

# Jerry Jurgensen: Thriving charter schools need state's support

MAY 11, 2017



In 2015, the Ohio legislature created a \$25 million competitive grant for high-performing charter schools to buy, construct, or renovate school facilities. In a climate in which charters receive an average of two-thirds as much per-pupil public funding than traditional schools, the facilities grant program was a much-needed infusion of support.

It also was an unprecedented move toward recognizing and supporting Ohio's best charter schools — those with a track record of success in educating some of the state's most at-risk youths. There were rigorous eligibility parameters for the grant, limiting funds to those schools and networks with a track record of academic success.

The state ended up awarding \$17 million to eight charter schools around Ohio, including United Schools Network, for which I am proud to serve as a board member.

The west campus of USN's Columbus Collegiate Academy is in a 104-year-old closed Columbus City Schools building on Dana Avenue in West Franklinton. While more suitable than the spaces used by many charter schools, Columbus Collegiate Academy — Dana Ave. has been in need of significant updates to make it a suitable environment to educate children. Thanks to \$1.7 million in support from the state that was matched by USN's private donors, the building will add an elevator for students with physical disabilities to move from floor to floor, along with a science lab, music room, theater stage, family resource center and other improvements.

Starting next fall, students of Columbus Collegiate Academy — Dana Ave., one of the best middle schools in the city, will have a facility that almost matches the caliber of their teachers.

Statewide, it is estimated that several thousand Ohio children have been affected by the improved learning spaces and enrollment slots made possible through this grant.

Despite the pressing need for facilities funds for good charter schools, Ohio only awarded a portion of the \$25 million. Ohio should reinstate the \$25 million facilities grant for this budget cycle, because supporting the growth of its best schools might be the single most important way toward improving Ohio's charter sector.

Ohio charter schools currently receive \$200 per pupil for facilities, an amount that has stagnated since the last budget. A survey of Ohio charter-school principals released in January found that nearly half of Ohio's brick-and-mortar charters were using buildings that were not adequate for planned enrollment growth. More than half were located in structures not originally designed to be a school. Given that an overwhelming percentage of Ohio charter students are low-income students of color, this introduces questions about equity and fairness in terms of how well we serve all Ohio students.

In order for schools such as USN to continue to grow to meet the needs of students in some of Columbus' most impoverished neighborhoods — and for excellent charters in other Ohio cities to do the same — state lawmakers must extend the competitive facilities program. Doing so would signal their commitment to quality schools and to the families and students waiting to be served by them. The private donors who provided the required matching dollars for the facilities grant have already demonstrated this commitment.

It would go a long way toward recognizing that to improve Ohio's charter sector, we must do more than close failing schools, but also support successful ones. And it would make Ohio and its struggling communities more competitive places for innovative schools to start and thrive.

*Jerry Jurgensen is the retired CEO of Nationwide Co. who chaired two governor's commissions on education.*