

THE DAILY GAZETTE

January 30, 2003

Charter school's ads push idea of choice

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ALBANY—In a new television commercial, Sabrina Johnson tells viewers what school choice means to her.

School choice, Johnson says, is “a parent having their voice being heard.”

Johnson's son is a first-grader at Brighter Choice Charter School in Albany. This week Brighter Choice launched an ad campaign in which parents such as Johnson extol the virtues of school choice.

“Give parents a choice,” Johnson says in the ad. “Give children a brighter future.”

The purpose of the commercial is to let parents know their children have the right to transfer out of poorly performing public schools, said Tom Carroll, founder and chairman of Brighter Choice.

The advertisement features a toll-free number that parents can call to get information on Albany's charter schools, magnet schools and the school district's open-enrollment policy.

The ad campaign is being funded through a \$4.4 million grant Brighter Choice received last year from the U.S. Department of Education.

Albany Superintendent Lonnie Palmer said he doesn't consider the advertisements an appropriate use of federal money.

“I wish they'd spend the money on helping kids, rather than commercials and surveys and lawsuits,” he said. “We could hire 80 teachers or 135 teaching assistants with that money. We could provide one-on-one tutoring to 2,000 kids.”

The purpose of the five-year grant is to find ways to implement the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed a year ago and gives children in poorly performing schools the right to transfer to charter schools or other public schools, or to receive free supplemental educational services, such as tutoring.

Before parents can request transfers or educational services, they need to be made aware of what their options are, which is why the advertisements were created, Carroll said.

Albany has three schools on the state's roster of poorly performing schools: Arbor Hill Elementary, Livingston Middle School and Hackett Middle School. Under No Child Left Behind, students in those schools are permitted to transfer to other school districts.

The Brighter Choice ads will run for a minimum of three to four weeks on local network and cable television stations. Alternate versions of Johnson's ad featuring other Brighter Choice parents will also air.

Final figures are not in, but the cost of the ad campaign will be somewhere in the low six-figure range, Carroll said.

Carroll said he's talked to a number of nearby school districts—including North Colonie, South Colonie, Guilderland and East Greenbush—that have indicated they would be willing to accept some transfers from the Albany schools.

Brighter Choice is willing to use money from the federal grant to help

defray the cost of out-of-district tuition for Albany parents who want their children to attend suburban schools, officials said.

According to a survey released last week by Brighter Choice, over 70 percent of parents with children in poorly performing schools are unaware of their rights.

Earlier this week, a class-action lawsuit filed against the New York City and Albany school systems accused the districts of failing to provide students with the choices required under No Child Left Behind.

Palmer said the school district has done everything it can to inform parents of their rights. Letters were sent home to parents of students in Arbor Hill, Livingston and Hackett and the information was also publicized in the school system's newsletter and on its Web site.

It is difficult to transfer students out of the district's poorly performing schools, Palmer said. Both of the district's middle schools are failing, and the better elementary schools, such as the crowded School 19, are filled to capacity, he said.

The U.S. Department of Education grant is being administered by the Brighter Choice Public School Choice Project, an offshoot of Brighter Choice Charter School. The grant total for this year is \$398,000. The money is being used in Albany and Buffalo.

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