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The News Reporter

Charter school hopes to repeat success here

By FULLER ROYAL

It's a typical morning at the Charter Day School in Brunswick County. With the occasional student moving across this tree-laden campus on a cool, sunny morning, the campus looks more like the forested setting of Boy Scout Camp Bowers in Bladen County.

Charter Day School doesn't resemble the average school.

Founder and trustee Baker Mitchell Jr. stands in the shade of an old pine with headmaster and chief executive officer Mark Cramer as they discuss the success and growth of the school.

The week before, they were notified that their proposed Columbus Charter School is one of five that the state's charter school committee is recommending for approval by the State Board of Education.

Final approval would have to come from the N.C. General Assembly and that won't be until July.

Mitchell and Kramer want to duplicate the model they've created in Brunswick and they say that Columbus County is the perfect spot.

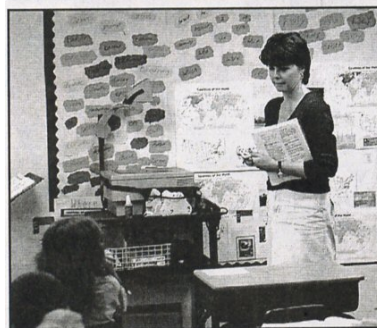
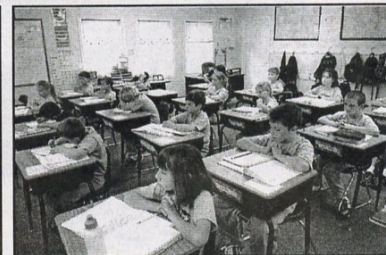
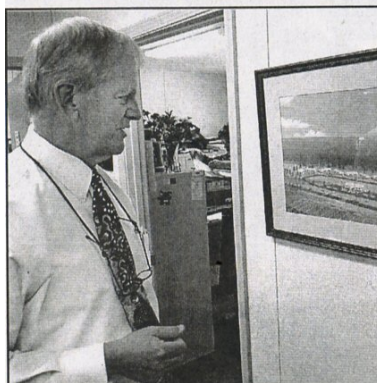
Already, more than one-fourth the Brunswick charter school's 600 students are from Columbus County, mostly from the eastern end of the county.

BRUNSWICK MODEL

From the layout of the campus and the design of the classroom buildings to the curriculum and teaching methods, Columbus County's version would be nearly identical.

Roger Bacon Academy, a for-profit organization created by Mitchell, manages Charter Day School on a contract-basis and would run the Columbus school.

The management setup is similar to Columbus Regional Healthcare, which is run by the for-profit Quorum Healthcare.



Photos by Fuller Royal

Clockwise from top: Charter Day School features stands of pines and forest green classroom buildings while dozens of picnic tables dot the grounds for lunch and snack times; uniformed students listen to a reading assignment; Headmaster Mark Cramer interacts with kindergarten students; third-grade language arts teacher Jill Applewhite instructs her students; and school founder Baker Mitchell looks over an aerial view of the school.

FUNDING IS MINIMAL

Roger Bacon operates at the pleasure of Charter Day School's board of trustees. That board of trustees, comprised of area professionals, answers to the State board of Education in the same manner that local boards of education do.

If approved this summer, Mitchell will have a full year to prepare for the August 2007 opening of the Columbus Charter School. Cramer, an employee of Roger Bacon Academy, only had five months to get Brunswick going after its 2000 approval.

It began with 53 students in kindergarten and first grade.

Roger Bacon Academy will hire a headmaster, teachers and support staff to handle at least the startup levels of kindergarten and first grade – possibly second grade.

As the students progress, a new grade will be added each year.

REQUIREMENTS DIFFER

Charter Day School's 65 teachers and 10 staff members are employees of the charter school. Tenure doesn't apply to charter schoolteachers, nor are they vested in the state's retirement or health plans.

Cramer said that while charter schools are free from the state's teacher pay scale requirements, Charter Day School does use the scale to pay its teachers. The school has its own retirement and health plans.

Cramer said the school also offers merit pay raises.

State law requires that 75 percent of the teaching staff hold active certification. Cramer said that 85 percent of this year's staff surpasses that requirement. He said that the remainder hold college degrees in the areas they teach.

"We have no trouble finding teachers," he said. "We do very little advertising. We're not in a financial position to offer a supplement. The environment here is the supplement."

Funding for the year is determined by the total number of students enrolled during its first 20 days.

The only money for the school comes from the per pupil expenditures from federal, state and local levels funds.

That amounted to roughly \$6,000 per student or \$3.6 million to operate the school this year.

There are no other funds available to the school.

Mitchell said that charter school funding is about 30 percent less than funding for the traditional public schools. There's no money for transportation or for free or reduced lunches. And there's no money for capital acquisition or repair.

He said that most successful schools are managed by groups who are willing to invest in the infrastructure. That's what Roger Bacon Academy did.

Charter Day School rents its 52 acres and classroom buildings from the Coastal Habitat Conservancy, which Mitchell also started.

Many charter schools are forced to use existing buildings, especially in more urban areas.

