Association of Public Schools President **Dan Quisenberry**. "It's no longer about the type of school — charter public or traditional public. It's about creating 21st century schools that will prepare our children for a strong future in a global economy."

Retired Michigan Chamber of Commerce Executive **Jim Barrett** said the business community around Michigan maintains strong support for what charter public schools are contributing to the landscape.

"The experience with charter schools has provided some excellent outcomes in student achievement," he said. "Where charter schools haven't performed, they've lost their charter. That's unlike traditional public schools, where underperforming schools continue to operate."

Charter schools have established a track record of student performance that shows them doing what they set out to do – using choice, change and accountability to transform education.

“Michigan’s charter schools have endured and succeeded, defying naysayers and opponents. It’s no longer about the type of school — charter public or traditional public. It’s about creating 21st century schools that will prepare our children for a strong future in a global economy.”

— **Dan Quisenberry**

“We’ve seen a number of urban districts that have not been able to find a way to succeed at their charge, which is a mass public education of kids who come from disadvantaged homes,” said former Lt. Governor **Dick Posthumus**. “Parents are looking for alternatives to what they are finding in their current schools. We now see support for charter public schools coming from those that may have been originally opposed to them.”

Some of the early critics remain skeptical. State Board of Education President **Kathleen Straus** is one. She contends that Michigan’s charter school landscape is dominated too heavily by for-profit management companies, which in her estimation have limited community involvement and innovation.

But even formerly staunch critics and Democratic voices like MDE’s **Joann Neuroth** say they believe there is a world of possibility awaiting Michigan’s charter school community in the next 15 years.

“I think that there’s a lot of hope, because some who do have that pioneering attitude are succeeding at this,” **Neuroth** said. “And to the extent that the authorizers are willing and getting serious and learning the discipline of their trade so they can organize them, and getting rid of schools that are not performing to make room under the cap for some others, I think there’s some real potential for charter schools to step up and make a stronger showing about how different they can become.”

The REAL PROOF of charter schools

“We see that we’re building momentum, we’re building proof points, we’re showing success, and we think that in the long run, the charter public school idea is going to be key to helping transform Michigan.”

— Jim Goenner

THE charter school movement achieved another goal, one of vital importance to its future that cannot be measured on a spread sheet or documented in a report. It is one that visitors see when they go to charter public schools, and comes from the fact that the people in the charter school have chosen to be there. From the school board members who take a constitutional oath of office to serve in the best interest of the students, to the teachers applying innovative techniques to classroom instruction, and to the students and parents who want a better opportunity for academic success, Michigan’s charter public schools share a unique atmosphere of passion for learning and focus on students.

Eighteen-year-old **Krystal Leaphart**, who graduated from a Michigan charter school in May 2009, said she noticed the difference ever since she first came to Detroit’s Old Redford Academy. Upon arriving there from the Detroit Public School system at the start of her freshman year, she said the two things she noticed immediately were the newer text books and more attentive teachers and administrators.

“At my other schools, it would take days to get to talk to a counselor about something,” **Leaphart** said. “Here, they really paid attention to our needs.”

She said her mother was looking for a safer education environment, and that the school’s use of uniforms was part of the initial appeal. But she was looking for an educational setting where she could grow, and the honors student said she found it at Old Redford Academy.

“The biggest class I ever had here was 18 kids,” **Leaphart** said. “With the smaller classes, the teachers could focus more on individual students. Knowing I had the opportunity to get more attention if I needed it felt really good.”

She now attends Washington D.C.’s Howard University, studying computer science and math. She said the charter public school experience has helped her get a solid foundation for her future.

“We talk about the differences between this school and traditional public schools all the time,” she said. “I’m glad I attended Old Redford Academy.”



Krystal Leaphart

KRYSTAL LEAPHART IS ONE OF THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF MICHIGAN SCHOOL KIDS WHO MADE A CHOICE FOR HER FUTURE BY ATTENDING A CHARTER SCHOOL. SHE AND HER MOM CHOSE OLD REDFORD ACADEMY FOR KRYSTAL'S HIGH SCHOOL CAREER, AND WHEN THE DETROIT TEEN GRADUATED IN MAY 2009, SHE WAS AN HONORS STUDENT WITH A CLEAR VISION FOR HER OWN FUTURE. SHE NOW ATTENDS WASHINGTON D.C.'S HOWARD UNIVERSITY, STUDYING COMPUTER SCIENCE AND MATH.

State leaders, past and present, all agree that charter public schools – because of their leaner business models, strong focus on student achievement and deep commitment to accountability – will serve a critical role in the future of an economically-challenged Michigan.

“In my view, this is the civil rights question of this decade,” former Lt. Governor **Dick Posthumus** said. “There really is a civil right to give a decent education to every child. And I think everyone – Republicans, Democrats, conservative, liberal, urban, rural – all want that to take place. But up until now, there’s been no way to guarantee that. And while there is no single key, charter public schools have been one key to opening the door for disadvantaged kids to get the education they deserve.”

