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April 3, 2006

## In Death of Bronx Charter School, a Wider Problem

By [ELISSA GOOTMAN](#)

When Yvonne Robinson heard that a small charter school with a focus on reading and computers was opening amid the weedy lots and graffiti-marked buildings of her South Bronx neighborhood, she thought it sounded like just the sort of place where her kindergarten-bound son, Warren, could flourish.

And for more than two years he did, she said in an interview. But in November, Warren's school, the ReadNet Bronx Charter School at Metropolitan College of New York, announced that due to mounting money problems and scant evidence of academic success, it would close in June. Now Ms. Robinson is school-hunting again, and 7-year-old Warren's anxiety surfaced in a recent nightmare.

"I had a dream that all the schools were closing down," the precocious second-grader recalled after school one day, eyes widening behind his glasses. Charter schools, which are privately run but receive significant amounts of public financing, are freed from many bureaucratic constraints, and in return are held accountable by being forced to shut down if they fail to perform. Supporters say they bring innovators and new ideas into public education.

But there can be a flip side as well. Sometimes, the freedom and flexibility that are cited as among charter schools' greatest assets allow school operators to get in over their heads. And when a charter school closes, as more than 400 have nationally, it leaves a messy wake of heartbreak, anger and dislocation.

"It's devastating," said Stephanie Alves, 34, who works in the ReadNet school office. "They're closing the doors just like it's a mama's and papa's restaurant. These are people's lives."

Of the more than 4,000 charter schools that have opened across the country since 1991, many are thriving. In New York, Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) views them as a cornerstone of his education policy. He and Gov. [George E. Pataki](#) are pressing to create more than the 100 currently allowed under state law.

There are also notable failures. Financial and management problems are behind most charter school closings, according to the Center for Education Reform, a nonprofit group that supports charters. In California, a string of 60 charter schools collapsed just before the start of the 2004-5 school year.

In New York State, four charter schools, including the John A. Reisenbach Charter School in Harlem, have closed after failing to convince regulators that their charters should be renewed after five years, as the state law requires. A fifth, a public school converted into a charter, closed after having its charter revoked, and a sixth, in Buffalo, is to close at the end of the school year, like ReadNet.

Traditional public schools can also close, and New York City is in the process of shutting 17, according to the city Department of Education. But those schools are phasing out gradually, by ceasing to accept new students.

The brief life of the ReadNet school offers a stark lesson in the ways in which charter schools can go wrong — with initial troubles finding a building, continuing financial woes and difficulties attracting qualified staff. ReadNet has received close to \$3 million in public financing.

"I think the experience of ReadNet will certainly be a cautionary tale for all charter schools around their financial operations and their organizational sustainability," said Garth Harries, chief executive of the Department of Education's Office of New Schools. (Mr. Harries's office did not oversee ReadNet, which was approved, and monitored directly by the state.)

So dire were ReadNet's problems that its board decided to close the school rather than face rejection by the New York State Board of Regents later in the year.

Since then, things have gotten worse. Thirty-two of the 143 students who enrolled in September have transferred out. With fewer students, the school has been eligible for less taxpayer money, and at several points it has come close to not making payroll. In March, six employees, including two teachers and the part-time guidance counselor, were let go.

"We didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to the children," said JoAnne Faruolo, 45, a teacher's assistant who was among the six.

That reality is far from the dream laid out five years ago by Robin D. Hubbard, an Upper East Side architect known for her charm, enthusiasm and prominent friends like Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, a New York Democrat, and Kenneth T. Jackson, editor of "The Encyclopedia of New York City."

Ms. Hubbard teamed up with Stephen R. Greenwald, the president of Audrey Cohen College, a small college mostly for working adults, to establish what they hoped would be a "paragon of quality education" in Mott Haven, a gritty neighborhood with some of the city's worst schools.

The school was a charter pioneer in New York. According to a thick application that the State Board of Regents approved in 2001, it would use a curriculum developed by the ReadNet Foundation, which Ms. Hubbard had started several years earlier, after helping her own son struggle with learning problems. There would be computers in every classroom, an array of dance and arts programs, and a partnership with [Columbia University's](#) history department, one of whose most illustrious professors, Dr. Jackson, was listed as a board member.

