

EDITORIALS

From Southland Prep to college

Educator Blondean Davis often reminds people she didn't wake up one morning and proclaim, "I want to open a high school!" But that's what happened.

Her brainchild, Southland College Prep Charter High School, launched in 2010. The Richton Park school will graduate its second class of seniors this year. All 109 of them have been accepted to college. They have earned more than \$12.5 million in merit-based scholarships to top universities.

University of Chicago. Morehouse. Yale. University of Illinois. Wake Forest. DePaul.

In the other editorial on this page, we make a plea for more choice, more innovation, more charters in Illinois.

Southland College Prep stands as an outstanding example of the charter school movement. It didn't exist five years ago. It came about because Davis, an elementary school district superintendent, was dissatisfied with the high schools in her area.

Rich Township High School Dis-

trict 227 blocked her efforts to open Southland College Prep because it viewed her school as competition. The leaders at Rich Township feared that a charter school would pull away money and students.

And, yes, it has. Southland College Prep now serves 500 students, most of them from middle-class African-American families in the south suburbs. Families who wanted a better school.

Davis, who serves as CEO, won over parents and students, but she couldn't win over the Rich Township school leaders. They rejected her petition to open, but she appealed to the Illinois State Board of Education, which overruled the local district and approved her proposal.

This was before the state charter commission had been created — and is a good example of why that commission should survive legislative attempts to scuttle it.

Southland College Prep wouldn't be around today if Blondean Davis had to rely



GARY MIDDENDORF/DAILY SOUTHTOWN

Blondean Davis, Matteson School District 162 superintendent, was dissatisfied with high schools in her area; she became CEO of Southland College Prep charter school.

on the blessing of Rich Township schools.

But it is around, and it has those 109 seniors accepted to college, armed with that \$12.5 million in scholarship aid.

And in case there's any doubt about this,

Southland College Prep is a *public* school, as are all charters in Illinois. It is funded with state and local taxes. It accepts students based on an open and transparent lottery. That means it does not skim the best and the brightest students from the local district, a criticism that's often aimed at charter schools.

"The last lottery, we had three times as many people seeking to come in," Davis told us. "That doesn't please me because it creates an unrest, a sense of disappointment."

The school's charter is capped at 500 students. The demand is there for more.

Southland College Prep is successful because its educators, from the CEO to every teacher, have the drive and the flexibility to set and carry out a mission.

Students, teachers and staff are in class from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and many come back for a half-day on Saturday. When other high schools empty out at 2:30 p.m., Southland College Prep keeps going.

That's why charter schools came to be — to free educators from government interference and to experiment with education concepts.

Lawmakers should be clearing the path for more Southland College Preps, for more students and families to be *given a choice* instead of being locked into a school system based on their ZIP code.