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Close to Home

Close to Home welcomes pieces on the local community. Submissions must be exclusive to The Post and should be sent to Close to Home, The Washington Post Editorial Page, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071; closetohome@washpost.com.

Charters: A Complement to D.C. Public Schools

The recently released analysis comparing the Stanford 9 scores of the public charter schools with those of the traditional public schools has highlighted divisions between advocates of the two types of schools [Metro, Nov. 23]. The D.C. public school official who authored the study has argued that his analysis proves that a traditional public school education is "more robust," while charter school advocates have criticized the study's methodology.

Missing from the partisan discussion has been the acknowledgment that traditional public schools and public charter schools are complementary parts of one system: the District's public school system.

The story of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School demonstrates our point. In 1995, while one of us practiced corporate law and the other was a public defender, we started an after-school tutoring and job-training program. We worked with kids who had been arrested and were not succeeding in public school. After some early success, we realized that afternoon programs were not enough. Our kids needed a different school.

We were committed to public education, so we approached D.C. public schools and met with then-Superintendent Julius Becton. We didn't ask for a dime, only that our school be allowed to be affiliated with the public schools.

Becton was overwhelmed with fixing a huge system, and perhaps he saw us as just two more idealists, because, although we did everything that Becton and his staff asked, eventually they stopped returning our phone

calls. Lucky for us, the charter school law came along.

We promptly submitted an application that outlined a school with classes averaging five to six students, a school day running until 8 p.m. year-round and part-time employment for all students. We received one of the District's first charters for our school.

Since its opening in 1998, the Maya Angelou Public Charter School has not drained resources from the public education system. On the contrary, it has brought resources to it. To take just three examples, consider financial, technological and human capital, investments our public schools desperately need.

Because public charter schools do not receive taxpayer-sponsored buildings, we were forced to raise more than \$2 million in private funding to build our campus. That's \$2 million spent on educating children that the public system would not otherwise have seen.

This investment led to the renovation of the historic Odd Fellows Hall building in the heart of Shaw. Once a social and educational hub for the African American community, this building had been abandoned for more than a decade before we purchased it. Now it is an academic and technology center serving the community.

Our students run the Student Technology Center, a storefront learning center equipped with 20 Internet-connected computers, which were donated by a consortium of technology companies. Today, Shaw adults take computer classes taught by our students.

Starting in January, students from Cleveland Elementary also will take computer classes at the learning center. If their computer skills improve and their Stanford 9 scores rise, it won't be because of the superiority of one part of the system over another but because of what can happen when people committed to education work together.

Our charter school also brings human resources to public education: Every week more than 150 adults tutor at our school. Over time, many have increased their investment in the students, offering an internship, a summer trip or college scholarship.

Hardly any of our tutors ever tutored at a traditional public school, in large part because they are professionals who aren't available until 7 p.m., an hour at which Maya Angelou is still open but most traditional public schools are not.

As our example makes clear, public charter schools support and are a part of our city's public education system. We beg city leaders, including D.C. public school officials, incoming school board members and school advocates of all stripes to recognize the ways in which charter and traditional public schools can work together to meet the needs of children who have been too long neglected.

—David Domenici

—James Forman Jr.

are, respectively, co-principal of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School and chair of the school's board of trustees.