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Lessons for Charter Schools

By THOMAS W. CARROLL

New Covenant Charter School, which opened with much hope in 1999, will be closed at the end of the school year. The State University Board of Trustees, despite an outpouring of support for the troubled school from its students and parents, bit the bullet and voted this week for its closure.

The decision was not an easy one for the trustees, who were obliged to uphold high standards of accountability, and an even more difficult one for parents, who saw New Covenant, despite any flaws, as a school on the upswing that offered a real alternative for their children.

This scene could play itself out over and over across the state unless the lessons of New Covenant are understood. As someone who played a significant role in the adoption of New York's charter-school law and as the chairman of the Brighter Choice Foundation, which has supported the creation of 11 charter schools in Albany (not New Covenant), I see four key mistakes that are particularly critical. They offer learning opportunities for the charter school community.

Opened too quickly: New Covenant, the brainchild of then-local Urban League President Aaron Dare, opened in September 1999 as one of New York's first three charter schools. They were approved before either charter school authorizer -- the SUNY trustees or the state Board of Regents -- had adequate staffing to review applications and before rigorous application review standards had been established.

The mistake -- which was a political one -- was to open any charter schools that fall without the proper support and oversight infrastructure fully in place. With New Covenant's closure, two of those first three schools have been

shuttered, a failure rate not repeated since that first fateful round.

Inadequate facility planning: New Covenant never paid sufficient attention to the importance of facility planning. First, its facility was too small (the school opened in rented trailers), then it was too big. In 2001, New Covenant opened a 90,000-square-foot school that could seat 950 students -- more than twice the size of other charter elementary school buildings in Albany. The board at the time was well meaning, but lacked real estate expertise. The result was that the school built a facility that it could not afford.

Too big to succeed: In the past year, the phrase "too big to fail" has become commonplace, but in New Covenant's case, the school likely was "too big to succeed." Most of New Covenant's problems could have been avoided if it had started small, grown slowly and remained a modest size overall.

After a few rocky years, the school's board wanted to lower the size of the school's student body. By that time, the board was trapped by the need to have a high student count to meet its debt service obligations on a \$16 million construction bond. The bond was issued based on the financial assumption that enrollment would remain higher than 800 students. Again, a less-rushed school would have thought through these issues up front.

Letting the fox in the henhouse: Early on, the school's operational and leadership chaos led to its unionization. Amid the school's turmoil, the teachers understandably desired the job security the union offered, but the employees did not think through that their specific union suitor -- New York State United Teachers -- was then and is now anti-charter.

In the past year, NYSUT succeeded in securing legislative adoption of a funding freeze

that cost New Covenant more than \$600,000 just this school year and would have cost even more next year, contributing to the school's financial instability -- one of the primary reasons for its closure.

Now all of New Covenant's dues-paying teachers will lose their jobs while NYSUT -- which failed to defend the school during the renewal process -- licks its chops.

Fortunately, some of the lessons of New Covenant already have been applied.

Both state charter school authorizing entities now have high standards for charter approval. Charter schools must apply by July 1 in the year before their proposed opening, thus ending rush jobs like New Covenant.

Extensive attention now is paid to board governance and board independence, too.

All of the remaining charter schools in Albany offer small school settings, longer school days and school years (with four of the schools offering a year-round school calendar), and state of the art facilities that are affordable and right-sized.

Also, each of these schools opened with just a grade or two, growing deliberately by adding a single grade each year.

As a result, each of these charter schools has been more successful.

While the lessons of New Covenant's experience offer little comfort to the school's students and their parents, hopefully these lessons will help others avoid the same mistakes.

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