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Beacon Charter School hits two milestones

BY JOSEPH B. NADEAU

WOONSOCKET — The Beacon Charter High School at 330 Main St. reached two milestones when it opened its doors to the new school year this week.

The school has hit the maximum number of students, 225, allowed under its state-issued charter as an independent 4-year public high school, and will also make full use of its home in the former ARC of Northern Rhode Island headquarters building for the first time.

The expansion to full use of all levels of the ARC building was completed over the summer as Beacon added a new film studio and additional culinary arts, business, and computer lab space on the top floor of the school. The added space became available when Beacon's landlord, the Homestead Group, moved its offices into other Homestead properties.

The additions also include the hiring of six new staff members to address Beacon's graduated growth to its charter-set maximum student population. Beacon offers a curriculum with majors in the Theatre and Performance Arts, Culinary Arts and Visual Arts along with a core curriculum of academics for all students.

"It's going really well," Michael Skeldon, Beacon's Academic Dean, said Thursday of the school's return to classes after a summer that had also



Beacon Charter students take notes during Carol Mowry's Spanish class Thursday held in one of several new classrooms on the third and fourth floors of the Main Street school.

Photo/Ernest A. Brown

seen students on campus.

Beacon, like other high schools in the state, is pushing hard to raise student achievement on state student assessment. Although meeting yearly progress goals for math and reading, Beacon still needs to show improvement in student writing skills, according to Skeldon.

To address that need, Beacon offered students a chance to do summer work in

writing during a three-day seminar at the school the second week of August.

The camp was well attended and will be followed up with additional efforts to improve writing skills during the school year, including writing sessions on Saturdays, Skeldon said.

Students will be completing writing projects during the sessions with a teacher and also participate in peer editing and review discussions of their

work. "A teacher will be working with them, but students also learn by looking at each other's work," he said.

The school also has designed English language arts, Math and Science coaches that will also work with students to continue achievement in those subject areas, Skeldon said.

As the school has grown from the original class of 40 students when the school

opened in the former George Street School in 2003-2004, it has also begun attracting students from a growing number of Rhode Island communities, according to Christina Go, head of the school's operations and admissions.

This year Beacon still draws a majority of its students from Woonsocket — 116 — but also has a good share of its students coming from Pawtucket, Cumberland, Burrillville, Lincoln and North Smithfield. Other students have traveled to Beacon from Providence, North Providence, Johnston and even Coventry, Go noted.

For many students, Beacon's arts-based curriculum is the main draw, but the school is also known for a personalized approach to instruction. The school's small size allows Beacon's staff to understand their student's needs better than might be possible in a larger school and the students themselves seem to work hard at making their peers feel welcome in the school.

Cody King of Woonsocket, a senior attending Uriah Donnelly's "Film as a Cultural Lens" film studies class Thursday, said he liked his school because of its size. "It's different from other schools in that it's not so crowded and has small classrooms and small learning environments," he said.

The school requires seniors to complete a "capstone project" video as part of their graduation requirements and King said he was taking the class

offered by Donnelly, a new member of Beacon's staff, to learn more about filmmaking. Donnelly, who also teaches a film studies class at Rhode Island College, was introducing his students to a Buster Keaton film, "The General" from 1926, as an introduction to silent films.

"Their capstone project is autobiographical so I will be showing them some of the styles and techniques of filmmaking during the class to help them with their projects. Silent films give students an understanding of how to show action or emotion through visual methods, according to Donnelly. "You don't always have to say everything that you want to express in a film," he said. "A lot of times it's better to show it," he said.

In the Culinary Arts department Thursday, Chef Melissa Riccio, was planning a film connection of sorts for her students in the weeks ahead. A longtime fan of Chef Julia Childs, Riccio said she plans to work a number of Childs' recipes into her students' cooking projects this semester and then have the students add a focus on Childs herself.

Childs is once again in vogue thanks to the new movie "Julia," but Riccio said there has always been something to learn from this complex chef who not only wrote a popular set of cooking books

See CHARTER, Page A-2

Reed: multi-prong

Final final...

Blackstone Valley

Sunday, September 6, 2009



Photo/Ernest A. Brown

Peter Bouzan, who is studying in the culinary arts program at the Beacon Charter schools over his class notes and recipes Thursday in one of the new classrooms.

Charter

Continued from Page A-1

and appeared in cooking television shows but had also been the first woman ever invited to attend the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu School of cooking in Paris.

"She was my favorite chef and I already knew her story so I was happy to be able to work this into my classes this year," Riccio said.

The Childs projects will conclude with students actually scripting out their own skit of a Childs cooking show, she said, a project giving them an opportunity to combine writing with their culinary skills.

"We always try to make it fresh," Riccio said.

As she left to catch her bus for the ride home to Pawtucket Thursday, Jasmine

Washington, an 11th grader, said the start school couldn't have been better. "It's awesome," the culinary student said of the new school year at Beacon.

Keenan Williams, a senior theater student said it didn't really feel like his last year at the school yet and seemed like he was still just a junior Thursday.

"It's odd, it is like I never left," Williams said. That feeling may change soon enough as his senior year builds speed and the workload piles up, he noted. "I know it's going to get tough, but I think I'll make it," he said. The school's size helps and it also helps that he gets along with everyone at the school, Williams said. "It's great," he said.

Another theater student, 11th grader Bryana Boucher, said she likes Beacon because the school is different "and it's alright to be different here."

Boucher said she didn't have much experience in the theater when she arrived at Beacon but that didn't hinder her teachers. "They were so welcoming, it didn't matter how much experience I had,"

she said.

"It's not just a theater group here, it's a theater family," Boucher said.

Like the rest of her peers in the school, Boucher is likely to find a busy year ahead of her, according to Skeldon. The theater program will be working on a production of the Diary of Anne Frank as its major theater project. The effort is expected to include performances in the Stadium Theater across the street, the school's occasional auditorium and stage, and also in house performances for area middle school students who attend for a field trip.

And when the seniors graduate next spring, Skeldon said he is certain they will all be headed to a college, art or technical school for the next round of their educations.

"Our classes are taught creatively but students are still taught traditional academics here," he said.

nch

From Page A-1

ating/cooling bills. With 50 semifinalists

required to "invent" something and present it in October. "Hugh is very excited. We're all excited," says his mother.

communication skills in their videos. The hitled down to just is with Burrillville's h Finch among that group.

The excitement level in the Finch household has been high ever since a representative of Discovery Education and 3M called Hugh in August to tell him he was a finalist.

competing on Oct. 6 are:

- * Marina Dimitrov, Bozeman, Mont., Sacajawea Middle School
- * Devin Dwyer, Northport, N.Y., Northport Middle School
- * Nikita Gaurav, Beaverton, Ore., Valley Catholic Middle School
- * Emily Grover, Lehi, Utah

Time to act on health care,

Democratic negotiator says

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate's chief Democratic negotiator on a health care bill is indicating it's time to act and has told his colleagues he won't wait

In a call from Camp David, the presidential retreat in the Maryland, Obama spoke to leaders of Congressional Progressive Caucuses and have been working on a pared-back bill that would cost under \$1 trillion over 10 years and drop contentious components, such as the government-sponsored insur-