

Inside A Rural Charter School District: Dublin, Georgia Is A National Leader

by Terry Ryan



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INTRODUCTION

One of the most innovative developments in American education during the last decade has been the reconceptualization of school districts and how they should be organized and managed. Neerav Kingsland, former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, described this as a movement of “relinquishers.”ⁱ Relinquishers, according to Kingsland, are superintendents who use their authority to transfer power away from the central office to individual schools – and, most important, to their principals and teachers.

For more than a decade education researchers like Paul Hill, Christine Campbell and Bethany Gross at Seattle’s Center on Reinventing Public Education have written about “portfolio school districts.”ⁱⁱ Like Kingsland’s relinquishers, portfolio school district leaders see their role not as running the schools, but rather as creating the conditions for a “tight-loose” system of school management – “tight” as to results, but “loose” with regards to operations. Superintendents are no longer owner-operators of schools, but rather “quality control agents” for portfolios of different types of schools in their districts.

Big-city school districts have led the way in the movement towards “portfolio management.” Some of the best-known examples are New York City, New Orleans, Washington, DC, Cleveland, and Denver. According to Hill, Campbell and Gross there are now more than 30 school districts across the country that they have identified as pursuing the portfolio strategy to varying degrees.

None of the districts identified are rural. In fact, when it comes to rural school districts and chartering there are many who argue the two simply aren’t compatible. “Charter schools just don’t work for us,” South Dakota State Senator Sandy Jerstad said in 2009.ⁱⁱⁱ Such opinions are common in much of rural America and this helps to explain why the charter revolution has largely bypassed large swaths of the country and its students. Of the eight states lacking charter school laws, all are rural.^{iv}

GEORGIA’S CHARTER SCHOOL DISTRICTS

But, the notion that chartering and rural can't go together is being challenged in Georgia. Changes to state law in 2008, required all Georgia school systems to decide by June of 2015 whether to continue as a traditional school district or choose between two other state accountability options. Of the three options available to Georgia's 181 school districts, the "charter system" option has the most potential for a dramatic shift away from a traditional top-down approach.

The idea of a "charter school system" builds on nearly 25-years of charter school experience from across the country. It offers the possibility of bringing the charter bargain – greater freedom and flexibility in return for results – to more schools and to more students. Especially, in rural and suburban parts of the country where charter schools have not had much of an impact. Rural and suburban districts embracing the charter bargain can use their flexibilities to better educate students that may not be getting the best education possible (e.g. gifted students or at-risk students).

According to the Georgia Department of Education, "A charter system is a local school district that operates under the terms of a charter between the State Board of Education and the local district. The system receives flexibility from certain state rules and regulations in exchange for greater accountability. There is an emphasis on school based leadership and decision-making."^v Lou Erste, Associate Superintendent for Policy and Charter Schools with the Georgia Department of Education, told a gathering of district and charter leaders in August of 2014 that, "If you are not committed to turning your district upside down and having legitimate local school governance you shouldn't apply, you shouldn't sign a letter of intent for that. Charter system is a commitment kind of like marriage."^{vi}

DUBLIN CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT AS INNOVATOR

The Dublin City School District in southeast Georgia has been a leader in embracing the "charter district" option. Dublin City Schools, established in 1897, initiated a five-year charter with the State Board of Education on July 1, 2011. Dublin has a population of about 18,000 and its school district serves about 2,800 students (82 percent of whom are Free and Reduced price lunch). About 80 percent of the district's students are African-American. The district portfolio consists of three thematic-based elementary schools, a middle school, an academic high school and a Title I non-traditional school that serves 450 students in grades 6-12. High school students also have access to the recently launched career tech regional charter high school.

The Dublin District embraces competition and school choice. The district is open-enrollment and attracts students from surrounding counties as far as 40 miles away. Superintendent Chuck Ledbetter, a former college football player and high school football coach from Alabama, believes “people make choices for different reasons and it is important to let people make choices.”

