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Opening doors to a better education

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OPENING DOORS
TO A
BETTER EDUCATION

by
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About a dozen charter schools in Indiana opened in the fall of 2002 following passage of a state charter school law one year earlier. One of those schools, Christel House Academy, is serving about 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade in Indianapolis in its first year. The school plans to expand by a grade each year, but must first endure the growing pains every new school faces in its opening year.
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In the early 1990s, parents across the country and particularly in many urban areas, who were unhappy with their children's quality of education, sought alternatives to public schools. Through that effort, the charter school movement was born.

Charter schools are public schools, funded by taxpayer dollars, which have signed agreements with their cities or states to improve students' education. To achieve that end, charter schools are afforded more freedom than traditional public schools over budgets, hiring and curriculum development.

Minnesota passed the country's first charter school law in 1992, and the first U.S. charter school opened in St. Paul that same year. Today, more than 2,700 charter schools in 36 states and the District of Columbia serve more than 575,000 students.

Indiana joined those states in 2001 when the General Assembly approved and Gov. Frank O'Bannon signed the Indiana Charter School Law after seven long years of debate.

Democrats, long supported by the state teachers' union, largely opposed taking money away from public schools and putting it toward private efforts. Republicans argued that public schools were not offering quality education and that parents deserved more choices.

The debate continues nationally today. Supporters of charter schools argue that freeing schools of bureaucratic "red tape" makes them better able to meet the unique needs of some children. They also say that, unlike traditional public schools, charter schools must show positive results or close.
Opponents argue that charter schools siphon money away from traditional public schools and hire unqualified teachers.

Little research has been conducted to determine who’s right. A national study released in October 2002 by researchers at the Brookings Institution concluded that charter school students were scoring significantly below public school pupils in basic reading and math skills.

The study reviewed 1999-2000 reading and math achievement test scores of 376 charter schools in 10 states.

But even the researchers who conducted the study said the findings do not necessarily reflect poorly on charter schools, which often target at-risk students.

The Washington-based Center for Education Reform, a supporter of charter schools, released its own study in October 2002. Reflecting on the success of charter schools, the study found that only 6.7 percent of those schools that had opened nationally had been forced to close.

The study also graded 38 of 40 charter school laws nationally, basing findings on such criteria as the number of schools allowed under the law, whether multiple chartering authorities and operational autonomy for schools were included, and if schools were guaranteed full per-pupil funding. Indiana’s charter school law received an A and finished sixth, behind only Arizona, Delaware, Minnesota, Washington D.C. and Michigan.

Whether Indiana’s charter school law is considered a success 10 or 50 years from now remains to be seen. What remains certain is the amount of work involved with creating a school from scratch.
Most of the dozen schools that opened this fall in Indiana serve elementary students and have plans to expand. Most also are run by well-funded nonprofit groups that each hired an educational management organization, or EMO, to oversee academics.

This series of stories follows the opening of a school that is representative of Indiana’s charter schools.

Christel House Academy is serving about 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade in its first year and plans to expand by a grade each year. The school was created by Christel House Inc., its nonprofit parent group that started schools for underprivileged children in four other countries.

In just its first few months, Christel House Academy has seen its share of problems. The school originally partnered with an educational management group, SABIS, which was to handle the academic side of the school, while Christel House would manage operations and handle before- and after-school programs.

Officials at neither Christel House nor SABIS would say why the two entities parted ways just a few weeks before school started. But Christel House officials admit the split slowed their progress, at least initially.

The stories that follow delve into the highlights and lowlights of those first few months and look ahead to what Christel House Academy can expect in the future.
Christel House prepares to open its first U.S. school in Indianapolis

After starting schools for underprivileged children in Venezuela, India, South Africa and Mexico, philanthropist Christel DeHaan found opportunity in her own backyard when the Indiana Legislature approved charter schools.

The challenge to create an elementary school from scratch will be no easier in Indianapolis than it was in the Third World, organizers said. The issues will just be different.

"Intelligence is not necessarily a function of zip code. It is a function of having opportunity, dignity of self," DeHaan said. "Even as affluent a country as this is, we still will have children and families that need Christel Houses."

Christel House Academy expects to open in the fall with 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. It will be among a dozen or so charter schools opening for the first time in Indiana.

The curriculum will feature a return to basics — reading, writing and arithmetic. It will require what school officials call “100 percent mastery” of subjects before students are promoted, and students are assessed on their progress every five weeks.

