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What Happens to the Kids When Charter Schools Fail?

By Sarah Butrymowicz / The Hechinger Report

Terri Griffin made herself a promise when her youngest daughter was ready for kindergarten: the little girl would never set foot in an Akron public school. Griffin, a jewelry-store clerk and graduate of the Ohio city's school system, had sent eight children — two of her own and six others she raised as her own — to traditional public schools.

She felt they were pushed through to a diploma and didn't learn enough. Teachers were eager to recommend special education, but Griffin couldn't get them to provide other, basic help. So for her youngest daughter, she sought out a charter school, Lighthouse Academy, and hoped for a better outcome. ([See "New Grades on Charter Schools."](#))

Griffin didn't know about Lighthouse Academy's low test scores or that it had been identified by the state as being in an academic emergency on and off since opening in 2000. Instead, when she visited the west Akron school, Griffin saw caring teachers working with small classes in a school that was well established in the community. She hasn't once regretted her decision.

Now, under Ohio's charter school closure law, considered the toughest in the nation, Lighthouse Academy is slated to be shuttered at the end of the year. The 2006 law mandates that any charter school that has received the state's Academic Emergency rating or been placed on academic watch for two out of three years will be shut down. (The ratings are based on state test scores.)

Most of Lighthouse's 66 students will be thrust back into the same public schools their parents tried to flee. Nearby public schools perform only slightly better than Lighthouse on standardized tests, and some do just as poorly.

The closure is another blow for the children of this fading industrial city, where a third of all kids live in poverty and about a quarter of high schoolers fail to graduate. It's a scenario becoming familiar to thousands of families in the nation's poorest neighborhoods as more and more districts start cracking down on low-performing charter schools, which get public funds but operate without the usual bureaucratic constraints. ([See pictures of a Mandarin school in Minneapolis.](#))

The dismantling of so many charters has some experts worrying that when students are forced to leave educational environments where they have friends and feel comfortable, the disruption is destabilizing and upsetting to some of the system's most vulnerable populations. Robert Slavin, director of the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, believes closure should be a last resort, after giving schools support and experimenting with possible solutions. Otherwise, well-meaning educational programs could wind up hurting the very kids they are trying to help. "Letting alone or closing are not the only two options," Slavin says. "[Closing] is very damaging to kids."

Nonetheless, the crackdown on ineffective charter schools has the backing of charter supporters as well as critics. In an effort to save the charter movement, which has come under increasing scrutiny, advocates have asked for more accountability, supporting forced closures of low-performing schools. Florida has already adopted a law similar to Ohio's. During the current legislative session, charter advocates in Missouri are pushing a bill that would require charter schools to set up specific benchmarks, giving sponsors an easy way to hold schools accountable. The California Charter Schools Association has said it will start urging school boards to not allow faltering schools to stay open. ([See "Why It's Time to Replace No Child Left Behind."](#))

Bill Sims, president of the Ohio Alliance of Public Charter Schools, says he regularly gets calls from his counterparts in other states asking for more information on Ohio's law so they can use it as a model for their own legislation.

"The good news is, Ohio doesn't keep underperforming schools open. The bad news is, it hit Lighthouse," says Marianne Cooper, director of the Richland Academy of the Arts, the nonprofit community arts center in Mansfield, Ohio, that sponsors Lighthouse. While the organization has closed the four other charters it operated, it saw potential in Lighthouse because of some of the same things that attracted and impressed Griffin.

"I love the way the classes are structured," Griffin says of her now second-grader's experience. "The teachers that she has had take those children in as their own."

The personal attention has not translated into convincing data, however. Lighthouse has struggled on state tests since it opened, falling well below state and district averages. Over the past six years, only about 31% of its students annually have reached proficiency across all grades and subjects. In some cases, only one student per class passed the exam.

Last year, every student demonstrated at least one year's worth of growth, according to state standardized tests, although many remained below grade level in their performance.

Using that growth as a key argument, Principal Fannie Brown plans to appeal the closure decision. However, the Ohio Department of Education says the decision will not be overturned.

