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Charter School Battle Shifts to Affluent Suburbs

By **WINNIE HU**

MILLBURN, N.J. — Matthew Stewart believes there is a place for [charter schools](#). Just not in his schoolyard.

Mr. Stewart, a stay-at-home father of three boys, moved to this wealthy township, about 20 miles from Midtown Manhattan, three years ago, filling his life with class activities and soccer practices. But in recent months, he has traded play dates for protests, enlisting more than 200 families in a campaign to block two Mandarin-immersion charter schools from opening in the area.

The group, [Millburn Parents Against Charter Schools](#), argues that the schools would siphon money from its children's education for unnecessarily specialized programs. The schools, to be based in nearby Maplewood and Livingston, would draw students and resources from Millburn and other area districts.

"I'm in favor of a quality education for everyone," Mr. Stewart said. "In suburban areas like Millburn, there's no evidence whatsoever that the local school district is not doing its job. So what's the rationale for a charter school?"

Suburbs like Millburn, renowned for educational excellence, have become hotbeds in the nation's charter school battles, raising fundamental questions about the goals of a movement that began 20 years ago in Minnesota.

Charter schools, which are publicly financed but independently operated, have mostly been promoted as a way to give poor children an alternative to underperforming urban schools — to provide options akin to what those who can afford them have in the suburbs or in private schools.

Now, educators and entrepreneurs are trying to bring the same principles of choice to places where schools generally succeed, typically by creating programs, called "boutique charters" by detractors like Mr. Stewart, with intensive instruction in a particular area.

In Montgomery County, Md., north of Washington, [the school board](#) is moving toward its first charter, a Montessori elementary school, after initially rejecting it and two others with global and environmental themes because, as one official said, “we have a very high bar in terms of performance.”

[Imagine Schools](#), a large charter school operator, has held meetings in [Loudoun County, Va.](#), west of Washington, to gauge parental interest in charters marketed partly as an alternative to overcrowded schools.

In Illinois, where 103 of the current 116 charter schools are in Chicago, [an Evanston school board](#) committee is considering opening the district’s first charter school.

More than half of Americans live in suburbs, and about 1 in 5 of the 4,951 existing charter schools were located there in 2010, federal statistics show. Advocates say many proposed suburban charters have struggled because of a double standard that suggests charters are fine for poor urban areas, but are not needed in well-off neighborhoods.

“I think it has to do with comfort level and assumptions based on real estate and not reality,” said Jeanne Allen, president of the [Center for Education Reform](#) in Washington, which studies and supports charter schools. “The houses are nice, people have money, and therefore the schools must be good.”

Ashley Del Sole, a founding member of one of the rejected charters in Montgomery County, said that regardless of how well a district performed, children benefited from choice because not everyone learned the same way. She added that competitive pressure would invigorate schools that had grown complacent.

“There’s sort of this notion that if it’s not broken, why fix it,” Ms. Del Sole said. “But there are people who are not being served.”

With high test scores and graduation rates to flash around, suburban school officials have had an easier time than their urban counterparts arguing that charters are an unnecessary drain on their budgets. In some states, including Virginia, where only local school boards authorize charters, suburban boards have all but kept them out.

“It’s like you’re Burger King and you have to go to McDonald’s to get a license — in most cases you won’t get a friendly reception,” said Roy Gamse, executive vice president of [Imagine Schools](#).

District school boards in Georgia have rejected so many charters that lawmakers created a commission that approved 16 schools over local objections. But after several boards sued, the law was overturned in May, leaving in question the fate of some of those schools.

In New Jersey, where the State Education Department approves charters, school boards and parents have been fighting a [proposed school](#) in another suburb, Montclair, north of Millburn, and another Mandarin-immersion school in the [Princeton area](#) that was approved last year but has yet to open. Statewide, 15 of 73 charter schools are in the suburbs.

The latest battle, over Hua Mei and [Hanyu International](#) — which would start in 2012 with 200 kindergarten through second-grade students drawn from Millburn, Maplewood, Livingston, South Orange, West Orange and Union — has divided neighbors and has spurred calls for legislation to require voter approval to open charters.

Jutta Gassner-Snyder, Hua Mei's lead applicant, said some of the school's 12 founders had received threatening e-mails.

"This is not just about the education of my child," said Ms. Gassner-Snyder, who sends her daughter, Kayla, 4, to a private Mandarin-immersion preschool. "If we just sit back and let school districts decide what they want to do without taking into account global economic trends, as a nation, we all lose."

[Millburn's superintendent](#), James Crisfield, said he was caught off guard by the plan for charters because "most of us thought of it as another idea to help students in districts where achievement is not what it should be." He said the district could lose \$270,000 — or \$13,500 for each of 20 charter students — and that would most likely increase as the schools added a grade each year.

"We don't have enough money to run the schools as it is," Mr. Crisfield said, adding that the district eliminated 18 positions and reduced bus services this year.

Millburn offers Mandarin only in high school, fueling the arguments of those seeking the new charters. "Kids are like sponges," said Yanbin Ma, a Hanyu founder. "There are so many things they can absorb and become good at, and I feel that our public schools haven't done enough to take advantage of that."

But to Mr. Stewart, a leader in a growing opposition that includes Livingston mothers who have helped collect more than [800 petition signatures](#), this sounds "selfish."

"Public education is basically a social contract — we all pool our money, so I don't think I should be able to custom-design it to my needs," he said, noting that he pays \$15,000 a year

in property taxes. “With these charter schools, people are trying to say, ‘I want a custom-tailored education for my children, and I want you, as my neighbor, to pay for it.’”