The school intends to stress languages, diversity and culture, and is marketing itself to poor black and Hispanic neighborhoods. A lottery for enrollment, open to all students who apply, is scheduled next week.

Ricardo Gambetta, who wants to enroll his 6-year-old daughter in first grade, said the Spanish classes the school will offer were a key draw for Latinos aiming to retain their heritage.
"It's a wonderful curriculum; it's international. After reviewing all their materials, I realized this is something great," Gambetta said.

The academy already has found a home, a former church on the city's south side, but will tackle thorny issues all summer: financing, transportation, curriculum, hiring, testing and enrollment.

Organizers also must market a school to parents and students that doesn't yet exist. And there is nothing else in Indiana to compare it to.

After seven years of debate, the state Legislature in 2001 passed a charter school law that allows Indiana's public school boards, public universities and the mayor of Indianapolis to sponsor charters.

Mayor Bart Peterson responded by sponsoring four charters, three that will open this fall. Ball State University and several school districts also are sponsoring charter schools in Evansville, South Bend, Fort Wayne, Floyds Knobs, Schererville and other cities.

But Christel House has what many of the other schools lack — an international track record with about 2,000 students in four schools, located in Mexico City, Mexico; Caracas, Venezuela; Bangalore, India; and Cape Town, South Africa.

The idea for Christel House was born in 1998 in a Mexican orphanage. DeHaan had traveled to Mexico on a philanthropic trip and the director's pleas for money resounded loudly.

DeHaan, who made a fortune in the timeshare industry, sought to parlay her wealth into a plan to bring education and health care to the poorest children in the world.
"It was a significant emotional event for me, recognizing that giving her money for food and clothing will provide some temporary relief, but it will not inherently change a thing," DeHaan said. "I realized that in order to bring about systemic change, you have to understand what the root causes are — poverty and a lack of opportunity."

DeHaan responded by creating a public charity to pay for a new school and health care for the children, then expanded her mission worldwide. Since 1998, she has personally donated $32.5 million to Christel House Inc.

The money pays for academic programs, before- and after-school programs, tutoring, physicals and nutrition counseling for both students and parents, and instruction on life skills such as job interviewing.

Children at each of the four schools have thrived in their new environments, all while surviving severe poverty and, in some countries, political clashes and war, DeHaan said.

"They have opened schools up around the world with a host of bigger challenges than here, and there's a real sense that they will achieve and thrive here," said David Harris, charter schools director for the Indianapolis mayor's office.

Since charter schools get public funds for each student, Christel House will use its additional funding to pay for the additional programs that otherwise would be too expensive. Providing health care to the children may prove a bureaucratic challenge in the United States initially, contrary to other countries, but remains a long-term goal for organizers.
The school already has jumped its first few hurdles. It found a building in the former Indianapolis Baptist Temple, a church seized by the federal government last year in a tax dispute.

The school also mapped out its curriculum, and a longer school year of 189 days plus a 15-day summer session, in a partnership with SABIS, an education management organization.

The goal is to impress upon the students the importance of integrity, independence, respect and responsibility so that they can "break the cycle of poverty," DeHaan said.

"Because we are dealing with children around the world, we chose the characteristics we felt are needed to guide anyone, irrespective of your religious background, irrespective of your ethnic background," she said.

Once the doors on the Indianapolis school open, Christel House will begin to research other U.S. sites, possibly on American Indian reservations in Arizona or in parts of Appalachia. An expansion of Christel House Academy to 1,500 students in kindergarten through 12th grades is planned.
Perched on the edge of her seat in the auditorium of the Indiana War Memorial, Navonda Adams waited as charter school organizers pulled number after number from a plastic jug.

Cheers filled the air as some parents realized their children were chosen in a lottery to attend Christel House Academy this fall. But Adam's 5-year-old daughter, Najah, was not among them.

"I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do," she said as the waiting list grew to more than 60 names.

Similar frustrations were heard across the state this spring as parents excited about the state's new charter schools instead found their children without a seat.

Schools will open in the fall in Indianapolis and other Indiana cities, the first in the state under a new charter school law. They are expected to serve more than 1,000 students.

Organizers at Christel House, founded by philanthropist Christel DeHaan with a back-to-the-basics approach, will spend the summer tackling a number of tough issues associated with opening a new school: financing, transportation, curriculum, hiring and testing.

Nothing is more important, though, than the students themselves.

