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"What are charter schools?" and school contacts follow story.

## **GROUPS PUSH TWO CHARTER SCHOOLS**

*LISA MICHALS, Staff Writer*

Let the trend begin.

Two grass-roots groups hope to launch charter schools in the Richland 1 school district. If they are successful, the number of charter schools in the district would rise from two to four. The South Carolina Charter School Advisory Committee is set to certify the **Carolina School for Inquiry** this week. Another local charter school initiative, the Booker T. Washington Academy, was denied by the committee, but organizers plan to submit a revised application in the fall.

Charter schools are largely free of state laws and regulations, although local school boards must review their application. They are meant to inspire innovations in education. Carolina School organizers are hopeful additional Columbia charter schools will pave the way for the charter and school-choice movement.

"As more become established, people will understand more what charter schools are," said Stacie Mandrell, a co-founder of the Carolina School concept.

The advisory committee plans to certify seven new charter schools statewide - including Carolina School - to open in fall 2006. They would join an anticipated 29 charter schools operating in the state this fall, according to the state Department of Education.

## **CAROLINA SCHOOL FOR INQUIRY**

When a group of Columbia parents considered expanding a popular private preschool and kindergarten program, they lit on the idea of a charter school. At first, they considered a partnership between the nonprofit Harmony School and a newly formed charter school. "We realized you can't have a private board interfere with a public board and vice versa," said Jeannie Eidson, a Harmony parent and Carolina School planning committee member.

Plus, parents don't want anything to endanger Harmony's stellar program, Mandrell said. So the parents began planning a charter school separate from Harmony but based on its beliefs.

The proposed **Carolina School for Inquiry** would serve 60 to 90 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Middle-school grades might be added. About 15 students in multi-age classes would use an inquiry learning model. After a teacher's lessons, students can pursue the ideas through activities and study for as long, or as briefly, as they desire.

Mandrell, a certified teacher, is optimistic that the school will clear its final hurdle - approval by Richland 1 school board members. Carolina School planners are busy searching for a school site, preferably in downtown Columbia.

While portable classrooms will probably serve as the school's first home, the plan is to build a "green" school that is environmentally friendly and energy efficient, said Eidson, an environmental scientist and sustainable development activist.

Richland 1 officials have supported the Carolina School organizers' efforts thus far.

#### **BOOKER T. WASHINGTON ACADEMY**

A somewhat unlikely threesome won't take no for an answer when it comes to launching an 800-student charter school in Richland 1.

Planning committee members for the proposed Booker T. Washington Academy are:

- \* SuMaria Ashford, a youth adviser, entrepreneur and graduate of Keenan High School
- \* Jeff Weiner, a national charter school advocate participating in a one-year fellowship with Boston-based Building Excellent Schools, a nonprofit that promotes charter schools in urban areas
- \* Arthur Jones, a Columbian who for decades has sought to launch an economic development initiative that would foster job creation for disadvantaged communities.

They envision Booker T. Washington kindergarteners through eighth-graders would learn under the best practices of some of the top elementary and middle school curricula. Moreover, the school would have classes from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with 90 minutes per day of the three core academic subjects - reading, writing and math.

Through his work as an educational consultant, Weiner heard about the urban environment of Columbia, and of Jones' desire to cultivate job training and careers for young people from disadvantaged communities. He thought the city sounded ripe for a charter school initiative.

Weiner got in touch with Jones and proposed the idea. Jones loved the idea of launching a school better than his own ideas for economic development and job creation. "I'd been floating that idea for 25 to 30 years, and it wasn't going anywhere," Jones said. "It went from the Booker T. Washington industrial project to the academy."

Jones met Ashford while she was teaching a technology course and asked her to join the team. She had been doing volunteer work for years, advising students through school and on to college. While she admits the Booker T. Academy planning committee is an unusual mix of people, she finds power in it - especially in Weiner's expertise. "I'm not sure what his motivation is, but it has worked for us," she said.

The state Charter School Advisory Committee hasn't released its reasons for denying the Booker T. Washington group's request for certification. Weiner said committee members found a need for numerous clarifications and changes in the application.

#### WHAT ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Charter schools are public schools that are largely free of state laws and regulations, although they are measured by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The schools are tuition-free and can hire noncertified teachers. Charter schools are meant to inspire innovation in education.

Schools can be set up by a group of parents or by a traditional school district. They are governed by a board of parents and employees.

Charter schools can receive local, state and federal money just like traditional public schools.

Local school districts, in concert with a state charter school oversight committee, decide whether to sanction charter schools, on the basis of criteria set in the state's charter school law.

SOURCE: S.C. Department of Education

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#### **Illustration:**PHOTO: BW

Organizers of the charter initiative **Carolina School for Inquiry** meet in the living room of one of the founders, Stacie Mandrell, left. The group, including Mona Syne, Sue Carstensen and her daughter Anna Maria, and Kathy Thomas listen to Jeannie Eidson talk about options for a location. RICH GLICKSTEIN/THE STATE