Charter Day School has the advantage of the Conservancy, which bought the land specifically for the school and has put up the funds for the classrooms.

Mitchell said that at too many charter schools, trustees have underwritten the costs of the schools themselves and that rarely works.

Of the 18 charter schools in North Carolina that have closed, most were for financial reasons – not poor academic performance.

"This school is financially sound," Mitchell said. "The charter school has no debt."

Additionally, he said that the board of trustees has instructed the management team to come up with a

two-month operating expense surplus - \$700,000 to \$800,000.

HIGH SCHOOL IS LATER

Charter Day School was approved from the very beginning to work its way up to the high school level.

Mitchell said that before they do that, they want to backtrack and flesh out some of the better amenities such as a cafeteria and a gymnasium as well as a building for music and art.

MUST TAKE EOGs

Charter schools are not exempt from state and national testing, standards and accountability. They do have the option of not adhering to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study.

Cramer said that in addition to the state's End-of-Grade tests, his students also take the national SAT-10, just to see how the school ranks nationally.

Mitchell and Cramer both see the state's EOG and the federal government's No Child Left Behind mandates as good things for education.

The school's high proficiency rates are a selling point for the school and a key factor in the state's recommendation for the Columbus Charter School.

Charter Day School uses direct instruction to teach reading. Cramer said that by Christmas each year, all of the kindergarten students are reading.

CHARTER SCHOOL LOTTERY

If Columbus Charter School is approved, a lottery will determine who is enrolled.

Cramer said that the vast majority of students wishing to attend the Brunswick school are able to get in.

Those not making the first cut are put on a waiting list and as long as their applications are renewed each year, they won't lose their place on the waiting list.

The only automatic admissions are for the new kindergarten students whose older siblings are already enrolled.

Mitchell, a retired entrepreneur from Houston, Texas, created the Roger Bacon concept while working as volunteer teacher.

A sailboat enthusiast, he fell in love with Wilmington and the Atlantic Ocean's clean and oil rig-free waters.

He was going to open a private school in Texas but opted to move to Brunswick County in 1997 – the same year the charter school law was passed.

Cramer retired from the U.S. Marines in 1999. His wife was from Wilmington and after working at a private school in Japan for one year, they settled there.

Cramer said his proudest accomplishment has been the rapid growth of the school since its hurried opening in 2000.

Mitchell said that his proudest moments are when parents come to him and thank him for starting the school. He said some of the parents come from difficult circumstances and that the school has made a big difference in the lives of their children.

“Some of these kids really need a break,” he said.

STUDENTS STICK AROUND

The school enjoys a high retention rate with nearly all of its teachers and students returning each year. For the first set of students in 2000, their eighth-grade year this fall will be their last.

Charter Day School is barely 500 yards off of U.S. 74-76 at the intersection with U.S. 87. A creek provides its other border.

The school has a football field and sponsors three Pop Warner football teams. It has a Cub Scout pack and a Boy Scout troop and a place on the property for Scouting activities. A baseball field is in the works.

In each classroom, teachers work with 22 to 27 students. The school has a uniform policy, which Cramer says works well and prevents a lot of

problems. Classrooms feature a laptop computer for each teacher and a video digital projector. A central server provides Internet connection. There are class assistants for grades kindergarten through third.

BEHAVIOR

Cramer emphasizes to his teachers and students the importance of everything from the way students behave to the way they sit in their desks.

He said that teachers are instructed to address appropriate behavior four times for every one instance of negative behavior.

The school is year-round with nine weeks of class and then three weeks off. In the summer, students have six to seven weeks off. The Columbus School would follow the same schedule.

There has never been a year-round school in Columbus County before. Cramer said the parents like the setup. Families can take vacations throughout the year, not just in summer.

In each room, a remote control video camera – capable of moving and zooming, allows Cramer to make sure all is well in each room.

He reported very few discipline problems. He has never had to expel a student.

Because parents and guardians have to drop off and pick up their students each day, there is always a way to contact a parent in person.

MINORITIES

The school population is 14 percent black and Hispanic, yet 65 to 70 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Statewide, 50 percent of the students enrolled at charter schools are minorities.

Cramer said that the majority of the students at Charter Day School could never afford a private school.

“Parents will find a way to get their kids here,” he said.

The middle school, with grades six and seventh, is separated from the elementary school. Three new middle school classroom buildings are under construction in anticipation of the addition of the eighth grade this fall. That will bring the school’s total enrollment to 750.

WHERE IN COLUMBUS?

A piece of land near Collier’s Crossroads, northwest of Whiteville, is under contract as a possible site. Mitchell said the location is ideal for the school. He wants to attract students from Whiteville, Chadbourn, Clarkton and Bladenboro.

The Columbus Charter School will eventually have 850 students in grades kindergarten through eight.

“We want to go to Columbus County because we see the demand there,” Mitchell said. “We want to establish a good working relationship with the school systems there.”

Cramer said that the charter school would gladly share with Whiteville and Columbus County systems the same innovative ideas in use at the charter schools.

“We look forward to working with (Superintendents) Dan Strickland and Danny McPherson,” Mitchell said.

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