Each of the charter schools, which by law are open to all students, has had to first decide what type of student it wants to attract, then promote itself to a student body that doesn't really know it exists.
Initially, Christel House organizers targeted itself to families with at-risk children, without regard to race. After identifying the single-parent households in the area with an annual income of less than $17,000, organizers realized those at-risk children they most wanted to serve were black or Hispanic.

“We wanted to attract all demographics and I believe we have a diverse population,” said Cheryl Wendling, senior vice president of Christel House Inc. “Had we had more time, I really think we would have been able to boost our enrollment through networking.”

And therein lies the biggest problem, Wendling said. Until they open, charter schools don’t have a product to demonstrate and have difficulty promoting themselves through word of mouth.

"Once people can come in and see what kind of education the academy is offering, we will just naturally build that circle of interest that will start in the local community," she said.

Following lengthy marketing campaigns that included radio and newspaper advertising, public meetings, leaflets and knocking on doors, many schools set to open this fall received more applicants than they could serve.

Organizers at Indianapolis-based Christel House spent nearly $25,000 to market the school, including the hiring of a bilingual staff member to answer Hispanic parents' questions and help them complete applications.

"The marketing paid off, but more than we even expected," Wendling said. "I think that speaks to how eager these parents are to identify a choice in education."
Christel House held a public lottery in May, as required by state law, to whittle the number of applicants from nearly 400 to just 280 in kindergarten through fourth grades. The target enrollment number was determined because it allows for small enough class sizes that the school will qualify for federal funding.

After seven years of debate, the state Legislature in 2001 passed a charter school law that allows Indiana's public school boards, public universities and the mayor of Indianapolis to sponsor charters.

Such schools are independent and taxpayer-funded, freed of many state rules and regulations, and designed to be more innovative in teaching and administration than traditional public schools.

Mayor Bart Peterson responded by sponsoring four charters, three that will open this fall in Indianapolis. Ball State University and several school districts also are sponsoring charter schools in Evansville, Fort Wayne, Floyds Knobs and other cities.

Some public school officials who fought the new law continue to speak out against charter schools, arguing they will further dilute funding and resources. But supporters say charter schools just need time, both to develop and be held accountable for their results.

Christel House eventually plans to expand to 1,500 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. It also will offer full-day kindergarten, before- and after-school programs and a longer school year — 189 days of instruction plus a 15-day summer session — than traditional public schools.
Kimberly Fleck, whose daughter Alexandra was selected in the lottery, allowing both of her children to attend, said she appreciates the school's extras as much as its curriculum.

"I'm a single working mother, so it's just a blessing that it's open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.," Fleck said.

Adams, whose daughter was not chosen in the Christel House lottery, is still considering her options, including private and parochial school and home schooling.

"I'm back to the drawing board," she said. "We'll adapt, but we will apply again."
Charters face first-year financing struggle

Behind the shiny desks and textbooks at the state's dozen new charter schools lurks a nagging question: How much will it all cost?

For parents, learning that charter schools are taxpayer-funded public schools eased both their minds and their pocketbooks.

The headaches are ongoing, though, for organizers of the schools opening in Indiana this fall. Many are struggling to understand complex school funding formulas while finding ways to curb budgets and still provide the services they promised.

That holds true for Christel House Academy in Indianapolis, despite its financial backing from philanthropist Christel DeHaan. The school will serve about 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade in its first year.

"We are so lean, and we constantly reassess and try to work smarter and more efficiently," said Cheryl Wendling, senior vice president of Christel House Inc. "Sometimes, you get tired of that whole process, but it's a really good exercise to try to make it better, smarter and cheaper."

Christel House anticipates a first-year budget of between $2 and $3 million. Administrators acknowledge the budget remains in flux — and is too high — just a month before its doors open. The school currently lacks the money to cover all its expenses in the first year, including an estimated $1.3 million to pay its staff.

Average per pupil spending for Christel House is $9,677, compared with a state average of about $7,900.
"The obvious thing is that Christel House Inc. has to fund the shortfall, perhaps half a million dollars," said Wendling, who added that school officials believed the situation was unlikely to continue in ensuing years. "There's a good possibility it will be more than that."

Other schools also plan to rely on generous sponsors after finding state and federal funding would fall short of their expenses.

The state funds charter school operating expenses under a 2001 law. The law allowed creation of the schools under the sponsorship of Indiana's public school boards, public universities and the mayor of Indianapolis.

Mayor Bart Peterson responded by sponsoring four charters, including Christel House. Ball State University and several school districts also are sponsoring schools in Evansville, South Bend, Fort Wayne, Floyds Knobs, Schererville and other cities.

