

Charter school proposed for county

By Kelly Griffin

The latest trend in public education reform has now come to Rocky Mount: the charter school. According to the September issue of *North Carolina* magazine, a charter school is a public school receiving the same amount of state and local funding per pupil as traditional public schools. The main difference is that it's managed by a private, non-profit group that's been granted a five-year renewable contract or charter.

The Community Development Foundation, an organization with members from various local businesses, applied for the charter to begin a new elementary school last October. If the charter is approved on March 15, 1997, the school would begin operation next fall at one of the four possible rental facilities: American Auction and Fixture Company Office/Warehouse Building, Magnum Warehouse Building, K-Mart Shopping Center, or Tarrytown Mall, according to the application.

The school will be operated by Advantage Schools, Inc., a Massachusetts company which specializes in managing charter schools. When the Community Development Foundation applied for the charter, it had the option to apply to three agencies: the local school board, N.C. State Board of Education or one of the 16 universities in the UNC system. "We applied to the state board because we were pressed for time. The state is the final authority for all applications," said charter applicant Doug Haynes.

Legislators just passed the bill to allow charter schools this past year, so there are no schools operating in this state yet. The legislation specified that there can be up

to 100 charter schools in this state next fall. So far, about half of that number have applied. However, there are 480 charter schools throughout the country.

The concept of a charter school is a relatively new idea. According to *North Carolina* magazine, the suggestion arose in California in the mid-1980's and then spread to Minn. which became the first state to adopt legislation allowing it in 1991. Seven states had joined Minnesota by 1993. North Carolina became the 25th state to permit charter schools in 1995. The number of charter schools nationwide has dramatically increased from the 134 that existed in January of 1995. California has the most, with 73 schools in operation last year.

Goals of charter school

The main goal of the Rocky Mount charter school, according to the application, is to improve student learning: "An overarching goal of the School is to demonstrate the height of academic achievement that inner-city students can routinely attain when the advantages of charter school governance are coupled with ambitious new academic standards."

The founders intend to do this, in part, by recognizing which students, after their sophomore year, plan to pursue a traditional college education leading to a bachelor's degree and those who plan to enter the work force or pursue a technical degree after graduation. Students will be taught curriculum according to which plans they hope to pursue. The latter will be in partnership with several local businesses to ensure that they will be trained to the highest skill standards.

"The founders are committed to attracting a highly diverse school population that is broadly representative of the Rocky

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-Robert Lutz, Pres. Chrysler Corporation

Mount school-age population by race, ethnicity, and income," according to the application. Both students at risk of failure and those academically gifted will be emphasized at this school. They will be grouped by subject competency, not age. This placing will be done by student records and a test, but there is no test that must be passed to attend the school. "There can be no standards of acceptance. No test must be taken to be admitted. We can't have all one race," said charter board member Jim Dickens.

"The charter school offers the opportunity to run schools differently-without the bureaucratic, red-tape government agencies. It can be innovative in what it teaches and still be under our school system. Standards have to be met and approved by the school board," said Dickens. According to the application, every classroom in the Rocky Mount Advantage Charter School will have plenty of teaching supplies and state-of-the-art computers networked to each other, the Internet, and all Advantage classrooms throughout the country. Every teacher will have a laptop computer, telephone, and fax machine. Teachers will be able to communicate with other Advantage Charter School teachers through their intranet technology, sharing their experiences and teaching plans for their lessons.

The idea attracts a wide variety of people. Chrysler Corporation President Robert Lutz believes that competition will be the

best thing that has ever happened to public schools, according to the Oct. 19 issue of *World* magazine. He doesn't think it makes any sense that everything else but public schools are competitive. He noted that even the phone company that existed as a monopoly for so long is now competitive. In the 70's, he said, "Chrysler was a public school. The other guys were Country Day and St. Margaret Mary."

When asked if this comparison was unfair, he responded, "Fairness is irrelevant. Private schools produce what we say we want." Lutz does not think that this competition will kill public schools. He believes it will force them to act differently and develop new priorities.

Success of charter school

The charter schools nationwide seem to be off to a grand start. In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Elaine Mosley, a Pennsylvania charter school official said, "It's mind-boggling to reflect on the beginning of the school year and then consider where we are right now." The September issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine reported that at Academy Charter School in Castle Rock, a recent survey determined that 99 percent of the parents stated they believe the school is meeting their children's needs. Test scores in all areas increased during the 1994-95 school year. According to the *Boston Globe*, 75 percent of Boston charter school parents said that their children had become more interested in school and 55 percent said they were more involved with their children's education. The *Globe* stated, "The unions and public schools have plenty of cause to worry--and improve. That's one of the best reasons for charter schools to exist."

Pros:

The corporation that applied for the charter is the moving force behind its promotion. Doug Haynes, Community Development Foundation board member, said, "What we are doing is essentially an effort to free the schools of much of the regulations they have to deal with, mostly created in Raleigh, and to give parents greater roles in controlling the kind of environment for their children. A lot of money is spent in bureaucracy, not in the classroom."

Haynes also said that standards will be higher and will have to be met at the new school. "If standards aren't reached in our schools now, nothing happens. In the charter school, people are fired and standards are met, or we're out of business."

Many educators are also willing to give the school a chance. Principal Jerry Carter said, "If it provides for a better educated populace in Rocky Mount, that's good. That's our goal. I hope the end result is that it makes public education better."

Cons:

Much of the opposition for the charter school is coming from skeptical parents, teachers, and school administrators. The biggest concern is that the new school will take the brightest students away from other elementary schools.

"One of my two major concerns is that the charter school is designed to pull some of the best students out of the school system and put them in a setting that's not reflective of our community," said superintendent Dr. Travis Twiford.

"Second, our school system has been recognized for efforts to work together to make it a better one. I was disappointed that we were not asked to be involved in discussing the charter program," he added.

Principal Jerry Carter's main concern involves whether rules and regulations will be equally applied. "If state rules and regulations are relaxed, it will be unfair competition. It makes it hard for us to compete," he said.