



THOUGHT LEADERS

Charter schools seek opportunities

Leaders at Buffalo charters spell out the challenges they face



BOTH PHOTOS: JIM COURTNEY

Kriner Cash, at right in top photo, is Buffalo City School District superintendent. He says city schools share many of the challenges faced by the region's charter schools. Below, Joseph Polat, right, director of Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School, listens to Eric Klapper of Tapestry Charter School.

BY DAN MINER
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Leaders of local charter schools and the Buffalo City School District converged last week for a frank discussion about the opportunities and challenges before them.

The charter leaders laid out a list of issues that hinder their progress, including everything from complaints about funding to the difficulty in recruiting teachers.

"Charter schools were founded to be incubators of change and laboratories of education in high-needs areas," said Eric Klapper, executive director of Tapestry Charter School. "We have not fulfilled the promise yet

in the city of Buffalo because we have not been fully utilized."

The gathering was part of a Business First "Thought Leaders" discussion Sept. 21 with Klapper; Teo Balbach, treasurer of the Tapestry board; Kriner Cash, superintendent of Buffalo City School District; Andrew Freedman, partner at Hodgson Russ; and Jason Zwara, NY policy manager for the Northeast Charter Schools Network.

Also, Helene Kramer, chair of the Charter School of Inquiry; Efrain Martinez, superintendent, Charter School for Applied Technologies; Joseph Polat, director, Buffalo Academy of Science; Emina Poricanin, Hodgson Russ senior associate; and



with **TEO BALBACH, KRINER CASH, ERIC KLAPPER, HELENE KRAMER, EFRAIN MARTINEZ, JOSEPH POLAT** and **ANDREA TODORO**

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“There is definitely a sense of competition among charters that I’d like to think isn’t there.”

HELENE KRAMER,
board chair, Charter School for Inquiry



“The enemy is the lack of achievement. That’s the common enemy.”

EFRAIN MARTINEZ,
superintendent,
Charter School for Applied Technologies



“Matching your teacher population to your student population has been a huge challenge.”

ANDREW FREEDMAN,
partner,
Hodgson Russ LLP



“With teachers, it really comes back to choosing the profession for the right reasons.”

ANDREA TODARO,
school leader,
West Buffalo Charter School



“I can offer them \$10,000 more but they still choose to teach in the suburbs.”

JOSEPH POLAT,
director, Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School



“New York is one of the worst when it comes to funding public education and funding charters.”

KRINER CASH,
Buffalo schools superintendent



“We are independently, organically grown schools founded based on a particular need.”

ERIC KLAPPER,
executive director,
Tapestry Charter School

Andrea Todoro, school leader at West Buffalo Charter School.

Many of the participants stated their belief in the importance of teachers in boosting student performance and lifting them above their socioeconomic circumstances. But they said it’s difficult to build a workforce these days that reflects Buffalo’s diversity and is dedicated to the challenges of urban education.

Some attendees said the problem is that college programs have been slow to adjust to the needs of a new generation. Others suggested a broader dynamic.

“In Western Civilization, people believe that you can blame your grandparents if you’re not good at math,” said Efrain Martinez, superintendent of the Charter School for Applied Technologies. “They don’t believe they can lift students up to overcome their circumstances. So it becomes, ‘I won’t ask too much of you if you don’t give me too many discipline problems.’”

The teachers are only part of the issue, though, as leaders from all sides of the spectrum noted the seemingly intractable issues facing many students and families.

Cash, who has been schools superintendent on Martha’s Vineyard and in Memphis, said parent engagement in Buffalo is the worst he’s ever seen.

Joseph Polat, director of Buffalo Academy of Science, said his best students want to go to City Honors School after eighth grade and his English as a Second Language population wants to attend Lafayette High School.



JIM COURTNEY

Andrea Todaro said efforts to unionize West Buffalo Charter School faded after a “great dialogue” with the staff.

Children are coming to school with significant issues that arise from their home environments and neighborhoods.

“We have 80 to 90 percent of children coming from low-income backgrounds,” said Helene Kramer, board chair of the Charter School of Inquiry and former president of the Buffalo school board. “We know that they come to school with a lot of trauma, and with that comes anger and other issues.”

Charter schools are partly a reaction to the restrictive union presence in public schools, and a unionization push has unsettled some charter school communities.

“More and more charters are subject to unionization campaigns, and they’re struggling with how to implement those creative and nontraditional agendas to advance education given the confines of what a union expects, which is shorter workdays and years and no additional work without pay,” said Poricanin, senior associate at Hodgson Russ.

Martinez said his school developed a good relationship with CSAT’s union but objected to advocacy from NYSUT.

“It’s not that unionization in and of itself is an issue,” he said. “It’s the targeted unionizing from people who are on the record as hating charter

► CLOSER LOOK AT THE THOUGHT LEADERS

The Thought Leaders is a yearlong series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Each month, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists. Excerpts from the conversation are published after the roundtable.

Discussions are held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

schools.”

Todoro said West Buffalo Charter School was the subject of a unionization campaign last year, though that died down after a “great dialogue” with staff.

With the presence of Cash, who took over as superintendent two years ago, the conversation inevitably turned to the historically tense relationship between charter and public schools in Western New York and New York state.

But most attendees praised the superintendent for bringing a new spirit of open communication and said they hoped it would lead to collaboration that could benefit all. Cash even ended the discussion by proposing a regular series of meetings with charter leaders to expand on topics of interest.

“The biggest challenge we have is how do we get all (Buffalo public school students) into the most competitive global economy that we’ve ever had,” Cash said. “This is more about how we can work together.”