Once the charter school law passed, organizers faced a number of financial hurdles.

They do not receive funding for capital projects, and must find their own money to buy, build or lease a building, as well as renovate and furnish it — often the biggest expenses.

Christel House Academy plans to rent the former Indianapolis Baptist Temple from its bankroller, Christel House Inc., which bought the building for about $1.5 million and is paying more than $6 million to renovate it in its first two years.

Christel House also plans to offer some amenities of a private school, such as before- and after-school programs — a boon to families struggling to afford anything beyond a free public education.
Yolanda Cobbs did not even realize Christel House was a public school until after her 5-year-old daughter Michaela won a spot in a lottery. She had expected to spend at least $1,200 on tuition.

"I've got a 17-year-old in her last year. I knew that was going to be something doing college and her tuition, so that was a little bit of a break for me," Cobbs said.

Funding for charter schools also is a contentious issue with Indiana's urban schools, which contend they are losing valuable funding to charters.

About 167 of Indiana's 294 school districts receive a guaranteed minimum amount of funding. But that dollar amount is reduced for every home school or private school student the district loses to a charter school.

Neil Theobald, professor of school finance at Indiana University, said the situation is pitting urban school districts and charter schools against each other.

"I think publicly that will sap support for this initiative if people see this as a dollar-for-dollar issue that hurt their child's education," Theobald said.

The manner in which the state releases school funding also does not lend itself to new schools — charter or otherwise. The state begins releasing money in January based on enrollment counts conducted the previous September.

Attorney General Steve Carter ruled the state must release money in time for the charters to open. Otherwise, schools that opened in the fall would not have received any state money until January.

But that means the state is paying double for charter school students — both to their original public school district and to the new charter school — a situation that may
have to be clarified during the next legislative session, especially if taxpayers begin to cry foul.

"The public may begin to question that practice. At what point does the state say 'We just don't have the money,'" said Derek Redelman, director of education policy at Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank based in Indianapolis. "Just looking at the state's financial situation right now, I don't think it's possible or very prudent to provide the double payment in the long term."

Already, some charter schools have partnered up to save money. The four Indianapolis schools formed a cooperative to share special education teachers and resources. They hope the effort will enable them to more effectively — and more cheaply — educate students with special needs.

Transportation could be another area where schools might cooperate to save money. The Indianapolis schools are required to provide it under their charters. For Christel House, the annual tab will be about $200,000 to lease its own fleet of five buses.
Charte schools open their doors to children

Eyeing each other nervously, about 245 shy, sleepy-eyed children officially ended their summer Tuesday morning as they shuffled into Christel House Academy for their first day at one of the state's new charter schools.

Distractions were everywhere — excited parents, visitors and members of the media toured the building that still smelled new. And there were a few glitches: Some parents complained that a bus had missed part of its route. Another tried to pay lunch fees with a $100 bill, only to learn that no one had change for a bill that large.

Most, though, came away marveling at how organized administrators and teachers were. By early afternoon, the wide hallways were quiet, and the jitters evaporated as students from more than 10 districts slowly began learning each other's names before heading home.

Christel House Academy is just one of a dozen new charter schools that will serve more than 1,000 students across the state this fall after the Legislature approved a charter-school law last year.

The first day went smoothly overall, and the few problems that did arise didn't slow teachers or students, said Michelle Thompson, the new director of education for the nonprofit Christel House Inc.

"I'm a perfectionist, so you always see things that can be done differently," Thompson said. "But I wasn't worried about our staff. We have a lot of wonderful educators who prepared for this day."
Christel House, founded by philanthropist Christel DeHaan, already opened schools for underprivileged children in Mexico, India, South Africa and Venezuela. Christel House Academy is its first charter school and first school in the United States. It will serve about 276 students in kindergarten through fourth grades.

"I'm over the moon," DeHaan said while touring the school Tuesday afternoon. "Magic was performed here. It is a testimony to everybody for all the hard work we've been doing."

Teachers and administrators first set foot in the school Thursday, which left them only a few days to prepare classrooms. They will continue to sidestep construction as workers pound away on the building's ongoing expansion. The school plans to add a grade each year.

Sack lunches will be served in classrooms until construction on the cafeteria and gymnasium is completed later this year.

Nine-year-old Ashley Tropez also wasn't thrilled with the idea of uniforms — white shirts with navy blue pants or skirts — a change from the traditional public school she attended last year. The fourth grader seemed to be thoughtfully biding her time before forming an opinion about her new digs.

