

**EXCITEMENT AND MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUND CHARTER SCHOOLS;
LEAVITT'S PLAN AND THE SUBSEQUENT STATE FUNDING FOR EIGHT IN UTAH
HAS GENERATED A FLURRY OF QUESTIONS TO EDUCATION OFFICIALS**

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Gov. Mike Leavitt promised exciting reforms in education with a legislative package he introduced this year, and if phone calls to the State Office of Education and the Capitol are any proof, Utahns are ready for the change.

Requests for information on charter schools has come in a steady stream in the weeks since the laws were passed. Among them are queries from a performing-arts center, an Indian tribe and a group of deaf-education specialists interested in becoming charter school pioneers in Utah.

``Many of them are more interested in attending a charter school than in starting one," said Associate State Superintendent Steve Laing. ``They'll ask: `Where are you going to build these charter schools?' and I have to tell them it's not like that."

The question is typical of the misconceptions that still surround charter schools. A charter school is operated with public funds, but it is still exempt from many of the restrictive rules and guidelines binding public schools. They are not allowed to charge tuition and must have open-enrollment policies, although some charter schools target a certain group of students with a particular interest such as music, theater, science or math.

In Utah, Leavitt tucked charter schools into a package of education bills he unveiled during this year's Legislative session. The bill provided \$500,000 to fund eight pilot charter schools that could open as soon as this fall. Leavitt originally had asked for more than \$1 million for the project.

Besides charter schools, the package introduced Schools for the 21st Century, a program designed to eventually replace the state's Centennial School program, which encourages non-traditional site-based decision-making and offers money in return.

This week, educators across the state were given the first glimpse of the extensive application process required to become a School for the 21st Century, but applications for charter schools will not be available until June.

Perhaps the most frequent inquiries have come from the Tuacahn Center for the Arts in Ivins, near St. George in southwestern Utah.

Gerald Sherratt, former president of Southern Utah University, would serve as president for the 200-student school in the scenic redrock setting near Snow Canyon. Tuacahn is privately funded and opened in 1995 as a professional performing facility.

Because classrooms, practice rooms and an auditorium already are in place, Sherratt said, the performing arts high school could be in place by fall if the state board approves.

At first, students would be housed for \$80-\$100 a month in apartments in Santa Clara, but dormitories would be built eventually.

Sherratt said the large number of retirees in Dixie make it the perfect site for such a school.

“We have a terrific number of retired artists, musicians and theater people here,” he said.

Leavitt's deputy for education, Gary Carlston, said inquiries to his office have come from a group of deaf-education specialists at Salt Lake Community College who hope to open a charter school for deaf students and a group from the Ute Indian Tribe.

There are about 780 charter schools in 29 states and the District of Columbia, so Utah and neighboring Idaho are trailing the national trend.

Idaho lawmakers also took action to create charter schools this year, and officials from the State Department of Education are hosting regional meetings throughout the month. Like Utah, Idaho's law takes effect in July, but it allows one charter school per district per year in Idaho. The Utah law allows only eight to begin with.

So far, several private schools in Idaho have expressed interest in becoming public charter schools. That may not be the case in Utah, where Margie Coombs, principal of the Rowland Hall-St. Marks Middle School, said that at least at her school, they are happy to stay just the way they are. Funding, for example, is now about twice as much per pupil as it would be in a public school.

“Financially, we just couldn't do it and still pay our teachers,” she said. “On a personal level, when I was in the public schools, it would have been an exciting concept.”

Coombs represented private schools on the Centennial Charter School Task Force last year.