

## What will the Topeka Board say this time?

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What will the Topeka, Kansas school board say to the Brown Family THIS time, and why should we care? A fascinating story is playing out in Topeka, home of the U.S. Supreme Court case, /Brown versus Board of Education/.

This time, The Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence and Research, headed by Cheryl Brown Henderson, is helping create a charter public school. They want it to be in Sumner Elementary School, the now closed building that Linda Brown was denied access to, more than 50 years ago. That was central to /Brown versus Board/.

The original charter idea, developed in Minnesota, was to allow local districts, and at least one other group, such as the State Board of Education, a university, or social service agency, to grant charters. That's how it operates in Minnesota and many states. Minnesota has more than 130 charter public schools. ( for more information, please see charter profiles at [www.centerforschoolchange.org](http://www.centerforschoolchange.org)).

Ms. Brown Henderson recently wrote to the Topeka Board, "It is our greatest hope that the Board of Education will include among its priorities, a focus on the need of children identified as at-risk. The petition being presented by the Sumner-Latter Academy aggressively addresses the growing achievement gaps in our classrooms. "

Brown Henderson is working with Sandra Lassiter, a retired, 30 veteran TPS elementary school teacher, counselor and principal. Lassiter's four children attended Topeka public schools. However, she asked for the charter because "too many children, black and white, lack basic skills. We want to work with the students with greatest needs."

Lassiter believes "the charter gives us the ability to meet students' needs by being more flexible with the schedule, staffing and families. I can have students spend two-three hours on reading, if they need it. Some faculty can start earlier, and some later in the day. The charter approach allows us to do what really needs to be done." More than 100 people joined Lassiter last week at the Topeka Board, urging them to approve the proposal.

Unfortunately, Kansas law allows only local districts to grant charters. This way, it's a bit like one restaurant franchise having the right to determine whether another can come to town, to compete.

All charters are not equally effective. Carolyn Campbell, president of the Topeka Board, notes that the district approved Hope Academy, a secondary charter that she says "has done a wonderful job with students who had succeeded in traditional schools. But Campbell says the new proposal still needs work, and that educators associated with charters in some states, "misappropriated public funds." Accountability for public funds, and for achievement, \*must\* be real.

However, because many charters have been successful, the movement has grown from one school, serving less than 100 students in 1992, to more than 1 million students in almost 4,000 charters around the country. So why should we care about Topeka? Because developing and approving a strong charter means saying "yes"; this time to hope, "yes" to parents and "yes" to progress.