Other students were outwardly impressed.

"I've never been to a school like this," 8-year-old Emily Sager said. "I like it. It's fun."

Charter schools are independent and taxpayer-funded, but free of many state rules and regulations. They are designed to be more innovative in teaching and administration than traditional public schools.
A dozen schools are being sponsored by Ball State University, school districts and Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, who toured his city's new schools Tuesday.

At Christel House, he visited with students in several classrooms, shaking hands and introducing himself as "Bart." He also said hello, or buenos dias, to the handful of students in the school who speak only Spanish.

Christel House has incorporated Spanish lessons into its curriculum, which focuses on the basics of reading, writing and math. The school also is offering before- and after-school programs, ranging from arts and nature to nutrition and athletics classes.
Growing up, Andrea Speziale always wanted to be a teacher. At one of the state's new charter schools, she is getting a chance to blend innovation and a traditional college education.

Bilingual in Spanish, Speziale teaches fourth-grade at Christel House Academy in Indianapolis. The charter school opened in September with 276 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

They were new, and so was Speziale, one of many first-year teachers at charter schools around the state.

"Their philosophy of education was right in line with me," said Speziale, one of about 200 applicants for 15 teaching positions at the new school. "It's different, but it's also exciting to be in on the ground floor."

Teacher recruitment has been one of the biggest hurdles for charter schools, which already are competing with public and private schools for the best and brightest educators.

While there is no shortage of elementary teachers, "there are shortages of quality teachers," said Michelle Thompson, the new director of education for the nonprofit Christel House Inc., which founded Christel House Academy.

Because Christel House started recruiting teachers late in the year — teachers weren't hired until August — the school was forced to turn to several Indiana universities for help in seeking out qualified candidates.
As a result, the school hired more first-year teachers than it planned. Now, the school is recruiting teachers with master's degrees and classroom experience. "We were very fortunate to get the quality of teachers we brought on board given that we started after everyone else," Thompson said. "Now we need the more experienced folks. We know we have to look for them and we know we have to pay for them."

The school started by hiring a director, Wayne Naylor, with 15 years of experience. He and Thompson then worked together to hire the teaching staff.

Teacher salaries at Christel House average nearly $30,000, though six of the school's 15 teachers are in their first year. The average starting salary at public and private schools in Indiana is nearly $28,500, while the average teacher's salary in the state is a little more than $43,000.

Christel House is just one of a dozen new charter schools serving more than 2,000 students across the state this fall. The General Assembly last year approved charter schools after seven years of debate.

Charter schools are independent and taxpayer-funded, but free of many state rules and regulations. They are designed to be more innovative in teaching and administration than traditional public schools, but whether that makes them a draw for teachers remains unclear.

The school’s biggest selling point is that teachers have the freedom to try new methods while still aiming to meet Indiana academic standards, Thompson said.

"We know that there are going to be those staff members who say 'I've given it my best shot and it just doesn't work.' That doesn't mean we've failed. It just means it wasn't a fit," Thompson said.
So far, class sizes couldn’t be considered a draw for teachers either. The average class size at Christel House is 23 students — compared with between 20 and 27 students in the districts from which the school drew students.

But Thompson said the school would consider hiring more teacher aides to improve the student-to-teacher ratio, in part because Christel House is a Title I school. That means it receives federal funding to teach low-income children and is required to keep class sizes low.

Christel House also joined forces with the other three Indianapolis charter schools that opened this fall to create a special education cooperative — the third such cooperative in the nation.

Christel House, 21st Century Charter School, Flanner House Academy and Irvington Community School share a director of special education, who administers the cooperative, assists the schools in identifying special needs students and develops individualized teaching plans.

The schools also share licensed teachers, which allows them to meet the needs of all special-needs children, as required by federal law, without accruing all of the costs.

Two other such cooperatives operate in Austin, Texas, and Washington, D.C.

"It's good in the fact that services for special education children require a number of specialists and those specialists don't come cheap. We're able to diffuse those costs over a number of schools," Thompson said.

Speziale, meanwhile, said she learned more in her first month than during any of her student teaching or college courses at Ball State University.
"It's not every day you're told that you can try what you think will work," Speziale said. "There's the Indiana standards as a baseline of course, but there's also freedom to meet those standards. It's innovative."

Christel House had hoped to offer its own retirement plan as an incentive to teachers, but found it cost-prohibitive on top of the state retirement plan, which is required by the law.

