

# Charter Schools: Hope for African Americans?

from page 1

school systems in other counties, Robinson said. Neither Superintendent Ward nor Grova Bridgers, state director of charter schools, were available to comment on Robinson's contention that the state has set precedent with church dealings.

"As long as you don't leave the sanctuary and you have a non-sectarian program, you're okay," said Robinson.

Local businessman Simon Johnson's private school Quality Education Institute (QEI) leases from the Carver School Road Church of Christ, but if his new entity, Quality Education Academy (QEA), is approved by the state, it would be housed in a different building. Johnson said he was unaware of the debate regarding charter schools and church space, and added that it would not have made much difference with the creation of QEA.

"I pretty much felt that the church and schools would have to be separate," said Johnson, adding that he is unsure of the full implications of the clause. QEI's board never intended to apply for a public charter, he said. "We're doing too well as we are, and we didn't want to give that up," he added.

Johnson intends to have the same success with QEA. The public charter school would be modeled after QEI's year-round program, with a nine-hour academic day and enhanced curriculum that averages two years above the grade level. The new school would serve students in grades six through eight, and like the existing elementary school, would be open to all students.

Clause or no clause, the charter school applicants seem driven to improve on the existing educational system.

"[African Americans] don't think their kids are getting a fair

shake in public schools," said Geneva Brown, a member of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County school board, which approved QEA's application and one filed by county commissioner Earline Parmon for Lift Academy. Another African-American applicant, Hazel Mack, approached the State Board of Education directly and recently received preliminary approval.

In Forsyth County as well as nationally, black students have been targeted as a high risk group for poor academic performance and disciplinary problems. Every year, statistics place African-American youth as comprising well over half of the students who drop out or are suspended or expelled from school. Some see the problem as part of a widening cultural divide — and look for the solution within their own communities.

"When we begin to look at the gap between minority and majority kids, people say, 'Hey, let's try this,'" Brown said.

Mack is one of those ready to try something other than the existing school system, in which, she said, "mediocrity seems to be the code." A local attorney and mother of two children in the Forsyth County school system, she is one whose frustration with public schools does not end with the quality of education. "There are fewer and fewer black teachers in the school system," said Mack. "Our children can go from kindergarten to high school with one, maybe two black teachers in the process."

"I'm not saying everything about public schools is bad, but it doesn't meet all the needs of all children," said Mack. One of her children, she said, responds well to public school teaching methods and is in advanced placement classes. The other, though, requires a different approach to learning.

Noting the disparity between her two children, Mack became interested in alternatives to traditional learning. She held a public forum at the East Winston Library shortly after the General Assembly passed the North Carolina Charter Schools Act of 1996 in June. Initially, Mack only intended to educate parents about the new choices charter schools offered. "The turnout was great," she said. "I didn't want to leave it."

Mack and a board of five other parents drew up a plan for the Carter G. Woodson School of Challenge, named after the African-American historian and creator of Black History Month. The school's charter opens it to children in grades one through eight.

Charter schools offer the flexibility in organization and curriculum that Mack and others seek. The schools, essentially, are deregulated and governed directly by the community under nonprofit chartering entities. Like public schools, they are funded with local, state and federal monies for each student enrolled. The state's limit of 100 charter schools total and five for each local school district should maintain stability in the existing school system, while providing ample chartering opportunities.

Lift Academy's Parmon views the non-sectarian clause as inconsistent with the proposed freedom of charter schools. "You do have a lot of church schools not able to apply for charters," she said. "I can see a lot in the present legislation changing because a lot of it is ambiguous."

Parmon takes greater issue with the state requirements for charter schools, such as the ABCs standard. Like regulated public schools, a charter school would have to pass muster with state tests or face termination of its contract. Statewide, less than 30 percent of black males passed

both standardized school tests last year. Those students are the demographic population overwhelmingly served by Lift. The only alternative open to Parmon is to devise a testing system that exceeds the existing standards.

Lift Academy currently serves students in grades six through 12 who have been suspended or expelled from public schools. As a public charter school, Lift would be open to

any student who applied, but would maintain what Parmon calls a "school within a school" program geared toward children with disciplinary problems. The school now has a capacity of 25 students; Parmon intends to triple the space by next year.

New amendments may be introduced into charter school legislation, said Robinson. He expects that his party will support changes that will free up

restrictions on church-leased spaces. "I would like to be more optimistic that black Democrats will vote for those amendments," said Robinson.

The state board is reviewing each charter application on an individual basis. Although some applications, such as the Carter G. Woodson School, have received tentative approval, all decisions for final consent will be held until March 15.



St. Mark Baptist Church recently held a Queen-for-a-Night competition. Seated is Geraldine Moore, and standing are Mattie Walker, first runner-up; Susie Moore, second runner-up; and Cynthia Weston, second runner-up.

## St. Mark Baptist Church holds special events

St. Mark Baptist Church, 1100 Manley St. in Winston-Salem, where the Rev. James Falwood is pastor.

The president of the organization is Mattie Walker. The public is invited.

St. Mark will hold their 43rd church anniversary Sunday, March 2, at 4 p.m. Dr. H.C. Moore and members of Bible Way Baptist Church will be the guests. All church members and guests are invited to attend.

Sunday, Feb. 23, at 7:30 p.m. The Rev. Waldo Hauser and the members of Freedom Baptist Church will be the guests. The public is invited to attend, and to dress in old-fashion attire.

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