



Living
Here it is ... definitive list of hot trends
Page 1D

Sports/USA Weekend
NASCAR's Daytona 500 roars into action
Poster features 3 generations of drivers
Pages 1C, 4C INSIDE



The Times

shreveporttimes.com

SHREVEPORT ■ BOSSIER CITY ■ ARK-LA-TEX

*SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2003

A Special Report

Right Step: What went wrong

Education board shifts focus to more oversight of state's charter school program

The concept is simple for some: Give an independent group taxpayers' money to run a school. Let the group use innovative ideas to reach students who otherwise may be lost. But the execution can be anything but that.

A three-month investigation by The Times of the now-closed Right Step Academy of Excellence — Shreveport's only charter school — revealed financial mismanagement, allegations of a lack of school control and poor academic performance.

Charter schools have been a mixed bag for Louisiana: Some have shown successes, others have been failures.

Right Step shut down when the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education pulled its charter in August because of academic problems. But those weren't the only woes suffered by the school. More than three years and \$1.4 million after Right Step opened with a prayer and a promise to give students a second chance, its doors are closed and some of its students are back in public schools. The experiment, by many counts, was a failure.

Failed Caddo academy leaves a legacy of questions

By Melody Brumble
The Times

Northwest Louisiana's only charter school appeared to be a family business of the pardoned felon who created it.

Right Step Academy of Excellence opened in 1999 in an education building leased from Church of the Living God on Alma Street in Shreveport with a promise to help failing ninth-graders get back on track and prepare for the rest of high school. Students started the first day of the first year with a prayer and an encouraging message from founder and headmaster Ronnie Banks.

By the time the school was shut down for academic problems three years later, the Banks family had received up to \$300,000 in pay, bonuses, reimbursements and travel expenses, according to an analysis by The Times of Right Step's

financial records.

Like other charter schools, Right Step operated with taxpayer money, receiving nearly \$1.4 million in three years.

Charter schools receive per-student funding from a lump sum appropriated by the state Legislature each year but are free of most regulations that apply to public schools. Charter schools statewide have received \$57.5 million in tax dollars since the first one opened in 1997.

Ronnie Banks, his wife, Cheryl, and their son, Reggie, were on the Right Step payroll. Copies of checks show Cheryl Banks received travel and meal reimbursements after she resigned. Board minutes provided to state education officials after the school closed include notes that Cheryl and Reggie resigned effective Jan. 31, 2002.

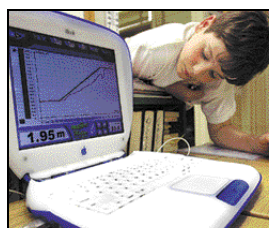
■ See QUESTIONS 5A



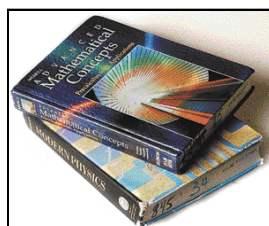
Right Step teacher Lee Murphy speaks with a student in this Oct. 5, 1999, photo.
Jim Hudelson/The Times

The Money: A Comparison

The following list shows what the \$1,357,480 in taxpayer money used to fund Right Step Academy could have bought the public school system.



1,357 classroom student computers
(at \$1,000 each)



33,937 textbooks
(at \$40 each)



27 buses
(at \$50,000 each)



28 certified teachers
(at \$48,000 each)

Source: Averages provided by Ben Wreyford, Caddo schools finance director



Airman 1st Class Leroy McFadden makes it to the front of the line to receive his medical records from Staff Sgt. Jennifer Melton as personnel from Barksdale Air Force Base prepared Saturday for deployment. Members of the 2nd Maintenance Group will leave in the next few days to an undisclosed location.
Robert Ruiz/The Times

Barksdale readies next deployment

Base buzzes with activity

From Staff Reports

Barksdale Air Force Base was abuzz with activity Saturday as hundreds of men and women who tend to its B-52 bombers prepared to deploy to the Pacific. They filled out paperwork, got shots, took care of personal and legal affairs and picked up their mobilization processing bags — "mobags" for short — to be ready

to hop on a plane and head for action literally at a moment's notice.