Important to Ledbetter is the fact that, “the charter system has given us flexibility from rules that allow us to do more for kids.” Specifically, he said it “allows us to pilot new ideas.” These new ideas include:

- Creating three K-5 schools that are defined by their own unique academic themes and are open-enrollment (families from anywhere in the district and beyond can apply);
- Utilizing flexible scheduling to offer students the opportunity to take courses from local colleges or if needed credit recovery programs;
- Moving towards mastery-based learning over seat-time requirements;
- Launching, in partnership with four public school systems, three area chambers of commerce, the Dublin-Laurens County Development Authority, Oconee Fall Line Technical College and Middle Georgia State College, the Heart of Georgia College and Career Academy; and
- Bringing to Dublin High School the academically rigorous International Baccalaureate Program.

Emory Bostic, principal of the alternative Moore Street School, believes that being a charter district means “we aren’t afraid to do things.” Ledbetter goes further and says he encourages his building leaders to “break rules with integrity in order to deliver for kids.” Saxon Heights Elementary principal John Strickland believes the district’s charter status allows a “culture shift.” “It triggered a change in mind-set. We don’t have to do things here because of the system. We do things because we think it works for kids,” observed Strickland. He added that his school has seen a dramatic decline in referrals for discipline issues since the change to district charter status.

The district chartering process is also about accountability. It requires the district and its schools to work out their goals, how they define success, and how people will be held accountable for delivering results. It provides transparency as the goals and targets for the district and the schools are shared with the state. According to Bostic, “there is a legitimacy through the certification process and of being recertified (5-years later) through the renewal process.” The process of defining targets and

measures of success is, Bostic says, “especially important for an alternative school like the Moore Street School.” For Moore Street students, credit recovery is an important component of the school’s offerings. Bostic said, “Young people have to understand you get out of it what you put into it.” Credit recovery is a tangible thing that students understand. They know it is a real step towards a high school diploma.

Students and their parents are engaged in what’s happening in the Dublin schools. Parents make a proactive decision as to the school their children will attend within the district portfolio. When open-enrollment for seats into Dublin’s three elementary schools took place in 2011 parents stood in line overnight to ensure their children got into the elementary school they thought worked best for them. Critics argued at the time, Ledbetter remembers, that no parents would show up for the open-enrollment process because they were apathetic, or that having open-enrollment into the schools would lead to the re-segregation of the public schools.¹ Neither criticism played out.

FLEXIBILITY TO DO MORE FOR KIDS

Because of charter district status there is actually more engagement in the schools. Not only by the parents and students, but also by teachers. Under the charter contract between the state and Dublin City Schools each building is required to “utilize a governing council as its governing body, which shall operate with the intent and purpose of maximizing school level decision making.”^{vii} Both teachers and parents have a role on these governing councils, and the councils (with significant input from building principals) have “decision-making authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school government goals, and school operations.”^{viii}

In practice, this means building level leaders like Bostic and Strickland have real say in what happens in their buildings. This starts with the fact that they draft their own budgets. Of course, Ledbetter observed, “in recent years that has meant they have a say in where to make cuts.” When it comes to the hiring and firing of teachers, and other building level staff, school leaders – again with input from their governing councils – have authority to hire the staff they think works best for their schools. But,

¹ Dublin City School District has been involved in Litigation over School Desegregation since the late 1960s. See “Desegregation of Public School Districts in Georgia: 35 Public School Districts Have Unitary Status, 74 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction,” Georgia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (December 2007). <http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/GADESG-FULL.pdf>

the district board, according to Ledbetter, has “the right of refusal.” In short, the district board can’t tell the schools who to hire, but they can veto particular hires.