The law allows employees of a charter school to bargain collectively. The option was offered to employees at the four schools sponsored by Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, including Christel House, but none have chosen to do so.

Christel House also is offering teachers a performance bonus of up to 10 percent of their salaries, which is based on merit and progress the children have made during the year.

"That's an important component because it allows us to reward quality teachers," Vice President Cheryl Wendling said. "That's something that is lacking in the traditional public schools."

Hope Brock, a fifth-grade teacher at Christel House who previously taught in Puerto Rico through the AmeriCorps program and in an a public school in a suburb of Indianapolis, said the merit pay system challenges her to become a better teacher.

"I know Christel House is pulling for the underprivileged and giving them the ability to succeed," Brock said. "I'm so excited to be at the foundation of something that's on the cutting edge of education."
Establishing a curriculum is the biggest challenge Indiana’s new charter schools face. Opening school doors without one would be like opening a restaurant, one that serves hundreds of patrons simultaneously, without a menu.

Yet two weeks before school started this fall, Christel House Academy still had no textbooks, having split with the company it had hired to manage the education side of its business.

"We did a year's worth of work in a month's time," said Michelle Thompson, education director for Christel House Inc. "And the teachers basically had three days to get acclimated once we had the books chosen."

Christel House is just one of a dozen new charter schools serving more than 1,000 students across the state this fall. The General Assembly last year approved charter schools after seven years of debate.

Charter schools are independent and taxpayer-funded, but free of many state rules and regulations. They are designed to be more innovative than traditional public schools, and nothing reflects that more than their curricula, an agenda for reaching their goals with textbooks and other teaching tools.

"Starting a new school and establishing a curriculum is not a big challenge, it's an enormous challenge," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform. "It's probably the biggest thing they have to do. But if it's done right, it ties into their individual mission."
That mission isn't the same for all charter schools. In northern Indiana, one charter school decided to serve 16 teen mothers, offering them day care and traditional high school classes needed for graduation, as well as technical school courses that could lead to early childhood certification.

For Christel House, the mission is a focus on the basics of reading, writing and math, much like other public schools.

Officials at Christel House, though, say they had more freedom to review new trends in curriculum and textbooks.

"We follow the guidelines established by the Department of Education, but we have a little bit more freedom and creativity in how we get there," Thompson said.

The school offers a longer school year and day, which allows for more instructional minutes in each skill area. The school also weaves concepts through each subject during the day, rather than teach isolated pockets of material, so that students are introduced to the information more than once during the day.

"That is one of the areas where charter schools excel, delivering a creative curriculum, because they're so flexible to choose a program that maybe somebody overlooked in the traditional system," Allen said.

The school is using a computer software program, called Plato, that allows teachers to align their lesson plans with Indiana's academic standards.

The program, which has built-in assessment tools and additional lesson plans for each academic area, also enables teachers to track the progress of individual students and employ other assignments in the classroom for students who fail to understand a concept.
"They can go back to the drawing board and rethink their lesson if necessary," Thompson said.

Christel House also sought advice from education leaders at several Indiana universities and area school districts.

Donna Biggs is principal of Ball State University's Burris Laboratory School, a K-12 school that investigates innovative approaches to curriculum.

Biggs helped Christel House narrow its curriculum for each grade and subject area and select its textbooks. Five of the seven textbook series chosen were ranked among the top nationally for their subject area.

"Curriculum is much more than a textbook. People who assume you've got your books, so you're set, are dead wrong — especially in today's academic world where we have all the new academic standards," Biggs said. "All of those things challenge every school and their faculty to develop a well-rounded curriculum that meets the needs of every student."

Christel House dropped the company it had hired to handle academics, SABIS, just three weeks before the school opened. Both Christel House and SABIS officials declined to comment on the split beyond calling it a "philosophical difference."

But the school still had its 280 students and their admission materials from which to draw information in drafting its curriculum.

"In taking a look at some of those we knew that we had a pretty underserved population," Thompson said. "We had a pretty needy group of kids, and we were anticipating that there would be some pretty significant gaps in their learning."
The school wants feedback from parents, who will play a role in textbook adoption and curriculum design in the future.

And parents, students and teachers, who all are required to sign a contract that confirms their role in the learning process, each will receive progress reports every five weeks.

"We want the parents to have a voice, because it really does require that partnership," Thompson said.

Without it, the school becomes a regular public school, Thompson said.