The action at Barksdale was just one facet of a picture of activity happening in the streets of Shreveport and other cities around the world as nations and their peoples rally in favor of — and against — possible war against Iraq and over escalating tensions over North Korea.

PAGE 1B: Barksdale prepares its troops for war, pictures and more

PAGE 1B: War protesters rally in front of U.S. Courthouse in downtown Shreveport

PAGE 18A: Throngs in cities around the world protest threat or war, say give peace a chance

PAGE 19A: United States, Britain begin reworking resolution to soften call for war in Iraq.

Robert Adley wins bid for state Senate

By Loresha Wilson
The Times

Veteran politician Robert Adley, 55, of Benton defeated opponent Jerry Lott, 65, of Sibley in Saturday's runoff race to fill the state Senate District 36 seat.

Adley got 8,172 of the 12,075 votes cast, or 68 percent, according to complete but unofficial results from the Louisiana secretary of state. District 36 includes most of Bossier, all of Webster and Bienville and half of Claiborne parishes. Adley easily beat Lott, who drew 3,903 votes, or 32 percent.

"Thanks to all the people who supported us," Adley said as election results were being reported and the percentage slowly grew more to his favor.

"This is a big camp, and we've got a big job ahead of us. We've got to return confidence to the public school system and find affordable health care, especially for our senior citizens. But like I said, we've got a lot of work ahead of us and I'm ready to begin."

Adley, owner of Pelican Gas Management Inc. in Benton and a former state representative, credited God for his victory. He will take office Feb. 24 to serve the unexpired term of Foster Campbell, who recently was elected to the state Public Service Commission.



Adley Lott

The runoff between the two Democrats drew a light turnout, with only 18 percent of the district's approximately 67,000 registered voters going to the polls.

Adley said he will run again in October to serve a full term of his own. "I didn't get into this for the short term. I got into this to make a difference in the quality of people's lives."

Lott, a former Webster schools superintendent, was gracious in defeat, complimenting his opponent on a race fairly fought. He said he was unsure whether he will run for the seat in October. "I'm going to leave those doors open and never say 'never.'"

The runoff Saturday was one of two legislative positions on the ballot that day. In House of Representatives District 13, which includes all or parts of Bienville, Lincoln and three other parishes, the five-way race resulted in a runoff between Todd Culpepper and James R. "Jim" Fannin, both of Jonesboro.

INSIDE

Louisiana looks at changes
PAGE 4A

State still has 20 charter schools
PAGE 4A

Details about Right Step
PAGE 4A

Board faced money woes
PAGE 3A

Former students recall their experiences
PAGE 5A

Editorial: System needs oversight
PAGE 6I

ONLINE

Founder relied on consultants
shreveporttimes.com/news/education

This icon indicates supporting documents will be found with these stories on The Times' Web site
shreveporttimes.com/news/education

Discuss charter schools and Right Step on The Times' message boards
shreveporttimes.com/forums/boards



The Times
shreveporttimes.com

The area's leading source for news, entertainment and more

Inside

List of announced local General Motors suppliers grows

Two suppliers have added their names to the growing list of companies locating in the area to provide pre-assembled components for the production of General Motors' new trucks, the Chevy Colorado and GMC Canyon.

Another five companies officially will unveil their plans by April, according to officials with the Greater Shreveport Chamber of Commerce. In all, at least 12 companies are expected to open here.

As the projected fall start-up of the trucks' production approaches, more supplier names are beginning to surface. Three have announced their plans to employ a combined 750 people.

— Details, 2A, 1I

Weather

High: 43 Low: 28
Details: 2A

Index

Insight	5I	Money	1I
Advice	11D	Movie Ads	9D
Answer	6E	Outdoors	7C
Classified	1E	Scoreboard	2C
Crossword	11D	Sports	1C
Deaths	4B	Mutuals	2-3I
Living	1D	Teddy Allen	1B
Local/State	1B	Television	1G