

Conversion Schools: Local Districts Have No Excuse – Summary*

Byron Schlomach and Vance H. Fried

Local school officials often justifiably complain that they have to deal with needless regulation and paperwork requirements imposed on them by the state. Indeed, one count of mandates from administrative rules and statutes in Oklahoma numbers them at about 640.

Oklahoma's school boards now have a tool at the ready to unilaterally deregulate schools that they oversee. There is a relatively new law that allows a school board to designate any campus a "conversion school" which would operate on a considerably deregulated basis. *This means the local school district board cannot hide behind state law or rules as a shield from criticism of school performance.*

What is a Conversion School?

Oklahoma law says that a school board can unilaterally decide to designate all or part of an existing public school as a conversion school. All the rules and regulations that currently apply to charter schools apply to the conversion school. All the rules and regulations that do *not* apply to charter schools also do *not* apply to conversion schools.

The flexibility at hand for charters and conversion schools allows for quicker and fuller implementation of curriculum, discipline, and management changes that are necessary to turn failing and mediocre schools into excellent ones. Children are tested under the usual statewide tests.

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Some Ideas for Conversion Schools

Conversion schools can implement new programming that regulations or top-heavy management make difficult to institute or just do not allow. What follows are several doable ideas, all of which could be implemented in a single district at the same time, in some cases with multiple conversions of different types on the same campus.

Offer Teacher Pay Tied to Performance/Discipline

Since a conversion school would not be subject to state school personnel law, it would have a great deal of flexibility in how it structured its personnel policies. Instead of paying teachers according to a rigid schedule according to years of experience and degree level, teachers could be paid according to merit.

Offer Individualized Learning

Using internet access, students can access lessons at any place and time that best suits their learning needs. They only move on when they have achieved mastery of the material, so they learn at their own pace. Teachers can continue to guide students as needed.

Offer Early-College High School Programs

An early college high school is a partnership between a public school and one or more higher education institutions that allows students to simultaneously complete high school credits and college credits. The standard is that students would earn at least 12 credits toward a college degree while still in high school.

Create Focused English Language Learner Programs

School districts can help themselves, their teachers, and most especially their students by establishing intensive English language instruction conversion schools. ELL children would

perform better on standardized tests just from better English skills. The main purpose of intensive English training would be to fully integrate these students into the learning process.

Offer Teachers a Micro-School Opportunity

Micro-schools are a combination of the 19th century one-room school and 21st century individualized learning. To a teacher, it offers significantly more autonomy and the chance for a higher income. A teacher and one aide could run a micro-school for 30 students, third through fifth grade. The teacher could cover all the costs for facilities, curriculum, technology, pay the aide \$25,000 in salary and benefits, pay herself average Oklahoma teacher pay, and still make over \$20,000 in profit.

Offer a Montessori Option

Many parents of non-high-school children have developed an affinity for Montessori or Montessori-style schooling, which groups children with multi-age groups, allows for a good deal of child self-direction, and has a very good reputation for educating younger children. Many charter schools have adopted Montessori as their primary instructional methodology.

Offer a No-Excuses Option

Some trace the no-excuses schooling method back to the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools. These

schools have a very good reputation for achieving high academic standards. They have high behavioral and academic expectations for their students, a strict disciplinary code, stress a college prep curriculum with little time for anything but academics, and great teachers.

Offer Free After-School Care

Because of the reduced costs conversion schools should experience due to being relieved from many state mandates on schools, again, depending on the circumstances, some could offer free after-school care. Instead of busing students home to be latchkey kids, parents would have greater control and confidence over the location and safety of their children.

Conclusion

The conversion school option for public school districts, barely exercised so far, opens districts to legitimate criticism for not taking their fate into their own hands. Today, school districts have laid before them in the conversion school law a bright opportunity to offer the sort of school experiences and services, as well as teacher pay, they always claim they want to. The conversion school option has put school districts in a no-excuses world.