



## Infinity Charter School in Penbrook has a perfect record in meeting the yearly academic performance targets

Published: Tuesday, October 18, 2011, 12:00 AM



By **JAN MURPHY, The Patriot-News**



**View full size**

DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News

Infinity Charter School has been in operation for nine years at Banks Street in Penbrook. Parent Soyoung So, of Dillsburg, works with kindergarten and first grade students, including first-grade student Ronit Roy. At far right is school CEO and director Nancy Hall. The students are reading in the hall during flexible ability grouping time.

**Infinity Charter School** in Penbrook has accomplished a goal that former President George W. Bush set out for all public schools.

Every one of the students at Infinity scored at or above grade level on the state's reading and math exams last spring.

Only four schools in the state had all of its students demonstrate proficiency in both subjects. Infinity is the only charter school among them.

The school is tucked along a side street in Penbrook in a former elementary school owned by Penbrook United Church of Christ.

This independent public school has a perfect record in meeting the **yearly academic performance targets set**

**forth by the state Department of Education.** The school far surpasses what the state deems adequate yearly progress.

"I think it makes our parents very pleased. I think they would be very concerned if we did not make [adequate yearly progress], but I don't think they necessarily expect us to have 100 percent always," said Nancy Hall, who cofounded the school along with her husband, Doug Morrow.

Hall attributes her school's state test performance success to its small size. The school serves about 125 children in kindergarten through eighth grade, and many are gifted. Staffers work individually with students to prevent them from falling behind. Hall also credits its multiage classrooms that group students in two grade levels together.

Gov. Tom Corbett wants to create more charter schools as part of his education reforms plans. It's one of his priorities, and it's a proposal that is expected to generate great debate.

Infinity stands out from most of the state's 153 other charter schools. While Infinity is an undeniable success story, critics say the same can't be said of many of the state's charter schools.

## Mixed results

Critics say schools such as Infinity don't face the challenge of larger public schools with highly diverse student bodies. And some charter schools aren't performing as well as public schools.

The **Pennsylvania School Boards Association** suggests charter schools have a worse track record than traditional public schools on state math and reading exams.

According to the association's analysis of Education Department numbers, 44 percent of charter schools did not reach the state's performance targets this year as compared with 6 percent of school districts that failed to hit those marks.

That finding underscores a Stanford University study that examined academic records of America's charter school students. It found that only 17 percent of charter schools do a better job than their local school districts, while 37 percent do significantly worse.

Lawrence Jones, president of the **Pennsylvania Coalition for Public Charter Schools**, told state lawmakers last summer that there are places where charters' performance is superior to that of school districts.

He pointed to Philadelphia, where 70 percent of charters hit the state's benchmarks, compared with 59 percent of district schools in 2009-10.

Besides that, Jones, who also is CEO of a Philadelphia charter school, said charters have a higher number of performance targets to hit than school districts.

He said a district can be considered as making adequate progress even if one of its school buildings didn't hit all of its performance targets. However, a charter school must meet all of its performance targets to be considered as making adequate yearly progress, Jones said.

Steve Robinson, a spokesman for the School Boards Association, disagreed that charter schools face a tougher challenge.

He pointed out that the state requires school districts to factor in the performance of far more students from poor families or children with special needs. If a public school district has 40 or more students with special needs, for example, that group's test scores count toward the district's overall performance.

Because many charter schools have far fewer students, particularly students with special needs, "it should be easier for them," Robinson said.



**Enlarge**

**DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News**

Infinity Charter School has been in operation for nine years at Banks Street in Penbrook. School CEO and director Nancy Hall works with kindergarten students Noah Porter, left, Camden Pickles, center, and Aleeyah Johnson. 10/12/2011 DAN GLEITER, The Patriot-News

**Infinity Charter School in Penbrook** gallery (10 photos)

**Corbett's education reform agenda** calls for holding charter schools accountable for academic performance. Charter schools would be required to hit their performance goals or run the risk of having their charters revoked and being forced to close. Jones applauded that idea.

"It's going to make for better charter schools, which is going to make our position stronger. It's going to improve public education to bring more charter schools," Jones said in a recent interview.

Infinity's Hall also endorsed that proposal from the governor, but also said she would like to see all schools held equally accountable.

### **Serving gifted kids**

Infinity uses diagnostic testing to determine students' reading and math abilities, and it groups them with students of similar abilities in those subjects so they can learn at their own pace.

The school centers its social studies and science instruction around a yearlong interdisciplinary theme. None of its instruction is textbook-based, giving teachers more flexibility in their teaching.

But state test results are not the only measure that Hall looks to when assessing her school's success.

"We have kids here who are excited about learning. We have kids who aren't happy about summer vacations lasting as long as it does because they are not getting to be here and learning things.

"We have guest speakers coming in, saying, 'Wow, those are some of the best questions we've gotten from anybody, adults, children, anybody,' and they are impressed. That's a measure of success for us," Hall said.

Infinity strives to meet the academic, intellectual, social and emotional needs of gifted students. But don't make the mistake of thinking that only gifted students are admitted, she said.

State law bars charter schools from using admission criteria based solely on academic and intellectual ability. So not all students who are admitted to Infinity are classified as gifted, she said.

Some have special needs and medical issues, Hall said. But all enter knowing the school's expectation is that learning is their first priority.

"Most people would say it's appropriate for a child to learn something new every day at school. Unfortunately, for gifted kids, sometimes that's not true," Hall said.

At Infinity, kids who listen to National Public Radio and watch the Discovery channel do it for fun and talk about what they learned from them in class. Second-graders are at ease talking about the building blocks of the universe, knowing classmates understand what they are saying and they won't be ridiculed or teased.

"Parents say for the first time in my child's life, he or she feels normal," Hall said. "I think that's the biggest compliment we've received."

## **ABOUT THE SCHOOL**

Infinity Charter School serves about 125 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The Penbrook school aims to meet the academic, intellect, social and emotional needs of gifted students. But the school's enrollment isn't limited to gifted students, the school says.

State law bars charter schools from using admission criteria based solely on academic and intellectual ability. Some students have special needs and medical issues.

## **A MIXED BAG**

While some charter schools are succeeding, others have failed to achieve what is termed making adequate yearly progress, or AYP. The state's benchmarks call for the schools to have at least 67 percent of students perform at grade level in math and at least 72 percent at grade level in reading.

— Of the 12 cyber charter schools that are independent public schools and deliver instruction over the Internet, only two made AYP.

— Of the 142 brick-and-mortar charters whose students took the state exams, 86 made AYP.

— 44 percent of charter schools did not reach the state's performance targets.

— Of the 499 school districts that administer the state exams, 467 made AYP.

— Of the 3,096 school buildings in the state, including cyber and brick-and-mortar charter schools and career and technology centers, 2,326 schools made AYP

*Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania School Boards Association*

© 2011 PennLive.com. All rights reserved.