

Union woos teachers at charter schools

Effort dismays administrators

By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | June 15, 2005

A state teachers' union yesterday made its first move to recruit charter school teachers, setting the stage for a potential battle over control of the independent public schools.

The Massachusetts Federation of Teachers, the state's second largest teachers' union, which represents Boston and dozens of other school systems, sent letters to all 2,000 charter school teachers in the state, urging them, "Please join us!"

"These people have been around 10 years, and they're entitled to a voice at the workplace like other union teachers," said Ed Doherty, assistant to the federation's president.

The union offered the teachers an associate membership, which does not allow bargaining for pay, but the idea of charter school teachers joining unions dismays charter advocates. They say union representation for the teachers would undermine one of the strengths of the independently run schools: Charter schools are [free](#) from union rules and many state regulations, allowing teachers and administrators to make changes and decisions quickly, including firing an incompetent teacher or starting a new educational program.

"It would add another layer of bureaucracy and negotiations around scheduling, the calendar, performance reviews, and hiring and firing," said Spencer Blasdale, president of the Massachusetts Charter School Association and executive director of the Academy of the Pacific Rim, a Hyde Park charter school. "The big thing for me is it would decrease the autonomy and flexibility that we have to continue to improve things."

Since state law began allowing charter schools in 1993, the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers and other organizations have fought efforts to expand the number of them. Opponents criticize the way charter schools are funded, saying they drain [money](#) from regular public school systems.

The union is offering charter school teachers an associate membership for \$58 a year, which provides professional discounts, [life](#) insurance, and access to union events. If charter school teachers wanted to bargain collectively for pay and benefits, they would have to pay more in dues, which vary by area. Boston teachers, for example, pay more than \$700 a year for full membership.

About 70,000 of the state's teachers belong to unions. The Massachusetts Teachers Association, the state's largest teachers' union, has a few charter school teachers who are associate members, but has never actively recruited.

The federation views the associate memberships as a first step and eventually would like to form local unions at charter schools, Doherty said.

A spokeswoman at the state Department of [Education](#) said a charter school could form a union and have collective bargaining rights if 60 percent of the school's teachers endorsed the move.

Doherty said the union wants to [help](#) charter school teachers, who often struggle with low pay and an uncertain job future. Teachers' unions offer pay scales that tie salary increases to experience and offer greater job security than charter schools, Doherty said. Charter schools can be shut down if the state Board of [Education](#) decides they are failing. This year, the board voted to close two charter schools in Boston, putting many teachers out of work.

At one of the schools that were spared from closing this year, Boston Renaissance Charter School, teachers contacted the union two weeks ago about possibly joining. More than 70 percent of the 100 teachers at the K-8 school have said they would consider unionizing because they are concerned about long working hours, salaries, and job security, said Alana Greene, chairwoman of the school's faculty committee.

Elementary teachers at Renaissance work from 8 a.m. to 4:15 p.m., more than an hour longer than Boston's teachers.

Because of budget cuts, more than 20 teachers have to monitor students in the cafeteria, missing their own lunch breaks, Greene said. Some experienced Renaissance teachers also make \$10,000 less than their counterparts in Boston public schools who have the same years of experience and [education](#) level, Greene said. A teacher at the Renaissance with eight years of experience and a master's degree will make \$57,800 next school year; in Boston public schools, that teacher would make \$67,094, Greene said.

Roger Harris, headmaster and chief executive officer of the Renaissance Charter, said the school's administrators and board have tried addressing teachers' concerns.

"It appears many of the teachers aren't satisfied with the decisions that have been made," he said. "This could have a tremendous effect on the whole charter school movement. It's a difficult situation. I've been on both sides, and the jury is out."

Harris, who taught in Boston public schools for seven years and was an administrator for 17 years prior to becoming headmaster of Renaissance in 1998, said he was attracted to working in charter schools in the first place because they didn't have unions.

"Too often the union and administration clash," Harris said.

Bob Hill, a [history](#) teacher at the Media and Technology Charter High School who used to work in public schools, said he would refuse to join the union. In the charter school he quickly set up a tutoring program with MIT, while in regular public schools he struggled to make such changes. He also teaches four days a week and spends the fifth day in training. As a result, he said, his school's MCAS scores are higher than Boston's average, though nearly 80 percent of his school's children are poor.

"I don't think [a union] is a productive thing for teaching and for learning," Hill said. "This school proves it."

The federation is asking teachers to sign up by July 31 for the next school year.

Charter schools exist in 40 states and Washington, D.C., but have been slow to unionize, though there have been some charter school unions in Philadelphia and efforts to start them in other cities, said Nelson Smith, president of the Charter School Leadership Council.

"As charter schools become more of a presence, you would expect unions to go after their staff and look for members there," Smith said.

In Massachusetts, charter schools, which first opened in 1995, serve 2 percent of the state's nearly 1 [million](#) students. In Boston, the schools are clamoring for state permission to add students and reduce waiting lists. The state has 48 charter schools, excluding eight Horace Mann charter schools that operate under the supervision of regular school systems, according to the state Department of Education.

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