

METRO

THURSDAY, MAY 8, 2008 | SECTION B

THE PLAIN DEALER

Public, charter schools agree to work together

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Someone joked that the decades-old gong that begins City Club of Cleveland forums sounds a lot like the bell used to start prizefights.

But instead of slipping on boxing gloves, leaders of traditional public education and upstart charter schools treated one another with kid gloves on Wednesday, agreeing to work together to provide opportunities for all Cleveland children.

"We're in this together," said Eric Gordon, chief academic officer for the Cleveland public schools. "We either go down together, or we reinforce things that work."

Gordon appeared with representatives of three of Cleveland's top-performing charter schools: Citizens' Academy, the Intergenerational School and the Entrepreneurship Preparatory Academy. The latter is sponsored by the Cleveland district.

The discussion seemed to signal a new era of cooperation between traditional public schools and charter schools, independent schools that are publicly funded but privately operated.

In their 10-year history in Ohio, charter schools have drawn the ire of many public school educators. They have been accused of siphoning much-needed money from urban districts and failing, in many cases, to

deliver better academic results.

Much of that anger has been directed at charter schools operated by large, for-profit firms. None of the charter schools at Wednesday's forum is operated by for-profit companies.

"This is about changing the conversation," said Cathy Whitehouse, co-founder and chief educator at the Intergenerational School, the only charter school in Ohio to receive the state's top academic rating each of the last four years. "We'd like to teach other interested schools in the community or districts things we found that have worked."

But charters appear to already be leveraging change. The Cleveland

city schools, for example, have established single-gender academies and other specialty schools to keep the district competitive in the education marketplace. Of the nearly 77,000 students attending school in the city last year, a little more than 53,000 attended Cleveland public schools, about 11,600 attended charter schools, and about 12,100 were at Catholic and other private schools.

"Choice is a powerful force," said Perry White, Citizens' founder and executive director. "We're losing population, and we need to keep and attract families to our neighborhoods."

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