But a spokesman for the university said recently that it had no record of any official commitment to the school. In a telephone interview, Dr. Jackson said he did not recall serving as a trustee and had never visited the school, although he praised Ms. Hubbard and called her a friend.

"I remember saying, 'What are you doing this for? You're knocking your head against bureaucracies and everything else.'" Dr. Jackson said. "Probably in her enthusiasm, she may have gotten a little bit in over her head."

Ms. Hubbard, through a spokeswoman, Colleen Roche, maintained that Dr. Jackson was on the school board from June 2001 until December 2003, although he was not an active board member. She added:

"There was a strong hope to have a connection with Columbia and it became clear after '04 that it wasn't going to work."

Soon after the school's plan was approved, things started to go wrong. The state frowned on the proposed school facility, at Audrey Cohen, now known as Metropolitan College of New York, saying that ReadNet's young pupils would be in too close quarters with college students.

The school had to cast about for space, and ended up spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to lease and refurbish a building. Children who had signed up to attend ReadNet in September 2002 were told that it would not open until the following school year.

Even then, the building was not ready in time. In September 2003, ReadNet opened temporarily on the fifth floor of Public School 277, down the street.

There was so much huffing, puffing and prodding involved in getting the school's 79 kindergartners and first-graders up the stairs, said Cary Goodman, the school's director at the time, that they did not come down for recess or lunch. Also, he said, there was no way to use the ReadNet software.

"In August there were no computers, in September there were no computers, in October there were no computers," Dr. Goodman said.

More turmoil followed. Dr. Goodman was dismissed — for what Ms Roche described as unsatisfactory job performance, a characterization that Dr. Goodman disputed. He protested the decision outside the school, prompting Ms. Hubbard to hire a lawyer, Neil M. Frank.

The problems continued. Too many of ReadNet's teachers, six out of nine as of October 2005, according to the State Education Department, did not meet state certification requirements. The school also did not administer the tests necessary for a charter school to prove that it should be allowed to continue, the state found. And the school was bleeding money.

In the fall of 2004, Mr. Frank said, the school's finances were so grim that Ms. Hubbard asked him to join the board, to try to turn things around. He said his cost-cutting suggestions were roundly rejected.

Mr. Frank said he was never able to get to the bottom of where the school's money had gone. He said that consultants, including ones affiliated with ReadNet Systems, a business founded by Ms. Hubbard, were hired without contracts or board approval. Clear lines were not drawn, he said, between the school, Ms. Hubbard's ReadNet Foundation, and ReadNet Systems (now called Smart Learning Systems). He described the relationship among the three as "a bowl of spaghetti."

Mr. Frank said he did not suspect that anyone had personally profited from the school. But he insisted that a "forensic audit" be conducted, and ultimately resigned from the board.

"It's a showcase for how a great educational experience for children can be ruined by an inept board of trustees," he said.

Ms. Roche, the spokeswoman for Ms. Hubbard, said, "The forensic audit will vindicate us completely." She added, "Was everything neat and tidy all the time? No." Mr. Frank recently filed a lawsuit, seeking fees he says he is owed for his work as ReadNet's lawyer. In an interview at a public relations firm, Ms. Hubbard

blamed the school's problems on its late start, the difficulty of raising money after Sept. 11, 2001, and the expense of having to find a new building.

"I have this incredible spirit of hope, but it's not always the most cautious way to be," Ms. Hubbard said. "There were a lot of things out of our control."

Ms. Hubbard pointed out that ReadNet was created in the infancy of the city's charter school program, before Mayor Bloomberg raised \$41 million for the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence, a nonprofit group that has been working to help ReadNet close as painlessly as possible.

By the time school started this year, with yet another new principal, ReadNet had little hope of succeeding: a hasty renewal application submitted to the state raised "grave concern," according to a letter from Lisa L. Long of the State Education Department that included questions about everything from the school's curriculum to its disciplinary policies to its finances.

Shelia Evans-Tranumn, the associate state education commissioner, praised Ms. Hubbard's passion, saying that Ms. Hubbard cared so much about ReadNet's children that some conversations ended with both women in tears.

"Growing a school into academic excellence is not as easy as it looks," Dr. Evans-Tranumn said. "It is a very difficult thing to do, and sometimes even with the best intentions, things don't work out."

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