

June 28, 2007**Patrons' Sway Leads to Friction in Charter School****By [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#)**

The Beginning With Children Charter School, housed in a former factory in Brooklyn, landed on the state's list of high-performing schools this year, thanks to rising English and math test scores among black and Hispanic students.

But its founders and wealthy patrons, Joseph H. and Carol F. Reich, who have poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the school, think it could be better. "It's above average," said Mr. Reich, 72, "but considering the effort and the capability and the resources, we don't feel we're getting the best we can."

So last month, the couple — threatening to cut ties, including financial support — forced most of the school's trustees to resign in a push for wide management changes, and better student achievement.

The move caused an uproar among parents and teachers who said they would be left with no formal say at the school. "My voice is going to be lost," said Shakema Daise, the mother of a first grader.

The clash has exposed fault lines of wealth and class that are perhaps inevitable as philanthropists, in New York and nationwide, increasingly invest in public education, providing new schools to children in poor neighborhoods while making communities dependent on their generosity.

And for those lucky to have such benefactors, the situation raises core questions: Who ultimately controls charter schools, which are financed by taxpayers but often rely heavily on charitable donations? Do the schools, which operate outside the control of the local school district, answer to parents, or to their wealthy founders?

At Beginning With Children, many parents and teachers say that the Reichs' main interest is to burnish their reputation as advocates for charter schools, and that the school's original purpose, of catering to each child's individual needs, is now secondary to drilling for exams in an effort to elevate scores and the Reichs' credibility.

The Reichs support not just Beginning With Children, and a second school they founded in Brooklyn, but charter schools generally. They gave \$10 million to help create the New York City Center for Charter School Excellence, a nonprofit group dedicated to opening 50 more of the schools.

"Joe and Carol Reich started the school for whatever reasons initially," said Gail Sims Bliss, a teacher and former trustee who resigned reluctantly. "But it has grown into their participation in the charter movement with a capital M." She added, "They cannot allow the school to compromise their status and their progress in this particular movement."

In an interview, Mr. and Mrs. Reich said they were committed to their original promise of providing children with an education that would lead to success in college and in life. "We promised to build them a model education program that would lay the groundwork for their future," said Mr. Reich, a retired investment banker. "This didn't come from nowhere. We were really worried that the school wasn't delivering."

The Reichs are not alone in directing their charity to schools. The Walton, Broad and Gates foundations, all founded by billionaires, support charter schools nationwide.

[Andre Agassi](#), the retired tennis great, opened a charter school named after him in Las Vegas. The former N.B.A. star, Kevin Johnson, started two charter schools in Sacramento. The billionaire corporate raider, [Carl C. Icahn](#), has a charter school named for him in the Bronx. And

Courtney Sales Ross, the multimillionaire widow of a Time Warner executive, has the Ross Global Academy Charter School, housed in the basement of the city's Education Department headquarters.

Nor are the Reichs the only ones facing difficulties. The Ross Global Academy is on its fourth principal in less than a year.

Frederick M. Hess, an expert on philanthropy in education, said there would be more disputes like the one in Brooklyn as high-profile donors invest their reputations in schools and face "the enormous kind of name-brand question."

"When those schools disappoint them, when there are disputes or divergence regarding institutional mission," asked Mr. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, "how are they going to negotiate this relationship?" He added, "What we are seeing is really just the front end of what is going to be a fascinating dynamic."

In educational philanthropy, the Reichs were pioneers. They fought for years to get the city's Board of Education to let them open the Beginning With Children school in 1992 in an impoverished section of Williamsburg, before charter schools became a national trend and at a time when private donors were generally reluctant to write checks to public school systems. The school converted to charter status in 2001.

They fought through bureaucratic tangles to get the system to accept a virtually free building, a former Pfizer pharmaceutical factory, which the school now occupies for \$1 a year.

The school has done well, though far from stellar. This year, 69 percent of students in Grades 3 to 8 scored at or above grade level on the state English exam, compared with the 56 percent citywide average. And 77 percent of students scored at or above grade level on the math exam, compared with 65 percent citywide. The state reauthorized the school's charter last year, giving it a full five-year renewal.

But the Reichs are not satisfied and said the school's trustees were an obstacle. Charter schools get taxpayer funding, but are run independently from local school districts under terms set out in their state-approved charters.

The 14-member Beginning With Children board included appointees from the Reichs' foundation, which helps finance the school; parents; teachers; the principal; and community representatives. The board chairman, John Day, is a former Pfizer executive.

The Reichs said the problem was that the board was "constituency-based" and that they wanted members with practical skills like fund-raising or public relations instead. To get the changes, they threatened in a strongly worded letter to cut off their support unless all but three of the board members resigned. Among those told to quit were five parent and faculty representatives.

At a board meeting last month, parents lashed out at the Reichs, angrily describing their relationship as that of master and servant or landlord and tenant.

One parent said the threat to cut ties was "a gun pointed at the head of every child in this facility." In recent years, the school has faced annual budget gaps of up to \$635,000 that were filled by the Reichs' foundation, and parents said they feared that the school would close without the Reichs' help.

Mrs. Reich, 71, said of the letter: "It was not a blunt threat. It was a choice. You can go the way you are going or you can restructure yourselves."

Many parents and teachers said they agreed that the board did not function well. But they also said there were disagreements with the Reichs over issues like how much to focus on standardized testing. And they accused the Reichs of meddling in areas like teacher hiring and the choice of a reading program.

"The emphasis on testing means the school is moving away from its original mission," said Karl Klingbeil, a parent. "They just got tired of listening to us talk about curriculum and pedagogy."

The Reichs said they did not want to squabble over such points, noting that the principal runs the school and that they themselves are not voting trustees. They said they had proposed creating a faculty senate and parent council to give input to the new trustees.

The city school system has stood at the sidelines. Garth Harries, who oversees charter schools for the Education Department, said they were intended to operate with wide autonomy. "We're confident in this case, with Joe and Carol," he said, "You are dealing with folks who have the interests of the school and the kids in mind."

The three remaining board members at Beginning With Children have enlisted a consultant to help identify new trustees, and the Reichs said they were moving aggressively to set things right. "This was our school, it's our dream, it's our vision," Mr. Reich said. "We are going to fight to make this school the best school it can be for this community."

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