

# A CHARTERED TERRITORY

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**[Dr. Hosep Torossian](#)**, Southfield, MI, 5 January 2016

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**AGBU Alex Marie Manoogian School, Southfield MI**

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The fact that leaders of Armenian schools preoccupy themselves with permanent fundraising is a serious concern: How do we make up the budget deficit? What should the student tuition be? How many families will be able to afford the tuition? What is the projected enrollment? How will the economy impact our enrollment? What is the socioeconomic status of our families? Are teacher salaries adequate and at par with the market? Will we be able to afford to hire another teacher? Can we afford to add a new educational program? What is our cash-flow projection? How reliable is that projection? Do we have a cash fund balance to cope with emergency situations and facility repairs? Will we be able to keep our doors open next year? Which benefactor's door should we knock on next? As school principal, these questions would keep me awake at night.

Traditional public schools spend, on average, \$10,000 per student from kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Tuition of most private schools in America can easily hover between \$20,000 and \$40,000, excluding numerous fees for activities, etc. Tuition fees in Armenian private schools may vary between \$3,000 to \$5,000 per student, with large discounts and accommodations given to needy families, or to families with multiple children.

Given the disparity of per-pupil funding between traditional public schools and Armenian private schools, the first question that comes to mind is "How are we able to offer quality education with such few dollars?" Having been in the trenches as a school administrator for 17 years, I congratulate all schools which have provided and continue to provide high-quality American education, indelibly intertwined with a proud Armenian curriculum. Many of my colleagues in these schools do a herculean job in preparing the next generation of Armenian community leaders, having immersed their students in the Armenian culture, language, religion, history and the arts.

The readers of this article will very likely be those who believe in the mission and vision of our schools, and the paramount role they play in the preservation and the dissemination of our heritage. The collective pain felt by school closures must be addressed and remedied. Every Armenian school which has shut its doors has done so for financial reasons. Once a school's student population falls below a critical mass, very likely due to the families' inability or unwillingness to pay their tuition, the school finds itself in a vicious downward spiral, resulting in bare survival and eventual demise.

### **The Charter Alternative**

Let me explain what they are, their advantages and perceived disadvantages as well as my thoughts based on my experience and teaching.

Charter schools are government-funded public schools. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997 was the founding father of the charter school movement. He was joined by Ray Budde, professor at University of Massachusetts. These pioneer reformers, fed up with the failing public school systems, added their powerful voices to the education reform movement which had begun decades earlier. Charter schools became the hot new idea in American education because they advocated choice and accountability. Before the enactment of charter school laws, a parent's zip code dictated that the student must attend the neighborhood school, even when that school was failing miserably. Charter schools put an end to that misery and allowed parents to send their children to a charter school of their choice. Zip codes would no longer determine a student's destiny.

Charter schools have gained tremendous political and public support. The first state which adopted charter laws in 1991 was Minnesota. From a handful of schools of choice, the movement has shown tremendous growth. Today there are 2.9 million students being served by over 6,700 charter schools across 42 states and the District of Columbia. The charter movement has achieved this enviable growth despite tremendous opposition from the traditional establishment, teacher unions and districts claiming that charters are stealing students and funds from them. The Center for Education Reform produces an annual report and a scorecard which ranks states according to their degree of charter school friendliness. This year Michigan scored an A and California scored a very respectable B. Again, these scores are based on state laws regarding operations, funding equity, number of

charter schools allowed, etc. It is worth mentioning that as of February 2015, there were 307 charter schools in Michigan with an estimated 140,000 students and 1,230 in California with nearly 581,000 students. [California leads the nation](#) in the number of charter schools and students attending charter schools.

I mentioned earlier that the national average spending per student is around \$10,000. One must understand that there is huge disparity in spending between states, within states and within districts. The range can vary from \$3,700 per student in Utah to \$18,000 in NY and NJ. Charter schools, on average receive approximately 78 cents to the dollar allocated to traditional public schools. In 2015, the AGBU Alex and Marie Manoogian school received \$7,200 per student for our 400 students, guaranteeing a revenue of \$2.9 million. Additional grants and revenue streams brought our annual budget to \$ 3.2 million.

### **A Case Study**

Our school opened its doors in 1969 thanks to the vision and benevolence of Alex Manoogian. At its inception, our school had twenty students and two teachers. It grew over the next 25 years and at its peak as a private school had 25 teachers and 200 students. Although our school thrived and produced a generation of successful Armenian students, funding issues were severe. Mr. Manoogian, with his princely benevolence, covered the school's perpetual deficit of nearly half-a - million dollars a year. During these difficult years, the student population in the high school declined so much that the board of education decided to shut it down. Despite these difficult years, hundreds of students who graduated from our school undoubtedly owe their solid educational foundation to the Manoogian family. Our benefactor, Alex Manoogian, understanding the dynamics and business of education, guided the school board of education to take advantage of the charter school movement in Michigan, and through the direction and authorization of Central Michigan University, our school received its charter contract in 1995, and became one of a handful charter schools in Michigan.

