

# The Washington Post

## OUTLOOK

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### Opening Doors to Scholastic Success

*Help charter schools  
find inexpensive homes.*

# Close to Home

When parents, educators and concerned businesses get behind a charter school, good things can happen—despite the D.C. Public Schools' failure to release surplus buildings for charter-school use [Close to Home, Nov. 7].

Take the SouthEast Academy of Scholastic Excellence, which opened in September in Anacostia. For months, the sponsors of this school searched for a building that could safely and adequately shelter students from kindergarten through sixth grade. They were unsuccessful, however, until May—just four months before the opening bell—when they finally settled on a former Safeway store to house their new school.

Most schools follow a standard design of having a central corridor, classrooms on either side and windows in every room. The Safeway, of course, had no central corridor and no border of windows—only a plate-glass front with a view of the parking lot.

But thanks to the helpfulness of the D.C. Building and Land Regulation Agency in facilitating the permit process, and the construction effort, led by Davis Construction and the Eastbridge Co., the school, which now has huge skylights in the old roof to bring daylight to every classroom, was ready to go for the fall semester. Even the neighbors, who had felt betrayed by the loss of the Safeway, supported the project and welcomed the academy's 600 new students.

Locating and financing facilities can be the most daunting challenge facing a charter school. Of the 18 charter-school applications it received in 1998, the D.C. Public Charter School Board approved only three, rejecting many in part because they had not lined up buildings.

Out of necessity, "adaptive reuse" has become a hallmark of the charter-school movement. Nationwide, charter schools operate in former convents, motels and malls; here in the District, experience with the SouthEast Academy and the Maya Angelou Public

Charter School, which is housed in a former Odd Fellows hall, show how unusual buildings have been converted into vibrant educational environments.

But finding alternative buildings is time-consuming, renovating them is expensive, and buying them adds greatly to the overall financial burden of a new school.

In the District, where 50 former schools sit unused, retrofitting supermarkets and malls should not be the only option for a charter school. The solution to two major problems facing the District—the dearth of choices in public education and the blight of abandoned school buildings—could be solved if the city made its surplus schools available at no cost for charter-school use. Closed schools are deteriorating while the city studies whether to board them up or somehow squeeze a profit from them.

Children and old schools could bring life and strength to one another, if only the District would do its part.

—Milton Shinberg

*an architect, converted the Safeway for use by the SouthEast Academy of Scholastic Excellence.*



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