All school employees are considered “district employees,” and if a principal decides a teacher has to go the formal decision is announced and owned by the Superintendent. About this Ledbetter said, “This is a pretty small town and people are apt to run into each other at the store or in church.” It is important to point out that Georgia is a right to work state and the teacher unions are relatively weak. There is no collective bargaining agreements for teachers in Dublin, but there is teacher tenure. According to Ledbetter, “you have to follow a formal process to dismiss staff, but we don’t have to keep staff that don’t work well for the kids and schools.” But, added Ledbetter, “none of us are into firing people.” He shared that because of the economic crisis of recent years good people had to be let go, and “this hurt families, students and the larger community.”

In Dublin, like rural communities across the country, the economy, the community and the local schools are intimately intertwined. The fiscal cliff that hit state and local budgets in 2008-09 was a turning point for the Dublin schools. According to Ledbetter and his team the economic pain encouraged them to do things differently, and changes to state policy offered additional incentives for the district to embrace the charter district concept. Not only did it offer the district and its schools more flexibility; it came with new dollars - \$85 per student.

THE SCHOOLS AND ECONOMY ARE INTERTWINED

But, more important than state policy and state incentives, is the connection the Dublin City Schools has to the local community and its overall economic and civic health. For most of the 20th century the economy around Dublin was based largely on the textile industry. All that changed in the 1990s according to Brad Lofton at the Dublin-Laurens County Development Authority. “The textile industry here was a casualty of NAFTA and we are still digging out of that collapse,” said Lofton. Unemployment in Laurens County is 10.5%, almost double the national average of 5.4%.

In 2014, Georgia was rated the top state for doing business in the country.^{ix} Dublin-Laurens County has a reputation as being one of the best regions in Georgia for doing business. In recent years, “Dublin and Laurens County have landed a slew of manufacturers, including a Latvian-based company that last week announced plans to invest \$20 million in a fiberglass plant that’s expected to create 150 jobs.”^x

Education is an important piece of Dublin's economic development strategy. This connection between education and economic development is evidenced by the fact that the Dublin district's Associate Superintendent Fred Williams is the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Dublin-Laurens County Development Authority.

In recruiting international companies to a community education matters in two important ways. First, top executives and their spouses want to know there are quality school options for their children before moving to a place. Second, businesses want to know that they can find the employees they need to get the work done in their factories and facilities. In fact, "existing work force skills" is the number one factor in top business climate rankings.^{xi} Superintendent Ledbetter stated bluntly, "We collaborate closely with the economic development authority...We are all in this together." Brad Lofton from the development authority agreed, "education is connected to economic development, which is connected to quality of life."

Being a charter school district has made it easier for the Dublin City Schools to react to opportunities. For example, Dublin High School decided to pursue "International Baccalaureate (IB) World School" status, and in the autumn of 2014 the school joined the ranks of more than 3,750 IB World Schools in 147 countries. According to the district, "the two-year curriculum is internationally recognized, which will in turn facilitate global mobility to all participating Dublin High School students."^{xii} It is also a program readily recognizable to citizens from other countries who move to help lead and build companies in Laurens County.

To provide career opportunities for Dublin's students aligned to the area's growing economic opportunities the Dublin City Schools helped spearhead the launch of the Heart of Georgia College and Career Academy. The Academy is Georgia's second regional "college and career academy," and it builds on the work and materials generated by the Southern Regional Education Board's Commission on Career and Technical Education.² The Academy, according to Ledbetter, was the result of "pleas from both employers and students for industry specific skills." In 2014-15 it launched as a pilot with 40 area 9th graders. Ultimately the Academy expects to enroll 800 students – 400 in the morning and 400 in the afternoon – with students taking half their courses in their home districts. The four public school districts have also agreed

² For more information see "Recognizing Academic Achievement in Career/Technical Education: Conditions for Awarding Academic Credit for Career/Technical Courses," Southern Regional Education Board.

to provide various in-kind supports to the Academy that include teachers and building and maintenance support.

