

## 3 more charter schools proposed

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### Document Text

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WARWICK - Applications for three new charter schools, including a proposed Internet-based elementary program, have been submitted to the state, despite a moratorium that bars Rhode Island from opening any more schools of this kind.

All three schools - two in Warwick, one in either Bristol or Warren - call for innovative education models. First on the list is a proposed elementary school that's being billed as Rhode Island's only "virtual school," meaning it would be conducted in part over the Internet. The Village Green would be geared toward homeschooled children and their parents.

The second, a high school, would be affiliated with the Community College of Rhode Island. Students would receive college preparation and earn higher-education credits.

The final plan calls for a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school that emphasizes the whole child. Sound Mind, Sound Body as it would be known, would focus on the importance of physical and psychological wellness in a science-based curriculum.

Submission of the applications is largely symbolic. A state-imposed ban on charter schools prevents Rhode Island from forming any new ones through mid-2008. But Governor Carcieri and Education Commissioner Peter McWalters have stated that they would like to see that moratorium lifted to increase the diversity of alternative education options, particularly in urban areas.

Steve Nardelli, Rhode Island League of Charter Schools executive director, says he hopes the proposals will jump-start a statewide conversation about relaxing the moratorium as soon as possible. Even if that doesn't happen, it takes a few years for charter schools to move from the idea stage to full operation, so it's important to start the application process as soon as possible, he said. Provided the moratorium ends, as expected, in 2008, all three schools would be ready to open that fall.

"We are very pleased there are people out there who continue to be innovative and propose opportunities to do things in education to provide choices for the 2,800 students who are now on [charter school] waiting lists, despite the moratorium," Nardelli said.

Eleven charter schools currently operate in Rhode Island, each serving up its own education style with academic focuses that range from the arts to construction. What ties all charter schools together is their commitment to offering public alternatives that increase options for parents and children. Frequently, they are geared toward students whose needs may not be met in mainstream public schools, and they often use non-traditional instructional methods.

In recent years, Internet-based college courses have found a foothold in mainstream higher education. But an elementary school on the Web is a more complex matter.

League of Charter Schools President Robert Pilkington, who has proposed The Village Green, acknowledges that e-learning (essentially classes over the Internet) isn't for every child. Yet for youngsters who may be floundering in traditional elementary schools, or homeschoolers whose parents are looking for a more structured curriculum, e-learning provides an interesting alternative, said Pilkington, who currently serves as principal of Woonsocket's Beacon Charter School.

As part of The Village Green program, teaching coaches would visit homes, providing instructional work for children and their parents before leaving them with Internet-based assignments, according to the application. Periodically, students would also visit the school site, in Warwick, for group activities.

The idea is to add a sense of community to home-based education. State statistics show that the number of homeschooled children has grown in recent years. Approximately 0.5 percent of all children in Rhode Island are now homeschooled.

But homeschooling can limit a student's social interactions, which are considered important components in early education. The new model would help a child "to progress socially as an active, helpful contributing member of the learning community," the application says.

The concept of Internet-based education in Rhode Island is still in its infancy. The Department of Education has no policy regarding distance or Internet learning, according to spokesman Elliot Krieger.

"This is a new area for us. We have never examined the pluses or minuses of distance learning," Krieger said. "We haven't been faced with it the way some other states have."

Nardelli acknowledges that e-learning is complicated. "I have some concerns about the concept," he said. "But that's what charter schools are all about - innovation."

Innovation is also a factor in Pilkington's second proposed school, The Middle College high school.

In the past decade, middle colleges - high schools affiliated with colleges - have cropped up nationwide. Here in Rhode Island, officials, including the governor, have emphasized the importance of a seamless transition from high school to college.

Pilkington's plan calls for enrolling high school students in CCRI classes starting in the 10th grade. The school's structure would be similar to a university format. Students would take classes in their disciplines, but they'd also have a support structure. By "bridging the divide between high school and college in a common physical setting," the application reads, students, particularly low-income and first-generation students, get a leg up on earning a college degree.

"Among their goals are to eliminate time wasted on nonessential courses and activities during the junior and senior years of high school and to provide students with appropriate adult guidance and support through their first two years of college," it adds.

The school building would be located along the retail stretch of Route 2 in Warwick, in close proximity to CCRI.

Rounding out the list of proposed schools is Sound Mind, Sound Body, to be located within the Bristol-Warren school district. "The founding partners of Sound Mind, Sound Body believe that student success is deeply connected to the physical, emotional and cognitive needs that they have at different stages," the application states.

Academically, the school would focus on math, science and technology, integrating that idea of the mind-body connection into the various academic subjects. Jane Carlson-Pickering, a retired teacher who is proposing the school, says there would be small classes and lots of personal attention. There are currently no charter schools in the East Bay part of the state.

An application for a fourth charter school - a middle school in Central Falls - is expected to be filed soon, Nardelli said.

The Education Department has not yet decided how much staff time to devote to reviewing any charter school applications, given the moratorium, according to Krieger.

Evaluating charter school applications can be a labor-intensive process, he said. Each review requires a major investment of time and staff resources. In the past, the state has handled only about two applications a year.

"It would really be a question of how much staff time the commissioner wants to devote before the moratorium is lifted," he said.

"But I think it was probably the right idea to get those applications in as a placeholder. Even if they don't move forward right away, getting that work done makes their case stronger."

The fate of the state-imposed moratorium remains unclear. The ban went into effect in 2004 over worries about financing and teacher unionization. It has since been extended such that no new charter schools may operate through the 2007-2008 school year.

Last week, Governor Carcieri reiterated his desire that the moratorium be repealed. When asked about the Warwick proposals, however, Carcieri emphasized that "the real need" for new charter schools lies in the state's urban areas.

Nardelli says the League of Charter Schools plans to submit legislation to the General Assembly this term calling for an early repeal, and asking that no more extensions be granted. But Sen. Daniel J. Issa, D-Central Falls, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, said it is too early to tell whether there is enough support for either request.

"I'm a proponent of charter schools. I think they have their necessary place in the system. But what we need to do is find out what the opposition is. I don't think people are specifically opposed to charter schools. I think there are questions about funding and maybe some misunderstandings about whether it hurts the public schools," Issa said.

As do many public school administrators, Warwick Schools Supt. Robert Shapiro says he worries that the proposed charters will do little more than drain education funds. "I cannot support these programs as presented, because I don't think they meet our needs," he said, adding that he's not interested "in siphoning money from the public schools for a new program unless it meets our needs." If the schools were tailored for the district's at-risk population, he said he would be willing to take a second look.

But Mayor Scott Avedisian has expressed support for the proposed charters, in light of the fact that Warwick offers few alternatives for non-traditional students. "We need alternative education programs," Avedisian said. "Rob Pilkington is addressing that problem. He's doing something about it." The mayor added that he would like to see the program accept as many Warwick students as possible.

Pilkington says the proposed charter schools, and those already operating around the state, are not interested in "taking away" students who are happy in traditional schools. "When we talk about the proposed schools, we are hoping they will have a statewide draw. Warwick is just a location," he said. "Then again, you can't tell me that out of 12,000 kids in a school system like Warwick's, there aren't 25 to 30 of them that aren't looking for something different."

That's what successful charter schools are all about, he said, providing options.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

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