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Leave schools to us?

City, county oppose expanding charter school to Columbus County

By Sam Scott

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LELAND | A new eighth-grade wing of the Roger Bacon Academy is nearly finished. But that could be the least of the growth. [

Flush with high test scores and a lengthy waiting list, leaders of the charter school near Leland want to replicate their success in Columbus County. They will interview next week as one of nine finalists vying for five available charters, a bid opposed by both the Columbus County and Whiteville City school systems.

The two traditional systems worry that the proposed Columbus Charter School would reduce revenues without a similar drop in costs, turn away low-income and special needs children, and worsen racial division.

“I strongly fear the proliferation of re-segregation in the schools of Columbus County if this charter is approved,” Whiteville Superintendent Danny McPherson said in a March 28 letter opposing the application.

Mark Cramer, Roger Bacon’s head master, said that charter schools take all applicants on a lottery basis and said the school’s black and learning disabled children far out-perform state averages on end-of-grade tests.

Roger Bacon has 16 percent minority enrollment, he said. The surrounding Brunswick County school system is 30 percent minority.

North Carolina’s charter schools – which are capped at 100 – are “schools of choice” that are open and free to any child. Unlike traditional schools, they are independent of local school boards and have greater latitude to pursue their own paths.

Roger Bacon uses a regimented approach with dress codes, formal manner and intense drills.

The Cape Fear Center for Inquiry in Wilmington, the area’s only other charter school, is more laid back, with the emphasis on hands-on learning and getting students to answer their own questions.

Results vary over the charter program’s 10-year history. Some schools languish and lose

their charters due to low enrollment, financial problems or poor test scores. Others like Roger Bacon thrive.

Last year, it ranked among the 25 most-improved schools in the state on end-of-grade tests and was named an Honor School of Excellence with nearly 92 percent proficiency on math and reading tests. The school has a waiting list for every grade, way over 100 in total, Cramer said.

Karen Gore sends her granddaughter there rather than to Columbus County Schools for disciplinary and academic reasons, she said.

“They know they have to stay in line,” she said. “This school is meeting and exceeding the standards.”

Charter schools get the same per pupil funding as traditional schools, although they get no capital funds for buildings. This year Roger Bacon is projected to take in more than \$1 million in local funds from Bladen, Brunswick, Columbus, New Hanover, Pender and Whiteville school districts plus a greater amount in state and federal money.

But because students come from different areas of the county, their leaving might not reduce the cost of running the traditional schools. For example, three kids leaving one school to go to Roger Bacon could take nearly \$20,000 out of a county school system without reducing the number of classes or teachers needed.

“The buses still run, the teachers still work with the students, the electricity bill continues to arrive in the mail,” said Dan Strickland, superintendent of Columbus County Schools, in an April 6 letter opposing the charter school. The proposed school would open in the fall of 2007 with four classrooms and then expand.

It might be an issue other local superintendents face. Cramer said Roger Bacon has future plans for more schools.

“We want to do it as long as we are successful,” he said.

The Wilmington Academy for Classical Education, a non-profit group geared to low-income, minority youth, is also seeking a charter for a local school.

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