The conversion to a charter school put us on a path of financial security. No longer did the school administration and board of education have to worry about securing teacher salaries. Parents did not have to worry about their tuition payments, and the school administration had more time to focus on curricular issues and academic programs. The average teacher salary at our school today is triple what it was during the pre-charter years, and at par with most charter teacher salaries in the state.

Our school's charter stipulates very clearly that we stay true to our mission and vision of preserving the Armenian culture, language and history through our educational programs. Every student attending the Manoogian School must take one hour of Armenian every day in every grade level. In addition, the school's focus on the Armenian culture thrives with the dedication of five full-time teachers who direct a myriad of cultural programs. We also have four part-time teachers whose primary goal is to teach Armenian dance, music and the arts. We can confidently state that our

Armenian educational program today is far stronger than its pre-charter years.

One of the first questions I am asked from fellow Armenians is the teaching of religion. Charter schools are publicly funded schools and as such, must respect the rules of the nation. We do not teach religion at our school but since our history is so intertwined with our church traditions, that students learning Armenian history will inevitably understand the Armenian psyche. Most of our students who seek religious teachings attend Sunday schools offered by the Armenian churches in Michigan.

There is also that narrow-minded question about non-Armenian students attending an Armenian school. Why is it that we are so afraid of disseminating our beautiful culture to non-Armenians? As a charter school, we are funded by public tax dollars and hence we ought to open our doors to any student, Armenian or Odar. Armenian students would experience ethnic diversity anyway if they enroll in public schools or other private schools. Non-Armenian students gladly comply with our curricular requirements, and upon graduation, not only have a deep appreciation of our rich culture and history, but also read, write and speak in varying competency levels depending upon their years at Manoogian. Our faculty has done a magnificent job in tackling this issue head on, as they developed a special curriculum, Armenian as a Second Language (ASL) offered to students whose mother tongue is other than Armenian. It is important to note that this group includes native American-Armenians, Ukrainians, and recent immigrants and refugees from the Middle East.

The financial security of our school has enabled us to bring countless technological and curricular advances. Our record student population of 400 is served by 45 faculty and staff. Our school is known for its safety, quality of education and school culture. Issues that plague traditional public schools are unheard of at our school. Graduation rates and college admittance rates are the envy of many schools. We enrich our curricula by offering Advance Placement classes, Dual Enrollment opportunities to our high achieving students, and a tremendous focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) related activities. The state funding has enabled us to allocate more funds to technology and have equipped all our classrooms with the latest gadgets, thus incorporating curriculum with technology. In 2012 and 2013, the US News and World Report ranked our high school among the top 22 percent of the nation's 26,400 public high schools, giving us a Bronze designation.

### **Opportunities and Pitfalls**

Not all charter schools have been successful academically. Equally sad is the fact that hundreds of charter schools have been shut down due to financial mismanagement. There is a great deal of oversight and scrutiny of charter schools, especially on those who hire for-profit management companies to administer charter schools. There is no shortage of news articles and commentaries attacking these organizations that use charter schools as cash cows. Under FBI investigation is one the largest charter school organizations in the nation headed by a reclusive Turkish Imam Fethullah

Gulen who hides in rural Pennsylvania, but commands a powerful political organization in Turkey. As of 2013, there were 140 Gulen-associated charter schools in the U.S.

The charter school movement is an outcome of educational reform efforts in this nation. Reformers want innovation and effectiveness. Reformers pursue freedom of choice in schools with freedom from bureaucracies that strangle innovation in large districts. Reformers are Republicans and Democrats. Reformers are all presidents beginning from Ronald Reagan, without exception. Reformers are state governors and city mayors. Reformers are major think-tanks, financial institutions on Wall Street, large corporations and philanthropic foundations such as The Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation (Walmart) and numerous others such as the Bazos Family (Amazon), Hastings (Netflix) and Rupert Murdoch (News Corporation). These foundations have poured hundreds of millions of dollars to support the charter movement, and with this kind of bipartisan, corporate and philanthropic support, the charter movement is here to stay.

Armenian communities and organizations seeking financial relief from perpetual monetary problems plaguing their schools should consider the option of charter schools. These organizations ought to enter into a dialogue with their respective state boards of education to understand the roadmap leading to charter schools. Laws and regulations vary from state to state and from district to district. For example in Michigan, a private school can convert to a charter school without missing a step, as long as it complies with the massive amount of compliance requirements, which includes finding an authorizing university and complying with its requirements for authorization. In California, it is stipulated that a private school aspiring to become a charter school close its doors for a year, comply with all educational, curricular, financial and facility requirements prior to being authorized as a charter school.

It is my belief that Armenian charters not only put our schools on solid financial grounds, thus eliminating the thought of school closures, but open our doors to tens of thousands of Armenian students who have stayed away from them due their inability to pay tuition fees. We know that some Armenian parents will never consider sending their children to Armenian schools, even when offered to them on a silver platter. Whether in Michigan or in California or New York, we will not be able to influence these families. However, we can reach out to those who have a genuine desire to impart an Armenian education to their children but shy away from Armenian schools for financial reasons.

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