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Memo: "About the School" and "What are Charter Schools?" info boxes at end of article

NEW SCHOOL PRIMED TO FLOURISH

LISA MICHALS, Staff Writer

No bones about it, launching a new school is tough. Hiring staff. Readying classrooms. Writing policies and handbooks. The list seems endless. But one question lingers: Will they come? Students are lining up for a new Richland 1 charter school set to launch in August. Organizer Stacie Mandrell says enrollment for the **Carolina School for Inquiry** is on track to meet the school's second-year enrollment goal of 108 - in its first year. "I get calls pretty much every day," said Mandrell, who will be the school's lead teacher. She teaches in USC's College of Education. If more than 72 students enroll, a lottery will decide who gets slots. Or school officials might explore opening with 108 students. About 30 students have signed up, after just one enrollment information session.

The school will serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade in multi-age classes. The school's teaching philosophy - "inquiry-based learning" - has proved popular in the Midlands. Richland 2's Center for Inquiry magnet school, which opened about 10 years ago, uses a lottery to select students because interest is overflowing. The 132-student school turns away 150 students annually, said Lyn Mueller, lead teacher.

The inquiry-based teaching philosophy uses children's natural curiosity to drive learning. Small, multi-age classes and the opportunity for students to learn at a potentially accelerated pace hooked parent Darlene Bell. She is excited that kindergartners and first-graders will learn in the same classroom at **Carolina School for Inquiry**, where she plans to enroll her daughter.

Her daughter turns 6 in October and would be older than most other kindergartners, so the multi-age classes are ideal, Bell said. "I think it would increase her learning ability," Bell said. "Academically, she'll probably be at a first-grade level by the time she starts kindergarten."

Charter schools are publicly funded, tuition-free schools largely exempt from state laws and regulations. They must be sanctioned by the state and the school district in which they reside.

This would be the third charter school in Richland 1. The Richland 1 Middle College is an alternative high school launched by the district; the Midlands Math and Business Academy is a kindergarten through eighth-grade school launched independently. Both are in their second years.

Community partnerships are blossoming for the **Carolina School for Inquiry**. USC professors and students are on board to teach special classes, such as fine arts. The school will be at the Richland County Recreation Commission's Crane Creek Community Center on Fairfield Road.

The community center staff is working with the school to develop an after-school program that would serve **Carolina School for Inquiry** students and other students who live in the neighborhood. "The partnership with them has been a lifesaver for us," Mandrell said, noting the school's tight budget of about \$463,000 annually. Mandrell hopes to augment that budget with grants.

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ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Opens: August

Location: Crane Creek Community Center, Fairfield Road

Who can attend?

All students in Richland 1 are eligible. A limited number of students living outside the district also may enroll. There is no tuition.

Grade levels: Students learn in classes that combine two grade levels (K-1, 2-3, 4-5).

Transportation:

Parents must provide their own transportation, but school officials plan to create car pools to ensure no student will be turned away.

Upcoming information sessions:

6:30 p.m. Jan. 10 at the USC West Quad Residential Hall, or

6:30 p.m. Feb. 7 at Crane Creek Community Center, 7405 Fairfield Road.

Another session is planned for Jan. 24, but details have yet to be announced.

Learn more: For more information or to enroll, go online, www.carolinaschoolforinquiry.org.

THESTATE.COM

Get a rundown of a typical day in an inquiry-based classroom.

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

Tuition-free and can hire noncertified teachers. The creation of charter schools is meant to inspire innovation in education.

Organized typically by a group of parents or by a traditional school district

Eligible for local, state and federal money just like traditional public schools

Approved by local school districts, in concert with a state charter school oversight committee.

SOURCE: S.C. Department of Education