

Opinion

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OUR VIEW

ON THE SUBJECT OF CHANGE ...

New schools challenge students

There's an old saying that the only constant in life is change. Anyone who has been around for more than a few years knows how true that is. Many people reading this can remember when Circle Drive was the eastern edge of Colorado Springs. A few might recall when Airport Road actually went to the airport. Or perhaps think back to the days when one could have lunch at Walgreens' or Woolworth's lunch counters while shopping downtown at JC Penney or Hibbard's.

Along with change comes growth, and as the city pushed out from the downtown core, the new neighborhoods contained new parks and schools for the children. Parents used to look closely at neighborhood schools when they were selecting a home. That's not the case so much these days.

Open enrollment, opportunity grants, magnet schools and charter schools have opened new possibilities for students. If their local school doesn't meet their needs, students and parents have options to enhance their educational experience. That gives students the opportunity to pursue the course of study that best suits them and their goals. Parents of such students are involved, so they ensure their children get the education they need to be successful.

On Thursday, The Gazette reported that organizers are proposing a new charter school in Harrison School District 2. The Atlas Preparatory School would be aimed at keeping high-risk students in class and preparing them for higher education. It's a great idea: target students who likely would quit school and have few, if any, marketable skills, and prepare them for college where they will get the education to become productive members of society. According to the news report, there are only a few such schools in the country.

A wide spectrum of supporters was quoted in the story, indicating Atlas would have broad-based support in the community. It's probably safe to say that there aren't many issues on which administrators at Colorado College and the Air Force Academy would agree, yet there they were at a meeting last week speaking up in support of Atlas' mission. It's not really surprising, though. Colleges and universities seek students who are ready and willing to add their successes to an institution's record.

Atlas could provide opportunities for students to turn their lives around and rather than being stuck in low-skilled, low-paying jobs their entire lives, they would have the skills to compete at the highest levels of the economy. That's good for them and their families.

Not that it will be easy. Organizers plan to have students in class from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. each day and the scholastic year would be 10 days longer than the standard 180-day year. Serving grades 5-8, the school would provide five years of education in four years. Students would come out ready to excel in high school and go on to college, most likely whichever college they choose. They'll be well prepared.

Backers of traditional public schools will charge that this charter school will drain money away from neighborhood schools. They'll probably also point to results that show charters-school students don't perform much better than students in traditional public schools. But charter schools operate under the constant threat of closure if they don't meet the needs and desires of their customers, the parents. That's a problem traditional public schools don't have; they're fairly free to force whatever education fad on their students administrators and teachers want to try. Parents who are unsatisfied can always take their kids out of the neighborhood school, but other than that, they don't pay a price for failure. Charter schools operate closer to the edge than that and must show results or be closed, especially in areas where school districts are hostile to the very idea of charter schools.

The rigorous curriculum at Atlas wouldn't be aimed at all at-risk students. If a child has no interest in or aptitude for higher education, other options would be a better choice. There's nothing wrong with that; one doesn't need a degree to contribute to society. Our economy needs people of all interests and education levels to be successful. That's one of the reasons that traditional, one-size-fits-all public education is poorly equipped to educate tomorrow's workers and voters. Charter and magnet schools can tailor their programs to specific needs of students and the economy.

It's a rapidly changing world out there and public education can no longer cling to outdated systems. They must adapt or fall by the wayside.