



The News Reporter

Academy seeks charter school

By FULLER ROYAL

Pending approval by the Office of Charter Schools and the N.C. Board of Education, Columbus County could see its first-ever charter school open for the 2007 school year.

The directors of the Roger Bacon Academy's Charter Day School of Brunswick County, in Leland, submitted a 129-page application to Office of Charter Schools Director Jack Moyer, in Raleigh, requesting permission to open a charter school, which might one day serve as many as 850 K-8 students.

The application shows that the target school population would come from Columbus and Bladen counties, more specifically Whiteville, Chadbourn, Acme-Delco, Clarkton and Bladenboro.

Roger Bacon Academy's Charter Day School was chartered in 2000 and has grown to 600 students in grades K-7. It has met Adequate Yearly Progress with No Child Left Behind every year and is an Honor School of Excellence with High Growth in North Carolina's ABCs of Education.

Next year, it will reach 750 students as it adds an eighth-grade. Of this year's students, 174 are from Columbus County, mostly from the Bolton and Acme-Delco-Riegelwood areas. Forty students are from New Hanover County and the others are from Brunswick and Pender counties.

A couple of students come from as far as Chadbourn.

Roger Bacon Headmaster Mark Cramer said that his school has developed an education model that has proven successful.

"We have refined that model and now we want to replicate it (in Columbus County,)" he said.

Cramer met with Superintendent Danny McPherson in February to inform him of the school's intentions as a courtesy.

According to Matthew Lanner, an administrative assistant with the Office of Charter Schools, there are four available slots for new charter schools this year. The Columbus Charter School is one of 19 to be evaluated by the Office in April before sending their recommendations to the State Board of Education and then the General Assembly.

A charter school with hundreds of students could have far-reaching impact on both local school systems as well as the surrounding private schools such as Waccamaw Academy and Columbus Christian Academy.

Both local public school systems, according to Lanner, will have the opportunity to issue an impact statement to the Charter School Advisory Committee.

Because of the possible location of the new school – the application shows a possible site on the Old Lumberton Highway – Whiteville City's five schools and Chadbourn's two schools are likely to take the biggest hits in terms of lost students and fewer teaching positions.

Charter schools do not provide transportation, so only students with the means to be taken to school can attend. Students totally dependent on buses will not be able to go.

Because of the transportation issue, the majority of students will be those who live nearer the school.

There's also no cafeteria. Students will have to bring bag lunches from home. There are no provisions for free or reduced lunches. The possibility also exists for dozens of teaching slots to be lost as students transfer into the school.

Funds are provided to schools based on their average daily membership (ADM) of students. When a school's ADM decreases, so does its funding. Lose enough students and a teacher is lost. Fair Bluff Elementary went through this for years.

Any student in the Columbus County or Whiteville City schools will be eligible to attend the Columbus Charter School.

Available slots will be filled using a lottery system. Once the slots are full for each grade, the remaining names are drawn and placed on a waiting list in the order they are drawn.

The school would begin with 50 students in kindergarten and first grade. Each year, the next grade would be added.

Neither local school board would have any control over the charter school, which would select its own board members with state approval.

Charter schools operate basically like a regular public school – End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests are still required.

Cramer said the biggest drawback for a charter school is in its funding formula. Charter schools receive no funds for capital expenses such as buildings or equipment. Cramer estimates that a charter school receives about 30 percent less funding per student than traditional public school.

Columbus County Superintendent Dan Strickland said that while he had received a letter about the proposed charter school, he had not seen the application.

"I know that charter schools are here," he said. "It's part of our state plan. It's a public school. Basically, we have to be ready for it."

Strickland said that the system has known for years that a charter school would eventually start locally.

"In the eastern part of the county we have students going to Roger Bacon," he said. "They have taken some of our best students, but we have also seen some of them come back."

Strickland said the local schools must make themselves more attractive to students and parents.

He said that with some careful planning, "Hopefully we can hold our own. The only concern I have with the charter schools is when we lose students to them the state and federal funds follow those kids. If we get them back during the year we don't get the funds back."

Strickland said that concern is shared by school systems throughout the state.