Unchartered territory

*Downstate and suburban families lack school alternatives*

**The problem**

In March, more than 300 students applied for 83 open spots at Peoria Quest Charter Academy’s third annual lottery. For every student who won, three were turned away.

Rhonda Elmore, a Peoria resident, was one of many parents hoping to win a spot for their children.

“The public school in my neighborhood was not meeting academic standards, and I didn't want my child to go there,” Elmore said. “Peoria Quest Charter Academy is so successful that I wanted my daughter to attend. Education is very important to me, and I believe my children should get the best.”

Alyssa, Rhonda’s daughter, was set to enroll in fifth grade at Glen Oak Primary, her neighborhood school. At that school, fewer than half the students meet or exceed the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), and the school has been on Academic Warning Status for the last four years. Following that, she would transition to Lincoln Middle School, which has been on Academic Warning Status for the last 11 years. Fortunately for Alyssa and her family, she was one of the lucky few to win a seat in the fifth grade class at Quest.

Where choice in education is available, parents respond. Unlike the Elmores, most downstate and suburban parents have few alternatives to their local public schools. A mere 14 charter schools serve as alternatives. Only 3,600 students attend these charter schools.

Contrast that with Chicago, where charter schools are transforming the landscape. Nearly 1 out of every 8 Chicago students now learns in a charter school. That’s more than 45,000 students at 110 schools across the city. And there are thousands more children on waiting lists.

If downstate students attended charters at the same rate as Chicago students, more than 200,000 students would be enrolled in these schools of choice.

**Graphic 1. Downstate and suburban children need more charter school opportunities**

*Percent of student population enrolled in charter schools*

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Beyond Illinois, the alternatives are even greater. A majority of charter schools are outside the major metropolitan cities in nearby states Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan.

Illinois has fallen behind its neighbors in offering alternatives to students outside major population centers. All children deserve the chance at a brighter future with schools that work best for them. (See Appendix A for maps of charter school distribution by state. See Appendix B for enrollment figures).

The demand for these schools in Illinois is real – when alternatives exist. Graphic 3 highlights the 10 traditional charters located in suburban Chicago and downstate Illinois, and their current waiting lists (four non-traditional charters have specific missions as dropout recovery or turnaround institutions so they are not covered here). The sample size is small, but four of the schools have waiting lists that exceed 50 percent of each school’s entire population.

**GRAPHIC 2. ILLINOIS’ NEIGHBORS HAVE MORE CHARTER SCHOOLS OUTSIDE THEIR MAJOR METROPOLITAN CITY**

**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN THE MAJOR METRO CITY VERSUS THE REST OF THE STATE**

Source: National Association of Public Charter Schools Dashboard 2010-11
Historically, prospective charters wishing to operate in a given district were required to obtain approval from that district’s existing local board. This is the equivalent of requiring a local fast food restaurant to obtain McDonald’s approval to set up across the street.

The biggest barrier to charter development in suburban Chicago and downstate Illinois has been the authorization process. Historically, prospective charters wishing to operate in a given district were required to obtain approval from that district’s existing local board. This is the equivalent of requiring a local fast food restaurant to obtain McDonald’s approval to set up across the street. That failed approval process has led to the rejection of 63 charter school proposals since the creation of Illinois’ charter law in 1996 (download a list of all charter school proposals since 1996 at www.illinoispolicy.org/uncharteredterritory). Even more likely, many potential proposals were never even presented because of the process.

Since 80 percent of Illinois students are located outside the city of Chicago, more learning alternatives should be serving them from one year to the next. The special interests of the educational status quo must give way to the expansion of these schools of choice. Outside competition, with better practices and a new approach to education, should challenge the establishment schools that have been around for decades.

**The solution**

Families throughout Illinois deserve to have an expanded number of school options. The legislature should take the following steps to ensure that more students have a chance at a brighter future:

- Abolish the arbitrary cap on charter schools for the entire state of Illinois. (Current law caps charters at 75 in Chicago and 45 in downstate and suburban Illinois – these numbers refer to school networks allowed. There are currently 37 charter networks with 110 campuses across the city of Chicago).
- Equalize funding for charter schools across the state (currently ranges from 75 percent to 125 percent of per-pupil funding. This formula should be changed solely to 100 percent of per-pupil funding which will ensure parity for all charter schools).

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**Graphic 3. Downstate and suburban charter school enrollments and waiting list numbers (2010-11 school year)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Charter school</th>
<th>Year opened</th>
<th>Grades served</th>
<th>School population</th>
<th>Waiting list</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Springfield Ball Charter School</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIU-East St. Louis Charter High School</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prairie Crossing Charter School in Grayslake</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robertson Charter School in Decatur</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge Lakes Charter School in Pingree Grove</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galapagos Rockford Charter School</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>K-4</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy Academy of Excellence in Rockford</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest Charter School Academy in Peoria</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southland College Prep in Richton Park</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CICS Rockford Patriots</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>K-4</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>0***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Illinois State Board of Education Charter School Biennial Report, phone calls to schools

*Did not receive more applications than spots available for the school as a whole. Kindergarten and second-graders had waiting lists at first but all students were eventually accepted. No lottery is being held for the 2012-13 school year.