Allen agreed.

"Curricula and standards are the biggest reasons people start and parents choose to attend charter schools," Allen said. "You don't have to create a program in a traditional public school that gets you to any particular performance level to stay in business. That's not true for charter schools."
Charters offer programs beyond academics

Jodi Tobias fondly remembers learning basic sign language in the fourth grade to the Amy Grant tune “Friends.” She laughs when she talks about the sign choir her church created for the children who had learned sign language in school.

That’s why the single mother of two was so frustrated to watch from the sidelines as children at Christel House Academy fidgeted and shuffled their feet, clearly bored to be learning sign language in an after-school program.

“Signing can be so fun,” said Tobias, who volunteered to take over the handful of first- and second-graders — to the relief of the teacher handling the class. “My main goal is to get them excited enough to want to learn more.”

Christel House is one of a dozen charter schools that opened across Indiana this fall after the Legislature approved a charter school law in 2001. The school, sponsored by Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, emphasizes the basics of reading, writing and math for about 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

The school also offers an early-morning drop off for parents who work and after-school enrichment programs. Programs offered include the arts, computer training, book club, remediation and English tutoring for non-English speaking students.

“Traditional public schools offer similar programs, but students and parents have to pay a fee,” social worker Leah Dooley said. “This school is unique because the programs are offered to all students.”

Most of the programs are offered through contracts with such organizations as the Herron School of Art at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and Young
Audiences, a group that provides schools with workshops and performances in visual art, theatre, dance and music.

"It's really difficult to keep the kids focused. They have to be really interested in the programs that are offered, which puts pressure on the instructors," Dooley said.

So far, though, many of the students are finding the courses engaging.

In one classroom, a group of third-graders made puppets of felt and pipe cleaners for the end of their pencils. Down the hall, three kindergartners acted out motions to music from "The Lion King" while their classmates formed a circle around them and drew what they saw.

Upstairs, about a dozen fourth graders pounded away on peace drums as four first-graders next door wrote a hip-hop poem about the school:

\begin{quote}
We, are, here to learn.

Accolades are ours to earn.

Let's listen to our teachers, ooh ooh,

and not act like wild creatures, ooh ooh.
\end{quote}

"Sometimes it can be overwhelming because the kids have such a long day, and they have a lot of energy," said T.J. Reynolds, a local poet who works with the children twice a week through Young Audiences. "The trick is letting them use their energy and not waste it."

Students arrive at Christel House between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m., and the class day runs through 3:15 p.m.

School organizers originally planned to offer two community programs along with remediation and tutoring for students each afternoon but found there weren't enough
programs to go around for all of the children. Some parents also complained that children weren’t getting home until 7 o’clock at night.

So one month into school, Christel House changed its schedule to offer remediation and tutoring with teachers, followed by just one enrichment program until 5:15 p.m.

“When the change occurred, it happened in a week,” Dooley said. “We had to change busing, contracts with the vendors. The program takes organization. It takes time. I think that’s one of the challenges we face, getting a lot done in a short period of time.”

The programs haven’t come without a few hitches. The school has been unable to offer athletics until the gym is completed at the end of the year, and there still are not enough programs to go around for all of the kids.

The latter program was solved with the creation of detention for students who misbehave during the day or after-school.

Bureaucratic “red tape” also has prevented the school from offering medical programs to students, said Michelle Thompson, director of education for Christel House Inc.

Before Christel House Academy, Christel House Inc. opened schools for underprivileged children in Mexico, India, South Africa and Venezuela that emphasized the academic basics.

But the schools also offered nutrition counseling and medical programs for the children, something organizers had hoped to continue in the United States.

“It’s been a challenge, because what’s local for us is not local for all of our parents,” said Thompson, pointing out that the academy has drawn students from three
counties. "In the future, we’re hoping to create some partnerships in the community, with hospitals or even creating a clinic at the school."

The after-school programs are funded by a $150,000 grant from another nonprofit group by founder Christel DeHaan, but the money only goes so far, Dooley said.

“Obviously, we would love to have programs that wouldn’t cost anything,” she said. “Right now, we’re left having someone work on outreach, finding groups that fit into our mission, our schedule and our budget.”

Teachers and staff members alternate shifts to staff programs both before and after-school.

But for now, Tobias remains the lone volunteer at the school, teaching the children sign language to Disney tunes.

“They’re doing great, they’re very excited. It’s being able to see a couple of the kids grow, kids who in the first few days were so shy and didn’t seem to be leaders,” Tobias said. “But because of this class, they have been able to shine because they don’t have to talk.”

