

Conservative Michigan college backs pitch for Chicago charter school

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3/30/2017

A group seeking to open a taxpayer-financed charter school in the South Loop is getting support from a conservative Michigan college that aims to build on President [Donald Trump's](#) school choice agenda.

Hillsdale College, which refuses federal funds in order to maintain its independence from government oversight, has helped open 17 schools in states including Texas, Florida and Indiana through its Barney Charter School Initiative.

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The initiative, which has said it wants to support 50 charters nationwide by 2022, is backing a local effort to open the Chicago Classical Academy in 2018. While Hillsdale's charter initiative is privately financed, the proposed new school would be funded by Chicago Public Schools.

Hillsdale's initiative helps design the curriculum of affiliated charter schools and identify a principal, trains the faculty, conducts classroom observations and engages in frequent phone calls to consult with new administrators.

The religious-based college in southern Michigan bases its educational philosophy for charters on the Western canon, with an emphasis on U.S. history and traditions, and seeks to offer a liberal arts and sciences education plus "instruction in the principles of moral character and civic virtue," according to the initiative's website.

Having a private college with a conservative ideology integrally involved in public education rankled some parents in Indiana, who tried to stop a Hillsdale-affiliated charter from opening near Bloomington.

"It's galling to me that this college — which won't take federal funding, God forbid the government tells them what to do — has no qualms with using our state funding to get their school's ideology out there," said Cathy Fuentes-Rohwer, chair of the Indiana Coalition for Public Education — Monroe County, which generally opposes charters and school vouchers.



It's not the first time a religious-based group has proposed a CPS charter. A prominent local megachurch that gave up a previous attempt to back a charter school in the Grand Crossing area intends to revive its effort, according to CPS.

Hillsdale, a college official said, simply spends its own money to offer a service it believes the country needs.

"The fact that the college is private and Christian is not a determining factor to the kind of just basic academic support for a classical school that a governing board of a public charter school could benefit from," said Phil Kilgore, head of Hillsdale's charter school initiative.

"Public education is a concern of everybody in the country," Kilgore said. "It would be a stretch of rational thinking for

someone to assert that some organizations have no right to try to make it better and make it stronger."

Chicago Classical and its supporters are pressing ahead during a tense period in the city's relationship with charter schools. A group of [Illinois House](#) lawmakers, with backing from a handful of city aldermen and opposition from the state's leading charter lobbyist, are pushing legislation to block new charters from opening in financially-stressed school systems including Chicago.

The latest CTU contract includes a clause intended to limit the growth of charter schools, although district leaders said the deal allows room for the privately-operated schools to grow.



Hillsdale says its charter school initiative is financed by a major grant from the Barney Family Foundation and other college supporters.

The [Chicago-based foundation](#), according to its attorney and tax filings, [has given money to Hillsdale](#) and a variety of politically conservative organizations including Americans for Prosperity, the Heritage Foundation, and the Illinois Policy Institute.

School choice and voucher programs that use tax money to help families pay for private schools have strong support from Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos, who has family ties to the Amway Corp. fortune.

In 2013, Hillsdale renamed one of its graduate programs for Amway chairman Steve Van Andel. A college spokeswoman said she could not say whether DeVos, her family or the Amway Corp. have donated to Hillsdale.

Bruno Behrend, who helps with the prospective charter's fundraising and operations and works on education policy for the conservative Heartland Institute, said DeVos' role at the Education Department will have no impact on the school's application.

"There's all kinds of other stuff going on when it comes to the federal side," Behrend said. "This is really a decision for the CPS board, it's a decision for the state charter school commission if we don't get approved by the city of Chicago, so really at this time it's much more of a local issue."

"If somebody wants to make this controversial by throwing around Betsy DeVos' name, there's nothing in the world that anybody can do to stop them. We don't know Betsy DeVos, we don't talk to Betsy DeVos, she's not writing us checks and probably does not know of our existence," he said.

The prospective charter school is one of 17 applicants that filed letters of intent to open 20 new independently-operated campuses inside CPS. The letters are one of the earliest stages of a lengthy district application that grants no guarantees a building will open for business.

Chicago Classical Academy, which would have its own governing board, is proposed as a K-8 school for families in nearby Bronzeville, McKinley Park, Bridgeport, Pilsen and Chinatown. Hillsdale has mailed colorful leaflets — featuring the college's logo — promoting the charter to area residents.

The school would teach a rigorous phonics program; early grade math with a focus on the mastery of basic operations without calculators; plus the study of Latin, Greek and immersion in Western Civilization's great works of literature and art.

Members of the academy's board say their efforts center only on presenting an appealing choice for parents. That's a central tenet of contemporary education reform politics and a position often at odds with the Chicago Teachers

Union.

"This is not about districts getting money; this is about children getting money. This is about money following children to the best option for that child," Behrend said.

In Indiana, the Barney Charter School Initiative is one of the partners behind the Seven Oaks Classical School in Ellettsville. The school is overseen by Grace College and Seminary, an evangelical institution, under state laws that allow most four-year colleges and universities to authorize the opening of charter schools.

Jenny Robinson, secretary of the Indiana Coalition for Public Education — Monroe County, opposed the school and pointed to a Hillsdale campaign from last year that sought to raise \$250,000 to "mark the beginning of an accelerated plan to educate millions of Americans about the Constitution." The college said the campaign was being mounted during "a time of unprecedented government overreach."

"It's designed around this one ideological bent, and I just don't think it's appropriate for public funds to be used in that way to support a specific ideology," Robinson said of Seven Oaks Classical.

The first step of Hillsdale's campaign, according to the fundraising notice, was to expand the college's efforts "to teach young people about the blessings of liberty" by promoting its brand of K-12 education across the country.

"Is it all just a holy war? Is it all their absolute conviction that this is important and this is a great way for them to influence the youth of the country?" Robinson asked. "Maybe it is that, but it's an incredible amount of resources that they're providing at no cost."

Members of the Chicago Classical Academy board acknowledged their application's potential for controversy, but rejected the notion that their work has broader political implications.

"This is to provide a very time-tested and credible education to all students in Chicago," said Heidi Schroeder, a former charter school teacher who is now working with the prospective school's board. "That's what this is, there's nothing more to it than that, and I say that in all sincerity."

Kilgore said the college simply wants to expand education options that are in the best interests of taxpayers.

"I think the citizenry is eager to have choice. Parents want choice," Kilgore said.

"If a school is doing well, then I don't think they've got anything to worry about," he said. "The parents are going to be satisfied and they'll keep their kids there."

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