

Charters

after passing a hiring process that includes four interviews with a litany of staff. They even present their learning style to a “class” of students and parents.

“We do give them flexibility to be creative,” he says, “but also we want you to be accountable.”

All told, charter teachers’ salaries average \$39,334, according to the latest state stats – \$16,192 less than traditional public schools. That can draw “farm team” analogies, Van Koevering says: New educators gaining experience before heading to the higher-paying “majors.” With many in their first five years, there is turnover, Naeyaert says. Yet charters do draw seasoned teachers tired of convention.

“There’s more emphasis on this concept of, ‘whatever it takes to reach this kid,’” Naeyaert says, even if it means working longer hours. And the pay gap may close over time, Van Koevering notes. “We don’t have people all

the way at the top of the pay scales yet. The schools simply haven’t existed that long.”

Qualifications are carefully verified both by authorizers and the state, she says: “It’s a significant mythology that’s grown up.” Citing state data, MAPSA notes that 100 percent of the state’s 5,000 charter teachers are certified. In the end, Van Koevering adds, the boards are on the hook for major decisions.

Where you come in

It takes many moving parts to make charters work. But parent demand may well be their lifeblood.

“No one’s going to a charter school that’s not dissatisfied with what’s happening for their child in a traditional public school environment,” contends Naeyaert. “They’re sending them because they’ve researched it and chosen.”

That’s been a factor in struggling urban



YOUNG MINDS IN BLOOM

ANN ARBOR CHARTER NURTURES KIDS WITH GARDENING, ARTS.

Eleven-year-old Andreas Prawdzik and his classmates plant herbs in their school’s community garden.

The two girls’ knees are smudged with soil. They drag kid-sized hand rakes across the ground and pluck tiny weeds near daffodils and hens-and-chicks.

“You get to dig,” Nylah Smith, 7, says. “And you get to help the plants.”

“And planet!” adds her gardening pal Colleen Cheskey, who’s 6.

Fun, science and eco-awareness: That’s the very purpose of this small bed, right outside their class at the Ann Arbor Learning Community. In fact, every room at this K-8 charter has its own patch – with a glass door that opens to it. The grounds, set in a placid industrial park, also house a sprawling community garden.

Outdoor education is firmly rooted in the instruction here, which is labeled “progressive.” Battling “nature deficit disorder” is one way. And, in an era where arts often get the ax, these 270 kids also visit sunlit art and music rooms at least twice a week. Both are part of a robust “specials” program that also covers phys ed. Older students get extra choices of drama or band. And every child experiences fishing, dance, karate, baking, sewing and more at Friday “enrichments.”

Nurturing students’ “creative sides” has been key at this Tree Town school since 1998, when it was founded by a parent and two community members, principal Ticheal Jones says. It’s only grown with the Green movement.

“We want them to have not only the knowledge, skills and the motivation,”

Jones explains, “but, very, very importantly, the sensitivity” towards earth – and each other.

Those seeds are planted in homerooms. Each has one compost bin, for instance, which gets emptied to a pile in the main garden. And each mixes two grades, starting with kindergarten and first. Kids mingle with multi-age reading buddies, too, and special-needs students blend in seamlessly. The revolving rosters help build relationships – and reinforce concepts, says art teacher Marissa Kowalczuk.

“Miss K,” who works with all students, wants each to leave with a “Jeopardy knowledge” of art. Arcing from aboriginal to graffiti, her self-crafted curriculum is highly hands-on, with older kids even tackling glass cutting and hot-wax batik.

“It’s not, ‘Here’s a book. Please open to page 7,’” she says. “I can figure out how to make it entertaining, so they have more understanding and involvement in it.”

Math, science, English and social studies are all here, too, appearing on a separate report card.

But it’s based on hands-on activities, like tracking the weather’s effects, counting pumpkins. Learning what sprouts in local soil. Connecting the food chain. Or just journaling amid the flora.

The languid style of learning creates a sense of community and camaraderie.

“And teamwork,” added Andreas Prawdzik, 11, as he planted herbs with his fellow fourth and fifth graders last June. “We’re all working together.”

Keep it capped?

Central Michigan University considered 42 applications for the lone charter it’s opening this year. Program director Jim Goenner compares it to having the last ticket to the Super Bowl.

“You want it to have maximum impact. How do we create the next ‘wow’ school?” he says. “We’re looking to create schools that stand the test of time.”

Under current law, state universities can only issue 150 total charters – a cap that’s been full for 10 years. And since they’re just about the only authorizers that can grant charters in any geographic area, they’re at a premium.

Should the cap be lifted? A steady stream of state bills has seemed to take aim over the years, and even the President has called for it. The biggest benefit would be additional K-12 choice, says Stephanie Van Koevering with the Michigan Department of Education. But there are drawbacks, too.

“Leaving the cap in place puts some very strong pressure on authorizers to keep quality up,” she explains, and “to close low performers.” If caps suddenly go away, she adds, odds are there’d be at least a little initial drop in quality.

But Van Koevering also sees another choice: earning their way out. “I think we always have to consider that third option, which is balance,” she says.

As for CMU’s “Super Bowl ticket”? It went to Quest Academy’s new K-5 locale in Taylor. But of the final nine contenders, he says, many were worthy.

“What it practically means is when we have terrific vision that could be a new school to serve kids, we can’t (always) do that,” Goenner says.