On its 15th anniversary as a charter public school authorizer, Central Michigan University currently authorizes 58 charter public schools that serve nearly 30,000 students. Today, more than ever, CMU's founding commitment to choice and competition to create better education remains strong at the heart of its mission.

CMU President **Leonard Plachta's** wife, **Louise**, recalled her husband's passion for education and helping children succeed, and said the university's progress to date is what he envisioned.

“He would be proud of where Central is at today,” she said. “He had a lot of faith in Jim Goenner, and encouraged him.”

Jim Goenner said that while the charter public schools are still a controversial topic in some districts, the days of dealing with questions about standards and practices are fading fast.

Even the United States Department of Education has highlighted the university's practices as a model for excellence.

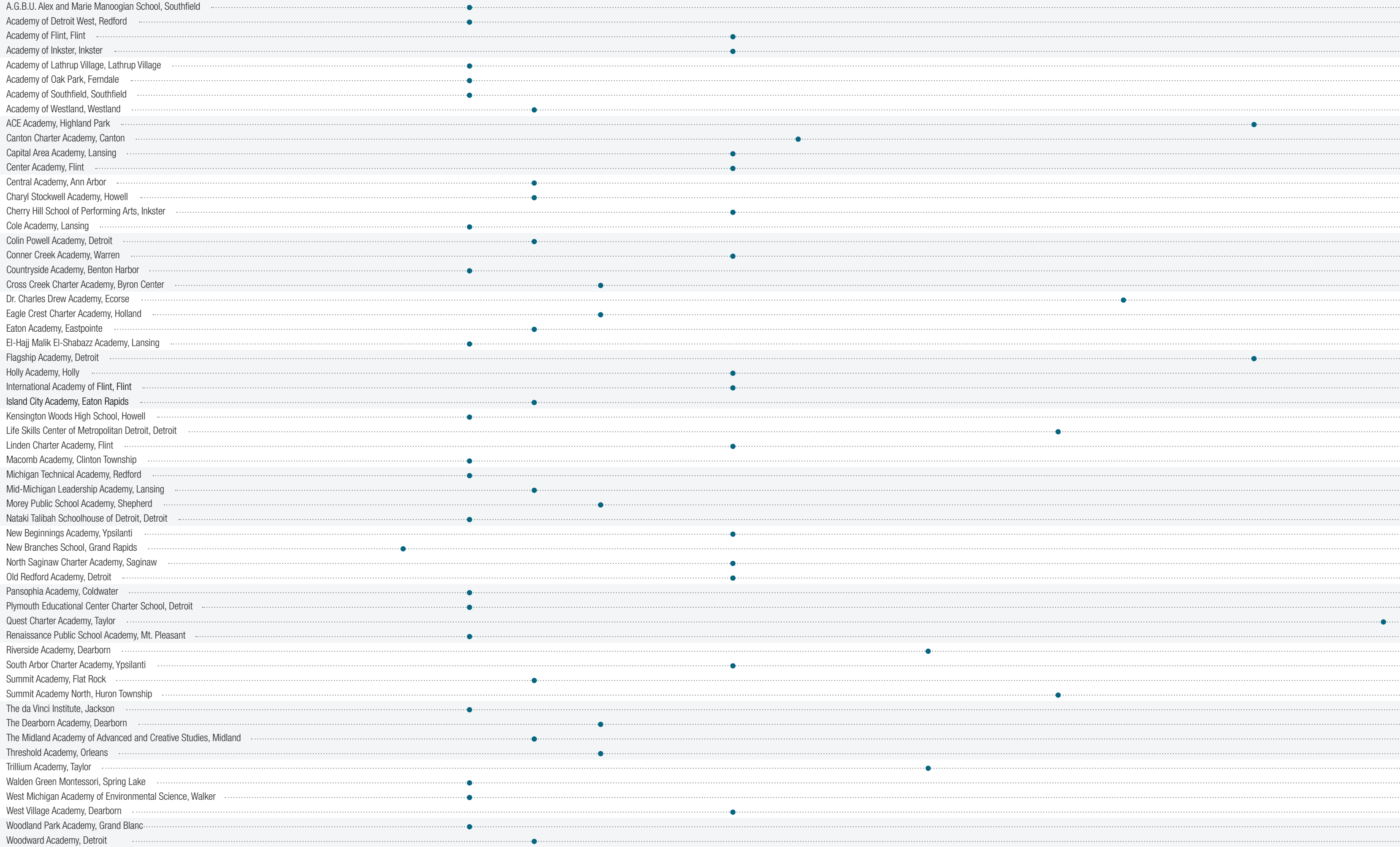
“I'm often amazed at how far we've come, but we are not done,” he said. “Education will always be debated, as long as there are people. Our job is to try to advance opportunities for children as far and as fast as we can.”

“We see that we're building momentum, we're building proof points, we're showing success, and we think that in the long run, the charter public school idea is going to be key to helping transform Michigan.”

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