**No lottery was held, school is full

***105 students applied and 105 students were accepted.
Since 1996, cities outside of Chicago have added, on average, only one new charter school a year. The slow, gradual process of reform is holding back a wave of innovation and depriving students of better options. In this same time period, Chicago has added 110 charter schools. Suburban and downstate families deserve the same opportunities.

**WHY THIS WORKS**

Where charter schools have thrived, success has followed. In Chicago, 9 out of the top 10 open enrollment public high schools are charter schools (based on composite ACT scores). Students who attend charters have a graduation rate of 76 percent, compared to 52 percent at traditional public high schools. They are more likely to attend college and stay in college as well. It’s no wonder that more than 12,000 students are on waiting lists for charters in Chicago.

Across the country, more than 2 million students are enrolled in charter schools. The demand continues to grow from one year to the next as 420,000 students remain on waiting lists. Urban communities have seen the most growth with a record six school districts enrolling at least 30 percent of their students in charter schools. New Orleans tops the list with 71 percent. Washington, D.C. is in second at 41 percent. Chicago is growing steadily and currently enrolls almost 12 percent of their students in charter schools.

Charter schools are dramatically altering the way students learn. The one-size-fits-all model of a teacher in front of students in the classroom is slowly becoming a relic. More choices mean that more families can match up the best school with their children’s needs.

For parents in downstate and suburban communities with virtually no students enrolled in charter schools, it may once have seemed hopeless to continue the fight for these schools. But the tide is turning. Last year, the legislature passed and the governor signed into law Senate Bill 79. Also known as the Charter School Quality Act, this law “will allow charters to get approved by an alternative commission appointed by the State Board of Education, expanding that authority beyond just school districts.”

In addition to this measure, Senate Bill 7, also known as the Performance Counts law, was enacted. This law ended the practice of “Last In, First Out,” which meant the last teacher hired was the first one eligible to be fired. Teacher performance, measured by independent data analysis, could now be taken into account for the first time in the state’s history.

Together, these two reforms are changing the debate and growing the momentum for school choice across the state. The time is now for politicians and school boards to understand that the demand for these schools should be met with an adequate supply. The peoples’ representatives in Springfield should recognize the potential of the Charter School Quality Act to be the most significant reform since the passage of the charter law in 1996.

Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin have expanded choice and opportunity for their residents. Innovation and experimentation have resulted in a wide variety of charter schools serving their states’ entire populations. Imagine the possibilities if downstate and suburban Illinois families had these same options.
Opened in the fall of 2010, Peoria Quest Charter Academy is one of the charter schools in Illinois transforming the educational landscape. Students here outperformed both District 150 and the state on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). There’s a mission to the work at this school, a focus on ensuring children are well equipped and prepared for a career or college.

The results speak for themselves:

- 79 percent of students meet or exceed the ISAT standards
- 95 percent student retention each year
- 96.7 percent attendance
- 0.9 percent truancy rate
- Quest low-income students outperformed District 150 low-income students on every single state test measure

A longer school day and a longer school year allow teachers to develop a richer curriculum for students. Rigorous courses focusing on math, science and technology are at the center of the school’s academic program. Assessing student potential and abilities every 6-9 weeks allows teachers to revise their courses to fit individual needs.

Quest teachers strive to instill in their pupils the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a 21st century economy. Students are rewarded with field trips and placements on the honor roll when they demonstrate success in their work.

A strong commitment to parental involvement both in and outside the school has created a system that functions as a partnership between families, teachers, students, principals, and staff. Parents can check student grades, homework, attendance, tardiness, and discipline records with an account and password supplied by the school. School culture has become paramount here to ensure that students are kept on track to graduate.

The “no excuses” mentality of the staff ensures that every student receives a high-quality education. The Quest model is exactly the type of school that parents in other communities throughout Illinois should have the option of choosing.
Appendix A – Maps of states & enrollment of students in charters

Illinois vs. Indiana

Illinois vs. Wisconsin
ILLINOIS vs. MICHIGAN
APPENDIX B – POPULATION ENROLLMENT ACROSS BORDERING STATES

NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN BIGGEST CITY VERSUS THE REST OF THE STATE

![Graph showing enrollment numbers across states](image_url)

Source: National Association of Public Charter Schools Dashboard 2010-11

ENDNOTES


3 Bateman, Ashley, “Charter School Enrollment Surpasses 2 Million” The Heartland Institute, 02 January 2012, http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2012/01/02/charter-school-enrollment-surpasses-2-million


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