

Abstract: The Catalyst Schools – Circle Rock Charter
5608 West Washington Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60644
CONTACT: Mr. Gordon Hannon, Chief Executive Officer: (773) 897-5815;
GHannon@catalystschools.org

The Catalyst Schools requests a \$200,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education Charter Schools Program to complete the transformation of its new Circle Rock Charter school into a vibrant digital media laboratory of learning for 520 young scholars, ages five through fourteen, who live in Chicago's low-income west side Austin community.

A combination of socio-economic factors has impacted the ability of Austin children to learn. One observer wrote that a child growing up in economic poverty spends more time surviving in the world and less time learning about it. Not surprisingly, children who come to Circle Rock can be as far behind academically as two grade levels in reading, math and science.

Catalyst understands that when you ask a great deal of students, you get a great deal in return. They want to do better. They have dreams and aspirations and want to be somebody when they grow up. Circle Rock Charter's approach is to establish a trust relationship with its students, develop their appetite for reading, put great teachers in their classrooms, provide plenty of psycho-social support, introduce them to the wonderment of the visual and performing arts, and keep their sights set not just on eighth grade graduation but *college* graduation.

In the four years since opening – first as a contract school and since July 1, 2010 as a charter school – the percentage of Circle Rock students meeting or exceeding grade level has risen from 57 percent (2008) to 69 percent (2011). This composite number is higher than all but one public school in the Austin community and on par with the average for all K-8 Chicago Public Schools. This figure remained steady even after Circle Rock grew by 147 students last fall. The current goal is for the student composite score to move from 69 to 80 percent meet/exceed.

The U.S. Department of Education Charter Schools Program has been an invaluable partner in assisting Circle Rock Charter in its objectives. For example, Education funding has made possible the makeover of each classroom into a “smart classroom,” with interactive white boards, document readers, LCD projectors, and classroom leveled libraries so students always have access to books. The funding has helped Circle Rock faculty participate in the Achievement Network program so they can go from being GOOD teachers to being GREAT teachers.

In its second year of charter school implementation, and in keeping with the GOOD to GREAT mantra, Circle Rock seeks to complete its technological transformation by making all classrooms learning laboratories without limits. That is, much of the funding will maximize the utility of the “smart classroom” by adding to it access to a digital media center. A vast library of videos will enable students to learn not only from their own teachers but also from master teachers and subject matter experts from around the world. Circle Rock faculty with special subject matter expertise will record and download lessons for other Circle Rock classrooms to use. The objective is to create the best classroom experience possible so Circle Rock students are invigorated by learning, their scores show their forward progress, they gain the academic strength to succeed in a college-preparatory high school, and go on to earn a college degree.