

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Study will provide new push for charter schools in St. Louis

By David Hunn

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Tuesday, September 1, 2009

ST. LOUIS — Mayor Francis Slay's office is poised to launch a new search for charter schools that would target neighborhoods with the least access to good public schools.

The campaign, to begin this fall, follows a study requested by the mayor's office and set to be released today.

The study concludes that more than 75 percent of the public school students in the city attend in buildings — whether independent charter schools or district schools — where students recorded poor test scores.

Moreover, of the 60,000 school-age children in St. Louis, only about 8,000 live near public schools with higher test scores.

The study is the first to compare performance in district and charter schools to population, ZIP code by ZIP code. It identifies six areas, four in north St. Louis and two in south St. Louis, with the worst records.

St. Louis now joins a trend backed by the U.S. secretary of education and popping up in cities across the country. The goal is to plan more carefully when closing underperforming schools and opening new ones.

Charter school advocates are especially interested in such studies as they seek the best locations to open new buildings. This study was paid for by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, at the mayor's request.

The association hired IFF, a Chicago-based nonprofit that lends money to schools and other nonprofits for buildings.

IFF analyzed each St. Louis public school's enrollment, capacity and performance on state standardized tests, and then compared those figures to student addresses and population numbers.

The results contain few bright spots. For instance, just one neighborhood school in the city — Herzog elementary, in far north St. Louis — met state testing standards in 2007-2008, the year the study reviewed. Three magnet schools also met the bar, but not one charter school did.

"This is a wake-up call for charter schools in St. Louis, who are performing at the same unacceptably low levels as the rest," said Greg Richmond, president of the charter authorizer association. "Some of them need to be closed."

IFF intended to use Missouri's state passing rates as the benchmark for a "good school." But with only four schools meeting them in 2007-2008, it created its own standard: For the school to qualify as "Tier 1," about one-quarter of its students had to pass the tests in English and math.

This is the third such study in the country conducted by IFF, with two more on the way, in Denver and Milwaukee.

The first two, in Chicago in 2004 and 2008, radically changed the way the public school CEO — Arne Duncan, at the time — viewed opening and closing schools.

"Up until that time, charter schools were located throughout the city, wherever they wanted to be," said Richmond, who worked with Duncan on the first Chicago study.

Instead of identifying struggling schools and building new ones, Chicago Public Schools shored up ramshackle structures, with little thought to academic performance. But after the first report, Richmond said, Duncan began closing schools that couldn't pass muster, and then seeking new schools, mostly charters, to fill the void.

Duncan, now the U.S. secretary of education, said during a recent visit to St. Louis that the IFF study was "hugely helpful," and the basis for his reform strategies.

Duncan has now adopted the theory as one point he discusses on his tours — to close the lowest-performing schools in the country, and replace them with good schools.

Leaders at St. Louis Public Schools have not yet said whether the study here could be used in the same fashion.

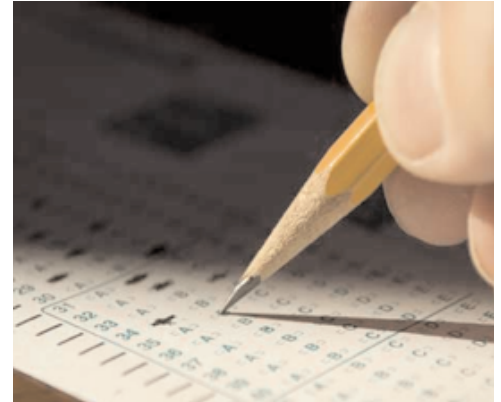
But CEO Rick Sullivan and Superintendent Kelvin Adams said they were happy to get the data and would refer to the study when making future decisions.

They agreed they need to focus on the schools falling the shortest on test scores and said they liked the competition brought by charters.

But Adams also pointed out a few problems with the study. Several district schools improved quite a bit this year, while a few others did worse. The study doesn't take into account that academic performance shifts over time.

"They looked at a slice in time," Adams said. The district, he said, must look at lasting improvement.

But the mayor's education aide, Robbyn Wahby, said the study addresses one barrier to



serving students: finding the right homes for charter schools.

Schools here, as in other cities, have been locating anywhere they can find good buildings. Wahby wants them to pick neighborhoods and populations instead. Now, she said, the city has a map showing where schools are needed.

Her office plans to approach local and national charter school groups this fall, asking them to send proposals to open schools in the areas identified in the study.

There are about 10,000 kids already enrolled in charter campuses in the city, though leaders have said they'd like to see bad schools close.

Some critics dismissed the IFF study as a ploy to get more charter schools into St. Louis.

"It sounds like a market analysis," said Peter Downs, president of the district's elected School Board, which was removed by the state two years ago but still discusses district issues. "It doesn't sound like something that asks how we improve schools."

Besides, Downs said, he knows of no evidence that adding charter schools will improve education in St. Louis.

It also may not be easy to convince parents to abandon their neighborhood schools.

Monday afternoon, at Lexington Elementary, located in one of the ZIP codes identified in the study, many parents and grandparents said they were happy with their school.

"They won't pass them until they're ready," said Lawrence Pittman, 61, whose two grandchildren are in fifth grade. "I'm real satisfied with them."

Valerie Schremp Hahn of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.