"While the school made some academic gains in the last report-card period, it was simply not enough to surmount the consequences of the closure law," says Ohio Education Department spokesman Patrick Gallaway.

[See "New Grades on Charter Schools."](#)

If Lighthouse closes, as expected, it could represent the beginning of a major change in the way charter schools operate. **Nationally, charter schools with low scores are only slightly more likely to close than traditional schools with low scores, according to a recent study by the Fordham Institute** that examined charters in 10 states. New data released by the Center for Education Reform (CER), a pro-charter group, indicates that 15% of charter schools have been shut down over the course of the charter movement, which began two decades ago. But **fewer than 200 of the 6,700 charters that have opened since 1992 were closed down for academic reasons; the majority were shuttered due to financial or mismanagement problems.**

Jeanne Allen, CER's president, says administrative problems indicate that a school isn't working long before test scores come out; the center's data, she says, shows that failing schools do get shut down even without the new regulations. "The vast majority succeed [and] stay open," she says. "Those that don't are closed within a few short years before they can ever have any negative impact on students."

Many others within the charter movement, though, are not convinced that closures are always so timely.

The California Charter Schools Association, for instance, is poised to start holding charters to task with or without a new law, and is urging school boards to not allow faltering schools to stay open. Doing so might encourage more school boards to take the politically unpopular step of closing down schools, the group says. Myrna Castrejón, a senior vice president of the association, says her group couldn't keep making the case for charter schools if it was seen as soft on failing charters.

More than almost any other state, Ohio shows that change is possible. The state originally took the "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach, encouraging rapid expansion of charter schools with minimal oversight. Ohio educators expected that parents would stay away from bad charters, which would then be forced to close down, says Todd Ziebarth, vice president of state advocacy and support for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. [\(See "Grading the GOP Candidates on Education."\)](#)

Instead, the state became something of a national embarrassment in the charter movement, with headlines about gross mismanagement and financial scandals. **In 2006, when the automatic closure law was written, more than half of Ohio's charter schools were given a D or F under the state grading system.**

The new regulation is a big step forward, but it hasn't fixed everything. **Only 17 charters have been shut down in the past five years as a result of the new law, in part because of a loophole that allows high schools with**

"dropout-prevention programs" to stay open regardless of performance. And more charters have opened to replace those that have been shut down.

Ziebarth thinks closing schools like Lighthouse should be an easy decision. If a school fails to live up to expectations in five years, it should be shut down, he says, adding, "What we can't do is perpetuate mediocrity and failure."

Nonetheless, Lighthouse's Brown and her faculty members think they should have more time to improve before putting their students through the disruption of being sent back to regular public schools, some of which might be worse or only slightly better than Lighthouse. They admit that the school has had a rocky history but say they've replaced the staff in an ongoing effort to improve. "I only wish that Dr. Brown had taken this school on two or three years ago," Cooper says. ([See "7 Things You Need to Know About a School Before Enrolling Your Kid."](#))

For now, it's business as usual for Lighthouse students. On a cold November afternoon, first- and second-graders practiced how to take out books and put them back with the spine facing the right way in the school's brand-new library, then danced to a YouTube video of "Five Little Reindeer Jumping in the Snow."

But the adults in the building can't escape the sadness of impending closure.

Over microwaved pizza and other reheated leftovers in the staff lounge, teachers say they're just trying to get through the school year before thinking about looking for a new job. They worry about what will happen to their children next year in "bigger, rougher" public schools. "The best schools in Akron," says teacher Jessica Satterlee, "are not where our kids live."

Griffin is still hoping that the closing can be averted, but if not, she's sticking to her vow. If Lighthouse shuts down, her daughter still won't be going to an Akron public school. Instead, she will be in private school, which Griffin's extended family will help pay for. "It's hard to explain — as a mother who really, really has a passion for their child's education — I felt so bad. I didn't know what to do," Griffin says. "This school is the only thing she knows."

[See "A Separate Peace: Portraits from a Gay-Friendly School."](#)

— *With reporting by Emily Alpert / California*

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