

Teachers at city charter school to join local union

They seek better wages at Construction Careers Center high school.

By David Hunn
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

ST. LOUIS • Teachers at a city charter school are expected to announce today that they are joining the local union, a first for the rapidly growing but still-controversial charter school movement in Missouri.

Roughly two dozen teachers at the 450-student Construction Careers Center high school, on the outskirts of the Lafayette Square neighborhood, approached the local branch of the American Federation of Teachers earlier this year.

They hoped union representation would bring better wages and working conditions, union officials and teachers said.

In April, the board agreed to let AFT Local 420 negotiate for the 32 teachers, aides and staffers.

"We just think it's going to be a great thing," said Mike Meehan, social studies chairman at Construction Careers Center. "Good for the teachers, good for the school and good for the students."

But some quietly question the decision.

Two decades ago, education reformers looked to charter schools to break from government and union rules that, proponents said then, wasted money and prevented innovation.

Charter school success still hinges on each school's ability to hire the right teachers, said Aaron North, director of the Missouri Charter Public School Association.

"In the public school sector, certain contractual agreements may be designed to best meet the needs of adults, with student interests as a secondary consideration," he said.

But unions have made headway. Now, several dozen of the nation's 4,000 charter schools have union ties. Some have bargaining agreements. Others are run by unions.

The AFT alone represents teachers in 70 charter schools in 10 states.

Randi Weingarten, president of the New York City AFT affiliate, expects that number to keep growing.

"Charter school employees are starting to come to the union," she said. "Nobody ever gives working families anything for free. You need to fight for decent wages and decent benefits."

It's too early to tell, experts say, whether unions will change charter schools.

But Rich Ledbetter, chairman of the Construction Careers board of education and president of a local construction company, said his school's mission hasn't changed.

The center gives high school students an excellent education in the academic basics, he said, and prepares them for work, whether for internships with road construction crews or four-



year engineering degrees.

The goals of the school and the union must be the same, he said.

"I have a sense that more charter schools are going to have to deal with collective bargaining," he said.

Mary J. Armstrong, president of Local 420, said this isn't the only group of charter school teachers in St. Louis to ask for help. But Construction Careers, sponsored by the city school district, seemed like a good fit.

She said the employees didn't come with a laundry list of grievances; they were more interested in consistent raises, salary schedules and uniform student discipline policies.

She said they'll start negotiating for teachers in the next few weeks.

Will she aim to get them higher salaries?

"That," she said, "is our goal."
dhunn@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8411