

Public boarding school—the way to solve educational ills?

April 25 2015, by Carolyn Thompson

Buffalo's chronically struggling school system is considering an idea gaining momentum in other cities: public boarding schools that put round-the-clock attention on students and away from such daunting problems as poverty, troubled homes and truancy.

Supporters say such a dramatic step is necessary to get some [students](#) into an atmosphere that promotes learning, and worth the costs, estimated at \$20,000 to \$25,000 per student per year.

"We have teachers and union leaders telling us, 'The problem is with the homes; these kids are in dysfunctional homes,'" said Buffalo school board member Carl Paladino.

He envisions a charter boarding school in Buffalo where students as young as first or second grade would be assured proper meals, uniforms, after-school tutoring and activities.

It's one of a pair of boarding school proposals that have been floated in the city, where only 53 percent of students graduate in four years, English and math proficiency hover 20 points below the state average, and a majority of public schools are considered by the state to be failing. Around 80 percent of students meet federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch.

"We are not hitting various measures set by the state or ourselves," said Tanika Shedrick, a former charter school dean who is trying to open the

state's first public boarding high school in Buffalo. "Our students are leaving school not prepared for college."

Her charter Buffalo Institute of Growth would supplement a college-style academic schedule with life skills and social activities that would keep students on campus seven days a week, with the goal of sending 100 percent of graduates to college or a vocational program.

"We want to make sure we're there every step of the way," said Shedrick, who plans to submit a charter school application to the state this year. She estimates the per-student cost at \$20,000 to \$25,000 per year, to be paid for with public funding and fundraising. New York's traditional charter school allocation is about \$12,000 per student.

Both proposals in Buffalo would be subject to state approval.

About 115,000 students board at private schools in the United States, federal statistics show, in a tradition that predates the Revolutionary War, but the idea of public boarding schools is relatively new.

The Washington, D.C.-based SEED Foundation opened its first public boarding school for poor and academically at-risk students in 1998 and followed up with a school in Baltimore in 2008 and Miami in 2014. A fourth school is in the works in Ohio at the request of the state's Department of Education. The model, in which students in grades six through 12 return home for weekends, required changes in state laws.

The idea has been discussed in cities including Detroit and Niagara Falls, as well. Advocates say the high price is the biggest obstacle.

"Even I have to admit, in the short run it's expensive," SEED Foundation co-founder Eric Adler said. "That's an argument for not doing it. I don't think it's a good argument, but it's a valid argument."

Adler continued: "Not every child needs this, but there are many who do, and without it, they wouldn't have much of a shot."

Tasha Poulson found SEED and its 90-plus percent graduation rate while researching schools after seeing her daughter, who had excelled in elementary school, begin to lose ground upon entering one of Washington's public middle schools.

"It was horrible," Poulson said. "I knew that I had to get her out of that school, and there wasn't another school that I saw as a fit for my daughter." But she hesitated at the thought of her sixth-grader living away from home.

In the end, Poulson decided it would give her daughter the independence and confidence she would need to go to college. She visits frequently and also attends events such as poetry nights that welcome parents. Her daughter is headed for North Carolina Central University next year, and a niece and son now attend the SEED school as well.

A Buffalo Board of Education committee is looking at Paladino's proposal to explore a SEED school.

While SEED's Adler acknowledged the annual per-pupil cost is high in the short term, he said it pays off with successful, taxpaying citizens down the line.

A study of SEED published in the *Journal of Labor Economics* last year found that changing both a student's social and educational environment through boarding significantly raised student achievement in math and English.

Paladino has proposed asking the state to fund a Buffalo boarding school as a kind of pilot project.

"Next year, we'll take in another 6,000 kids to our traditional public schools," Paladino said. "Eighty percent of those kids are condemned to a [school](#) opportunity that will not teach them. It will just put them on the streets at some point."

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