

Dear North Star Parents,

Charter schools are schools of choice—for parents and for teachers. For those of us who take the leap from the safety and stability of the traditional school system, it is a considered decision. We are looking for something better—a better way of teaching—a better way of learning. Something better for our children.

When I was School Choice Coordinator at the State Department of Education, I had the opportunity to work with charter schools across the state. I saw the passion and vigor that accompanied the start-up phase of new charter schools. I saw the pride and commitment of our longest operating charter schools. But I also saw the charter schools that were making the painful transition from passion to pride—the “tweeners.”

Adolescent charter schools face many of the same challenges that teenagers face. There are fits and starts. High emotions. Conflicts and confrontations. Adolescents are in the process of “becoming.” Of making their hopes and dreams a reality. This transition is rarely easy (ask any parent of a teen), but it is always fulfilling.

Sometimes it is easy to give up in this transitional phase. Like some of you, I have considered other options. So why do I stay?

Because at North Star Charter School...

Students work hard. Every day they amaze me with the quality of their work, their insights and their desire to be the best. They are articulate, engaged, passionate learners. They thank me as I hand out assignments. They thank me for a particularly engaging lesson. It is not unusual to see study groups in the lunchroom and classrooms preparing for tests and projects—or older students helping younger students with complex reading and writing tasks. Students at North Star relish a challenge. Instead of dragging and coaxing them to new levels of learning, sometimes I am scrambling to keep up. I have taught for over 30 years in public school, private school and university settings, and I can honestly say I have never worked with such outstanding young people.

Students are nice. In the years that I have taught at North Star, I have never faced the kinds of behavioral challenges that I confronted in other schools. I have never seen violence—no fights or weapons. Drugs and alcohol aren't promoted. In fact, the language and behavior that are tolerated in other schools are a rarity here. Typically, student misbehavior at North Star includes too much talking, running in the halls, some lunchroom trash, hugging (mostly among friends), a flipped rubber band, a “stolen” water bottle, tardiness, late assignments and (did I already say) too much talking. While they no longer walk the corridors in the neat lines of their elementary years, and they no longer speak in café voices, they hold each other to a high standard of behavior that supports accelerated learning.

Students care. I love the K-12 framework that allows children of different ages to interact. I love seeing our high school students crouched in small blue chairs in the elementary wing working with younger

students. I love seeing big brothers wrapping little brothers in a hug at the beginning and end of each school day. I love seeing the respect, compassion and thoughtfulness that the students share with classmates and with teachers every day. And, in particular, I love how our older students have responded proactively to the greater needs of our community and our world: childhood cancer, families with diabetic children, language challenges of migrant children, poverty in South America, etc. Service for many of our students is not a requirement—it is a way of life.

Students work hard, and they play hard. Our students are fun and funny. We laugh a lot. Just last week one of my juniors entered the classroom in full prom regalia singing “That Loving Feeling” to one of the girls. It was good...but it became even better when his “back-up” singers—a group of freshman and junior boys entered, snapping, to join in the chorus. Just the week before, in a staging of the final act of Hamlet, the student playing King Claudius “died” dramatically for over a minute. By the time he finally succumbed to his injuries, we were all in tears. Our students are golfers, gymnasts, bull riders, artists, musicians, composers, clothing designers, singers, dancers, actors, pole-vaulters, computer specialists and, well, kids. They know the value of hard work—and the value of play.

Athletes are not “jocks.” Our athletes work hard on the court, in the field and in the classroom. They are scholar-athletes, balancing a passion for sports with accelerated learning. They are disciplined and hard working. Our coaches support the classroom teachers; they ensure that students manage their classroom commitments first. Many of the athletes in my classes are among our highest academic achievers. They are leaders, not only on their respective teams, but in the classroom as well.

Parents rock! In a small high school, parents and teachers can become partners in ways that are not possible in other settings. I have known many of you for all of the years that I’ve taught at North Star. I have stood alongside you as your children have grown, gone to college and (choke!) married. I have shared in your sorrows and your joys. North Star parents are impassioned, committed parents who spend countless hours working on the school board, on committees, on activities and on fund raisers. They provide desperately needed resources for our classrooms. They stay up late working on assignments with their children. They email and meet with me after school and at lunch. They advocate for their children, and, ultimately, they ensure their children’s success.

The IB program offers a world-class education. It provides breadth and depth in learning. It ensures that all students who engage fully, whether or not they test for the IB diploma, are ready to meet the demands of a post-secondary education. Students learn time management, critical thinking, advanced reading and writing skills. Unlike schools that offer accelerated classes a la carte, the IB curriculum is integrated. IB not only emphasizes accelerated academics, but it also emphasizes character and service. IB learners strive to be: inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, and reflective.

My colleagues are superstars. I have taught in schools where there were many good teachers—but there were always a few down the hall who showed movies all day or had laminated lesson plans dating back to their first years of teaching. Not at North Star. The curriculum is not a follow-the-textbook, fill-in-the-blanks program. It is designed by the teachers to not only meet the learning needs of the

students in any given year, but to accelerate the learning. This is no easy task. The IB and Pre-IB program demand excellence from students and teachers. Most secondary teachers start their day at 7 am. And if you look at the end of the day, there are still cars in the lot at 5 or 6 (or 7). North Star teachers share a love of the students and a passion for lifelong learning. For us, teaching is a passion.

Now, I'll be the first to admit things aren't perfect at North Star. We face a lot of challenges as we move forward to maturity. But when I reflect on all of the choices available, North Star Charter School remains my school of choice.

Respectfully,

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