

## **Plan could keep charter school open –**

**A new head of school and a partnership with Johnson & Wales are two components in a proposal that would allow Woonsocket's BEACON Charter School to amend its charter and remain open.**

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BY CYNTHIA NEEDHAM Journal Staff Writer

WOONSOCKET -- The BEACON Charter School may get a second chance with an amended charter that would be granted by the state's Board of Regents. This latest option was disclosed yesterday after a meeting at the Department of Education. It comes on the heels of Governor Carcieri's acknowledgement that he hopes to find a way to save the school.

On Thursday, BEACON officials will present proposed amendments to their school charter at a Board of Regents subcommittee meeting.

The substance of that plan, while not yet completed, will involve an academic and administrative partnership with Johnson & Wales University. Rhode Island League of Charter Schools President Robert Pilkington will also take over as head of school.

BEACON lawyer Thomas M. Dickinson declined to provide any additional specifics.

Yesterday's closed-door meeting with state officials left many in the BEACON community hopeful, but confused. Throughout the summer, the state Department of Education appeared the school's biggest critic. The state chastised the school for mismanaging its finances, saying it would be "irresponsible" to allow the school to remain open.

On Friday, it seemed that fate had been sealed. In a sharply worded decision, an independent state hearing officer upheld the Department of Education's position that the high school voluntarily surrendered its charter at the end of school in June, after a series of financial setbacks.

But in a dramatic shift late yesterday, Jennifer Wood, chief of staff at the Department of Education, said the state met with BEACON officials to

provide "technical assistance," essentially shepherding them through the amendment process.

Asked about this change, Wood explained that when it comes to Rhode Island's 11 charter schools, the state wears two hats. It is at once a regulator and resource for these schools.

BEACON officials, who have sharply criticized the state for its hard-line stance, also softened yesterday. Dickinson thanked Wood and the state for "giving BEACON whatever assistance [they] need to get on course."

Even more surprising, both sides agreed that the option of amending the charter has always been there, but it simply wasn't acted on.

It remains unclear why neither side pursued the amendment route previously, and why they suddenly agreed to work together. Neither would acknowledge whether the governor's interest in this school, and in Rhode Island's overall charter school movement, played a role.

Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal, when asked whether the governor had stepped in and requested that the state give the school a second chance, reiterated that the governor has been supportive of efforts to keep the school open.

He's not the only one. Since the school's financial troubles were first publicized this spring, many have rallied behind it, including Woonsocket Mayor Susan D. Menard and state Sen. Marc A. Cote, D-Woonsocket.

With its art and business-based curriculum, BEACON offers a unique educational alternative, supporters say. And because it's the only charter school north of Pawtucket, it draws students from Providence to Burrillville.

But since opening in 2003, the school has struggled financially. Like all Rhode Island charter schools, it is free from many of the bureaucratic rules that can bog down traditional public schools, but it still relies on the state for operating money.

In September last year, BEACON overestimated its enrollment by more than 50 students, leaving it with a smaller-than-expected operating budget from the state that threatened a \$280,000 deficit.

After months of warnings, the state stepped in and offered an ultimatum. It

would give the school the extra money it needed to finish the year, provided the school give up its charter when the year ended.

Reluctantly, BEACON officials agreed, later asking the state for a second chance. But the Education Department insisted that the school officials' pattern of financial mistakes showed that they were not qualified to run their own affairs.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Education Reform, of the approximately 3,400 charter schools nationwide, less than 10 percent have closed. Of those, about half have shuttered for financial reasons.

In Rhode Island, charter school amendments are not unusual, Wood said yesterday. Of the state's 11 charter schools, at least 3 have amended their charters as they've grown and changed.

But often, these amendments take time -- something BEACON simply doesn't have. To open in less than three weeks, BEACON's amendments must be approved at the Board of Regents' next meeting on Aug. 26.