

Sterling preparing for new year

By Mary Both Phillips

Sterling Montessori School, one of the first charter schools in North Carolina, will be accepting applications on April 1 and April 15 for the 125 slots that will be available this fall.

Since the approval on March 13, Andrea Uzzell, director, has hit the ground running to obtain a grant for busing, hire additional teachers, and oversee completion of the school playground, among other tasks.

She is also looking into obtaining a loan to expand the program in the future, especially at the kindergarten level.

The first round of student applications was accepted on Saturday, March 15, two days after the charter was announced. Ms. Uzzell will request from state officials that the applications be approved on a first come, first serve basis instead of in a lottery as the state requires. The lottery would be held in subsequent years.

Ms. Uzzell will meet with state officials on March 26 to resolve that and other minor issues about the charter.

"We are most concerned about having our own students be able to continue in the program," she said. "We're going to do our best to work with the state, to do everything that they require, but not give up what we're doing."

She hopes that the state will allow "first refusal" to the four-year-olds already in the program for the kindergarten spaces. "All of the public Montessori schools in the country do that," she said.

Sterling Montessori was selected from a list of 65 applicants by the State Board of Education in early February. Thirty-five schools made the first cut. All 35 were approved on March 13. They are the first charter schools in North Carolina.

The charter status allows children to apply and attend the private school as though it were a public school. The state will pay \$4,200 per child per year.

Mrs. Uzzell said she initially applied for the charter in order to make the school available to all children.

"We wanted it to be available to anyone who would want to come, regardless of financial availability," she said. "Since we had this opportunity, and it went along with the foundation that we had set up a few years ago to do scholarships, it fit right in with our philosophy."

Some of the preschool children have left the Montessori program to go to public school because of the cost of continuing, she said.

The two large, new buildings near Treybrooke Apartments opened February 3 and March 3. About 63 students moved into the first building in February and the other 151 moved from the Cary Montessori school in March.

Ms. Uzzell said she would have been doing many of the jobs she is doing whether the charter was approved or not.

"The busing grant is about the only thing I wouldn't have been doing," she said.

She is in need of three teachers, who will have to be both state certified and Montessori trained to qualify for the charter.

"I have several state certified teachers already," she said. "It won't be like starting from scratch." She also must hire several assistant teachers.

"We would have been a successful school without the charter," she said. "I think the most that this is going to change the school is it will require more paperwork for me," she said.

Under the Montessori program, students work individually at their own level with support from teachers, and grade levels are not as firm as in a traditional public school. Often students of several ages are grouped together.

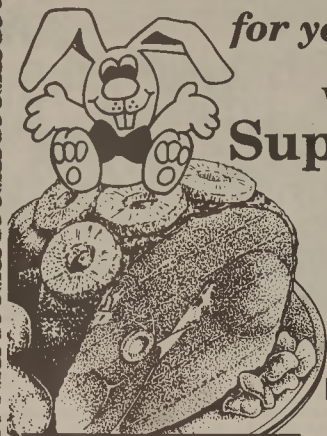
Ms. Uzzell hopes to add 37 more kindergarten spaces in the future. Under the charter, there will be 30 kindergarten spaces available this fall, 30 first grade spaces, and then the number will taper off for older elementary children.

"The bank is asking us if we want to borrow more money to continue building," she said. There are currently two large buildings on the campus.

Ms. Uzzell is considering building another classroom building to house additional students. Eventually, she hopes to build a cafeteria and gymnasium.

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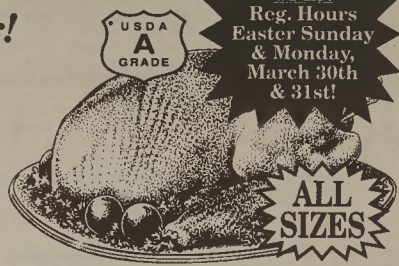
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