Ledbetter shared that "Industry is helping pay for the cost of teachers and equipment," and added that adults are also going to be able to take courses and earn industry credits from the Academy. Tiffany Lofton, the Academy's CEO, believes that industry certification shows employers that "our students can do anything," while partnering with the county in this efforts makes good sense "because both of us are looking where are students are coming from and where the opportunities are." According to Ledbetter and Lofton, industry certification is key for proving to employers that graduates are actually ready for the modern workplace.

GETTING EVEN BETTER

In an interview for "American Graduate – Let's make it happen," a public media initiative supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Ledbetter remarked, "since moving to a charter system the district's high school graduation rate has improved, it's led to greater community involvement and a number of large companies have moved into the Dublin area."^{xiii} But, not everything is perfect.

Ledbetter and his team shared that both the IB Program and the Heart of Georgia College and Career Academy efforts "have collided with some existing state rules and regulations." For example, raw test scores from the state's assessment system don't capture many of the advanced skills required of IB or the skills and knowledge related to professional credentials. Further, seat time requirements are largely irrelevant to students spending half their time in an industrial fellowship or internship.

Ledbetter shared that "funding Carnegie Units doesn't work for students participating in the Middle Georgia State Aviation Program." Because of these disconnects, Ledbetter and his team are pushing for changes to the state funding formula so that it is no longer defined around six or seven school based units. "Seat time should be waved and there should be a focus on mastery of content, while funds should follow students to the programs they actually participate in," argues Ledbetter.

Dublin is going to seek more flexibilities in its 2016 charter renewal with the state, but Ledbetter worries that some of the state's lawyers may want to "over-regulate" the effort at the expense of "space to innovate." Ledbetter wants to rework the goals and the achievement targets to reflect what they've learned over the last five years.

He said his ultimate goal is to “do what’s necessary for the community and to generate productive students.”

Terry Ryan is president of the Idaho Charter School Network and a member of the Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho (ROCI). More information on ROCI can be found at: <http://www.rociidaho.org/>

Endnotes:

¹ Neerav Kingsland. “An Open Letter to Urban Superintendents in the United States of America,” http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2012/01/an_open_letter_to_urban_superintendents_in_the_united_states_of_america.html

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¹ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/09/02/02stim-rural.h29.html>

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¹ Michelle Wirth. “Georgia School Districts Weigh Different Operating Models,” <http://wabe.org/post/georgia-school-districts-weigh-different-operating-models>

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<https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Charter-Schools/Documents/Dublin%20City%20Charter%20System.pdf>

¹ Ibid.

¹ <http://www.areadevelopment.com/Top-States-for-Doing-Business/Q3-2014/survey-results-top-states-analysis-2624441.shtml>

¹ Linda S. Morris. “The secret of success: International companies find home in Dublin,” [Macon.com](http://www.macon.com) (August 2, 2014).

¹ Mark Arend, “Sunny Day in Georgia,” <http://siteselection.com/issues/2013/nov/cover.cfm>.

¹ Dublin City Schools Report 2014.

¹ Michelle Wirth. “Georgia School Districts Weigh Different Operating Models,” <http://wabe.org/post/georgia-school-districts-weigh-different-operating-models>

ⁱ Neerav Kingsland. “An Open Letter to Urban Superintendents in the United States of America,” http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2012/01/an_open_letter_to_urban_superintendents_in_the_united_states_of_america.html

ⁱⁱ Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban School* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/09/02/02stim-rural.h29.html>

^{iv} Center for Education Reform, “The Last Eight States without Charter Laws,” <http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/CharterLaws2013-Last-8-States.pdf>

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- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} <http://www.areadevelopment.com/Top-States-for-Doing-Business/Q3-2014/survey-results-top-states-analysis-2624441.shtml>
- ^x Linda S. Morris. “The secret of success: International companies find home in Dublin,” [Macon.com](http://www.macon.com) (August 2, 2014).
- ^{xi} Mark Arend, “Sunny Day in Georgia,” <http://siteselection.com/issues/2013/nov/cover.cfm>.
- ^{xii} Dublin City Schools Report 2014.
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