“Everybody has a place where they can excel,” Tobias said. “I’m trying to get parents to see that as well.”
Supporters of charter schools reduce the complicated issue of accountability to four simple words: no results, no school.

"The fact that schools can be closed if they fail to meet their charter is the ultimate accountability," said Bryan Hassel of Washington-based Public Impact, an education policy-consulting firm that supports school choice.

That's the mantra of Indiana's dozen new charter schools that opened this fall, including Christel House Academy, which is serving about 280 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

Charter schools were made possible in Indiana through a 2001 law allowing public school boards, the state's public universities and the mayor of Indianapolis to sponsor the schools.

Charter schools, which are autonomous and taxpayer-funded, sign contracts with their sponsors that free them of many state regulations in exchange for freedom in curriculum design and teaching methods.

The schools are held to the same academic standards as traditional public schools, and in some ways more rigorously, supporters say.

"Help me get a list of all the regular public schools that have actually been closed," said Hassel, who worked with Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson in drafting an accountability handbook for the four charter schools the mayor sponsored this year, including Christel House. "The list of charter schools that have been closed is large comparatively, especially since charter schools represent only 1 percent of all schools."
A study in October 2002 by the Washington-based Center for Education Reform found that 6.7 percent of all charter schools that had opened nationally had been forced to close.

"There’s not any provision in most state laws for closing down poor performing public schools," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform. "There’s no mandate that they perform to stay in business. So conceivably, a state or a local entity could close one down, but we’ve only ever seen that happen in cities where they’ve actually passed new laws giving a mandate to reconstitute or close schools."

More importantly though, Allen said, is that traditional public schools lack a review process.

"It’s not that charter schools are accountable just because they can be closed, but because they have to be reviewed against a set of performance measures and goals in order to stay in business," Allen said.

Those goals are clearly spelled out long before a school ever opens. For Christel House, academic goals were summarized in the school’s application for a charter last year.

The school aims to meet or exceed average scores of the local school district and the state on Indiana’s standardized test, ISTEP-Plus, which is administered every fall.

The school also hopes to exceed the graduation rate of the local district, achieve a lower suspension and expulsion rate than the local district and the state, and achieve full enrollment each year in each grade level and maintain a waiting list in each grade.

"It’s our role to hold these schools accountable. Ultimately, we’re the entity that’s responsible for that," said David Harris, the Indianapolis mayor’s liaison for charter
schools. "It includes a range of things, and it starts with before the school opens through the seven years of its charter."

Christel House also will conduct standardized assessments every spring for each grade, as required under its contract with the mayor, to assess each student's progress for the school year.

"Test scores is going to be what everybody understands," Harris said. "We will require spring and fall tests, unlike public schools. That way we can evaluate the school for each and every student."

Christel House currently is working on its accountability plan, which is to be completed by the end of the first school year.

Charter schools are public schools in every way — they can't identify any particular population they want to target and must meet financial, academic and school safety standards, said Michelle Thompson, education director for Christel House Inc.

Still, getting used to the paper shuffling is a task for any new school, Thompson said.

"It almost seems like there's more regulations than there are for public schools, even though it seem like we're not supposed to be regulated as much," she said.

Financially, charter schools must prove to their sponsors they have the resources to open before their charter is even approved. After that, the State Board of Accounts audits charter schools each year like any other public school.

Christel House also must provide quarterly financial reports to the mayor's office to show fiscal responsibility.
But in the end, academic results are what matter most. If Christel House fails to meet the academic goals set forth in its contract, the mayor can choose not to renew the school’s charter when it expires in seven years.

“This is not Milwaukee, where the public complaint is that the schools aren’t held accountable for the results. They are treated as public schools in Indiana and are held to the same accountability measures,” said Mary Tiede-Wilhelmus, a spokeswoman for the Indiana Department of Education.

Tiede-Wilhelmus, though, cautioned against critiquing the schools too soon.

“People have to remember that this year’s test results measure last year’s progress, so people can’t jump on charter schools right away,” she said. “But they will be in the spotlight, for sure.”

And they already are forcing change. School districts in several cities, including Milwaukee, have begun advertising their schools through newspapers, radio and television in order to compete with charter schools.

That result is the greatest measure of charter schools’ accountability, Allen said.

“That’s the accountability charter schools also have — parents can choose,” Allen said. “All parents can choose. They’re just not used to it.”