

Strict discipline academies

Schools address safety issues and educate “at risk” students.

By Guy Dobbs

In the fall of 2000, Jacob Guigear brought a 3-inch blade to Carman Ainsworth High School in Flint. For this infraction, he joined more than 1,200 students estimated by the Michigan Department of Education to have been expelled from state schools each year since lawmakers began mandating expulsions for violence in 1995.

Guigear, who had a long history of skipping school, told The Detroit News he’s shaped up since his forced stay at Frontier Learning Center, a “strict discipline academy” (SDA) in Fenton.

“You could look at this as a sentence,” Guigear, who now wears a uniform and is subjected to daily searches, told The News. “But I don’t think I’ll be skipping as much anymore after I get out of here. It’s not worth the effort.”

The strict discipline academy is a relatively new tool available to Michigan educators for dealing with students whose conduct threatens the safety of staff and other students in their schools. Established through legislation in 1999 as part of an ongoing effort to enhance and maintain safety in schools, strict discipline academies are public school academies chartered for the purpose of reforming “at-risk” students without endangering others. The academies provide traditional education courses in a controlled environment—requiring metal detector checks at the door, uniforms, and strict adherence to behavior policies.

As Michigan educators become more

familiar with SDAs, it is likely the future will see one or more established in most of Michigan’s intermediate school districts.

Though the law establishing SDAs is exclusive of Michigan’s charter school law, SDAs are similar to charters in that they can be authorized by a local school board, an intermediate school board, the board of a community college, or the governing board of a state university. They are organized as a nonprofit corporation with a board of directors. Since they are public schools, they can have no religious affiliation.

The law requires that SDA charters be awarded on a “competitive basis” within the boundaries of their authorizing authority, taking into account the resources available, population served, and educational goals of competing proposed SDAs. They are subject to annual reviews by the state, which assesses the academy’s mission statement, attendance statistics, dropout rate, test scores and financial stability.

The law also allows citizens wishing to create an SDA to organize a petition drive if the school board or other authorizing body rejects a proposal that qualifies in every other respect. In order to place a proposal to accept the SDA on a public ballot, citizens must obtain the signatures of at least 15 percent of those citizens living within a school district’s boundaries who voted in the previous school election. If the ballot proposal then receives a majority of the votes in the election the SDA is authorized.

Within 10 days of issuing an SDA contract, the authorizing board must submit

a copy and application to the state Board of Education and must adopt a resolution naming the members the SDAs board of directors. The contract must include a number of important items, including a statement of the educational goals of the SDA, how the board plans to hold the SDA accountable, and procedures and grounds for revoking the contract. As with any public school, SDA teachers must be state certified, except as otherwise provided by law.

As nonprofits, SDAs are exempt from taxation on their earnings and property, but may not levy property taxes. They may not charge tuition and must admit students according to a non-discrimination policy. Like any public school, SDAs receive per-pupil funding from the state for the number of students enrolled at the beginning of the school year. They do not serve juvenile criminals, but the state Family Independence Agency or another state agency can enroll a suitable pupil from a juvenile detention facility in an SDA, provided the agency bears financial responsibility for the student.

Some district administrators have been cool to the concept of opening a strict discipline academy for local students. In Garden City, for example, administrators last year studied and rejected a strict discipline academy. However, without the programs, expelled students are left with few choices. They can seek to continue their education through private tutoring or alternative education programs, if offered by their district.

“With zero-tolerance in Michigan, there is nothing for these expelled kids,” Dan Sherman, vice-president of Educational Services, the private company that manages Frontier Learning Center, told The Detroit News. “Strict discipline academies want to get kids off the street and give them some benefits so they can get back into school.”

Strict discipline academies provide a way for Michigan educators to deal constructively with the growing number of expelled students who might otherwise be left without any opportunity for academic achievement. Incorporating them into school districts’ overall safety plans would provide a positive “last chance” for students who may present a danger to others.

While some opposition in local school districts will likely continue, the establishment of well run strict discipline academies will facilitate education for all of our students, make schools safer, and provide educational opportunities for some students who might otherwise have slipped through the cracks.

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New charter plan expected

First charter bill fails in House, legislature likely to revisit this spring

More than two years after the state of Michigan easily reached its self-imposed limit of 150 university-sponsored public school academies and the political clamor to remove the “cap” began, an eight-member panel appointed by the legislature recommended 130 more charters be allowed in the state—but not without trade-offs allowing more regulation of charter schools. A bill produced from the commission’s recommendations was defeated by one vote in the state House on May 1. The legislature is expected to revisit the issue in the coming weeks.

Dubbed “the McPherson Commission” after its chairman, Michigan State University President Peter McPherson, the panel convened in the final months of 2001 after the Michigan Legislature failed to reach agreement on whether to lift the charter cap. On April 10, the commission released its recommendations, calling not for eliminating the cap, but for increasing the number of charters.

Of the 130 additional university-authorized charters envisioned, five “conventional” public school academies would be approved this year (for general education with no particular curricular emphasis), 10 more would be permitted each year for the next five years, and 15 “special-purpose” schools (with particular emphases such as mathematics, humanities, or programs for the learning disabled) would be permitted each year for the next 5 years.

The recommendations also include a raft of new regulations. The commission’s report calls for restrictions on public school academies greater than those on regular public schools.

Currently Michigan is home to 189

public school academies that educate nearly 60,000 K-12 students. Of these, 35 have been sponsored by various intermediate school districts, and three by community colleges. The remaining 150 schools are sponsored by various public universities in the state. The university-sponsorship mode is the most common sponsorship mode under Michigan’s charter school law. It is also the only mode that is limited by the cap. The cap was reached in 1999.

The Michigan Education Association (MEA), the state’s largest school employee union, with the help of Democratic and Republican legislative allies, originally worked to block Gov. Engler’s efforts to lift the cap. Union representatives say their opposition is based on concern over educational quality. Opponents, however, say it is actually because charters, usually non-union, attract students away from unionized public schools. This competition requires traditional public schools to improve their efficiency, often by outsourcing non-instructional services to non-union firms or by seeking alternatives to high-cost, union-owned health care plans.

Despite the union’s initial opposition to the cap increase, when the House bill was crafted to include increased regulations on charter schools and limit the number of schools that could be chartered in the coming years, the union attempted to garner support for the bill that failed May 1.

Supporters of increasing the cap include the tens of thousands of Michigan parents who take advantage of the opportunity to enroll their children in charter schools. Citizens praised charter school

learning environments in testimony before the commission in Detroit and Grand Rapids last December. More than 600 people attended these hearings.

The commission was created in order to examine whether legislation to raise the cap on charters should be pursued. Advocates on both sides of the issue agreed to appoint an eight-member commission, four members appointed by Democratic and Republican legislative leaders from the Michigan House and Senate, two by Gov. Engler, with the final seat being filled by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins. Two key members were Engler appointee Richard McLellan, a Lansing attorney and Mackinac Center for Public Policy board member who drafted the initial charter school law, and MEA president Lu Battaglieri, appointed by Senate Minority Leader John Cherry, D-Clio.

If the commission’s recommendation is eventually approved, Michigan’s public school academies will face a host of new oversight and regulation, including:

- A special annual test of all charter school students in grades 3-8, in addition to the prescribed program of standardized testing administered to all public schools. Those taking the test would be required to meet annual progress standards that would be set by the superintendent of public instruction, a requirement other public schools do not face.

- Greater oversight of charter schools by their authorizers and oversight of the authorizers by the State Department of Education. The state superintendent would oversee universities authorizing charter schools through a new certifica-

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