

Beacon Charter High School expanding, nearly full

By **LOUISE TETREAU**
Valley Breeze Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET – Beacon Charter High School is alive and growing.

Despite a rocky financial history that nearly closed the school two years ago, Beacon officials are projecting a small surplus for the second consecutive year and announced plans to expand to the third floor of the four-story building located at 320 Main St.

On the administrative side, the school was cited as a resource for other school districts writing the student support section of proficiency-based graduation requirements.

Beacon is also looking ahead to another milestone. It will graduate its first group of students who have spent all four years of high school at Beacon Charter High School – in all its locations.

It's been only six months since students and faculty moved into the John E. Moran building but Principal Bob Pilkington says the staff and students are comfortable.

"It feels as though it has been a long time since we've been here," said Pilkington. "The memories of George Street are lesser and lesser with each passing day."

Added Admissions and Operations Manager Tina Go, "It feels like we fit here. We never felt it (the George Street location) was ours. We have ownership now. It feels like home."

The Beacon Charter School community started its year without a home. Plans to move into the Main Street building were put off when delays in the approval process for the necessary construction permits occurred.

While waiting for construction to be completed culinary students were headquartered in the commercial kitchen at St.



A view of the second floor at the Beacon Charter High School. The vast space has been divided into classrooms and lockers act as hallway dividers for students. Plans to convert the third floor are now under way.

Valley Breeze photo by Louise Tetreault

Ann Arts and Cultural Center on Cumberland Street while theater students worked out of the Stadium Theatre and art students went to the Boys & Girls Club.

In October the school began operating at its new location using 16,000 square feet of space on the first and second floors. With a steady enrollment and the desire to expand, Pilkington said he began discussing the possibility of taking over the third floor from the Homestead Group that owns the building.

The principal said plans have been discussed that would see Homestead give up its fourth floor occupancy by mid-July allowing Beacon to renovate and expand for the fall.

Pilkington said building officials said the two organizations could not occupy the building in its present state without there being one floor empty between them

The third floor will be renovated to create visual studio space for the art program, a rehearsal and small theater space for the theater program and two more classrooms, Pilkington said.

Financially, the project will cost the school \$51,000 extra; a number Pilkington said is well within their budget.

This year the school was allowed by the Rhode Island Department of Education to enroll 140 students. They have maintained an average of 130-plus throughout the year, according to Go.

Next year the school is allowed to enroll 180 students but Pilkington said the board and faculty have agreed to keep enrollment at no more than 165 students.

"It was a building-wide consensus with the board – where do our economics have to be? One hundred and eighty isn't

necessary to get us to sustain," said Pilkington. "It's a luxury problem to have."

Go said the freshmen and senior classes are full for next year and that anyone seeking a seat in those classes will be put on a waiting list.

There are only three seats left in the sophomore and junior classes.

"We will be developing a waiting list," said Go. "I'm expecting a lottery next year."

Interestingly, Beacon is able to make its numbers despite having the lowest per pupil cost among all charter schools in the state according to Pilkington.

According to his data, Beacon's average cost per student is \$10,052.

At the end of the 2005-2006 academic year, Beacon showed \$117,866 surplus which Pilkington said was

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used to open and stock the new school. The numbers are astounding given the school posted a \$157,106 deficit in the previous academic year.

This year, Pilkington said he anticipates the school will have closer to a \$10,000 surplus.

Beacon's success has not gone unnoticed. According to data collected by the Information Works! the school ranked second out of 53 schools by students for having a safe and supportive environment; was in the top tier for recruiting and supporting teachers; ranked third in teaching practices; ranked third in engaging families and communities, and was selected by the Rhode Island Department of Education as an exemplar district in supporting students in the Performance Based Graduation Requirements.

But the school isn't poised to rest on its laurels. Pilkington said the school has recently signed on to participate in standardized testing beyond

what is required by the state.

Not satisfied with receiving state results nearly a year after students take the tests, Pilkington said school officials decided to conduct testing developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association which will not only give the student immediate feedback on his or her strengths and needs, but will also help faculty develop personalized learning plans.

"NWEA is an online Web-based adaptive test in reading comprehension, language usage, math reasoning and math computation," said Pilkington. "Kids know at the end of the test how they did. In 72 hours the school has it."

By having up-to-the-minute data, Pilkington said students and teachers will be challenged to see improvement from test to test. Tests will be given twice a year.

"We're talking about skill development," he continued. "It's a whole cultural shift on how kids and adults teach to each other in school. It's about where you are with your skills and where you want to be."