

# Charter management group just might help Milwaukee schools

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First, a lesson from baseball: It was roughly a year ago that Brewers fans were wringing their hands that the pitching was bad and there was little prospect for fixing that in the off-season, given a weak free agent scene and limited finances. Now, the Brewers have pitching that is basically amazing.

Sometimes, things do improve dramatically. Sometimes, that happens even when there are sound arguments for why they won't.

I could write this entire column - if not a book - on why I'm pessimistic about things getting a lot better on the Milwaukee education scene. I would present a pretty sound case, too.

Maybe I'm wrong. In fact, I hope I'm wrong. I'd like to see things take off like a rocket ship.

Which brings me to Rocketship Education, a small group of charter schools in San Jose, Calif., that is causing a big buzz in education reform circles nationwide. Four reasons for that buzz: One: The schools are getting great results with low-income students. Two: They use an eye-catching program that includes blocks of time in which students learn basic skills from tutors and from computer programs. Three: Rocketship leaders have big ideas for expanding and closing race and income gaps in education achievement wherever they go.

And four: There is a major push going on among some key education figures in Milwaukee to make this the first place outside of California for Rocketship to land - and there's a strong chance they'll succeed.

[Rocketship](#) is part of a new wave nationally in the 20-year-old movement to launch publicly funded, non-religious schools that are given permission (a charter) by a government body to operate independent of traditional school systems. Well over a million children nationwide will attend charter schools this year. Some specific schools are great, including some in Milwaukee. But, overall, the results are not much different than those of conventional public schools.

Enter the CMO - the charter management organization. The idea is that a lot of local, one-of-a-kind charters aren't stellar because they're not really that well run. How about if people who are good at running these schools go into the (usually nonprofit) business of expanding into a lot of places, especially urban centers with histories of education failure? Then there will be more well-run charter schools getting worthwhile results.

Nationwide, including in Milwaukee, the long-term success of the charter movement may depend on whether CMOs can create a vibrant body of schools that consistently get more success than traditional schools.

There is some success at this early point in the wave. The best-known is the KIPP network of charters,

with more than 100 schools and an impressive overall record. KIPP has not come to Milwaukee.

## **Two new schools**

Two CMOs are opening schools in Milwaukee this fall. Milwaukee Scholars Charter School, 7000 W. Florist Ave., expects more than 250 kindergarten through fifth-graders. It is part of National Heritage Academies, which runs more than 70 schools, mostly in Michigan and Ohio, and it is chartered by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Math and Science Academy, 110 W. Burleigh St., expects more than 150 students, also in kindergarten through fifth grade. It is run by Chicago-based Concept Schools, which operates more than two dozen schools in the Midwest and it is chartered by Milwaukee's city government.

Both schools expect to grow in coming years. And there are other CMOs committed to or considering opening schools in Milwaukee.

Rocketship is causing a particular stir - even though, if all goes by plan, it won't open its first school here until two years from now and, until this fall, it has run only three schools in San Jose. Major civic leaders, philanthropists and politicians have taken strong interest in Rocketship. A delegation including Mayor Tom Barrett and Common Council President Willie Hines visited San Jose recently.

Rocketship schools serve kindergarten through fifth-graders. The education program includes teacher-led classes for six hours a day, with two hours a day with tutors and with computerized instruction covering basic skills. (The jargony terms for this are "blended" or "hybrid" education.) Rocketship has strong connections to Teach for America, the national program that puts college graduates into high-needs classrooms for the first two years after they get diplomas.

Abby Ramirez and Kole Knueppel, co-founders of Schools That Can Milwaukee, are doing all they can to launch Rocketship here. They see it as an important part of their organization's goal of increasing the number of students in high-performing schools in the city to 20,000 by 2020. (It's less than half that now.) If Rocketship grew, as envisioned, by 2017 to eight schools of 500 students each, and if each school becomes high performing, that would be 4,000 students. (Those are big "ifs," of course.)

## **Chances improve**

Milwaukee, which initially was given little chance of being at the top of Rocketship's expansion list, is now strongly in the organization's sights.

"It's Milwaukee's to lose," said Kristoffer Haines, who has the title of "director of trailblazing" for Rocketship. He said, "One of the things that is encouraging about Milwaukee is there is a really strong sense of collaboration and thoughtfulness and urgency." He said Chicago and New Orleans are also high on the expansion list.

Will CMOs be like the pitchers who came to Milwaukee and are doing so well for the Brewers? We can't ignore the memory of the baseball free agents whose entry was heralded and whose results were a disappointment. And keep in mind Edison schools, a hot idea a dozen years ago. The two charter schools started here by Edison are still around, but neither has fulfilled big hopes.

But hope is a good thing. The personality of Milwaukee has such strong elements of resistance to change and that-won't-succeed thinking that sometimes we don't accomplish doable things. Maybe it's time to let hard-driving optimists like Abby Ramirez go at our needs. Maybe she'll pitch a no-hitter. Maybe the

rocket ship will fly.

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