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High-Achieving Charter Chain to Start Private Schools

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One of the country's most successful charter schools has decided to buck the trend and start private schools, rather than the more prevalent conversion of private into charter. Arizona's BASIS.ed plans to open elite private schools, starting in California and New York.

"The mission of BASIS.ed is to raise the standards of US education to the highest international levels," said Mark Reford, BASIS.ed CEO. "When we can do that with charter schools, we will do it. When a private school is a better fit, we do that."

Several of BASIS's charter locations rank among the highest, not just in the United States, but in the world: Students in its Tucson and Scottsdale campuses beat out every other country that participated in international tests in 2012. Each BASIS student takes an average of 10 Advanced Placement exams and nets a score high enough to get college credit without taking a college class.

This may make BASIS the first charter school chain to open private schools, said Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

"They offer an incredibly high-quality product," Bedrick said, "and I expect that especially somewhere like Silicon Valley with a lot of people who are highly educated who appreciate what a good education means, especially one like BASIS offers, and are willing to pay for it."

High-End Niche

While many, if not most, charter schools target gaps at the low end of the market—poor kids who can barely read and write—BASIS aims at a gap on the high end: The United States' mediocre K-12 performance compared to international peers. As the [Global Report Card](#) shows, even the *best* U.S. schools hardly meet the *average* performance of schools in countries like South Korea, Finland, and Germany.

BASIS's challenging curriculum—[students may start algebra as early as fifth grade](#)—fits poorly with students who are far behind, but can be an excellent fit for kids who need a challenge. While as charters they must accept every student, their students also self-select: Nearly 10 percent of students at BASIS' DC campus left the school in its first year, and one of its Arizona

campuses lost almost 25 percent its first year, DC head of school Paul Morrissey told the local charter board. The DC campus is their only with a large proportion minority and poor students.

“Selectivity isn’t the issue: the issue is one of expectations,” Reford said. “At BASIS.ed, we believe that students rise to the expectations you set for them. We believe young minds are ready for the challenges of material not usually taught in typical grade school settings, public or private.”

Why Private?

BASIS charters need approximately \$6,500 per student to break even, but their private tuition will run \$22,000 in San Jose and \$23,000 in Brooklyn.

“The traditional private school is built on a paradigm and curriculum that we believe is rooted in obsolete thinking,” said Reford. “As one example: We won’t do fundraising.”

While tuition at the BASIS Independent schools will run about three times higher than at their charters, spokesman Phil Handler pointed out they significantly undercut prices at the elite private schools against whom they hope to compete. High-end K-12 tuition runs \$40,000 or more.

“The BASIS curriculum is the same, but it costs more to implement that academic program in high-cost metro areas than it does in Arizona—teacher salaries are more, building maintenance is more, everything is more,” Handler said.

The private schools will have larger, more elaborate buildings and more amenities, such as “sports facilities, a theater with an orchestra pit, stadium seating, practice rooms,” he said.

“BASIS.ed has a simple belief: that as many kids as possible should be able to get an excellent education, with uncompromising standards at an international-level,” Reford said. “Put simply, the private school market allows more kids to attend a BASIS.ed school.”

Teachers at the Top

Biannual student evaluations and student achievement constitute much of BASIS teachers’ evaluations, earning them bonuses for high performance. They are granted a large degree of freedom to teach how they like as long as their students perform extremely well.

“The word ‘professionalize’ says that the teacher has subject and content mastery, and is a master of the craft of teaching, and that they need to have the liberty to teach in their classroom what it is that they want, and they know that the students need, to learn,” said Phil Kilgore, Director of The Barney Charter School Initiative at Hillsdale College. “What that does is let the teacher not necessarily be a slave to some program or pedagogy or some set of standards.”

A passion for subject-matter is crucial to BASIS teachers, Reford said.

“BASIS was founded by two economists who expect a lot out of their students and value human capital,” according to Bedrick. “They are willing to seek out the best and demand the best from

the top people who are well-acquainted with subject matter in the field that they're teaching, not only that they have a degree in teaching. ”