

Regents allow charter school to reopen – Woonsocket's BEACON Charter School will be on probation and must meet several financial conditions by Sept. 12.

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PROVIDENCE -- A yearlong struggle to save the BEACON Charter School ended in victory last night as the state's Board of Regents voted to allow the school to reopen this fall.

But the decision will leave the school on a probationary status, full of financial conditions that must be met before school starts on Sept. 12.

"We will be watching them very closely, based on the history of the school so far," said Gary A. Grove, a member of the Board of Regents.

In order to open, the high school will be required to pay off the approximately \$82,000 debt it has accrued this summer, secure a line of credit to prevent future financial troubles like the ones that forced it to close this spring and cap its student body at 115. It must also agree to stringent quarterly reviews by the state's Board of Regents until its current charter expires three years from now.

"It's a little more restrictive than we might have hoped, however we're very happy," Robert Pilkington, head of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools and newly appointed BEACON director, said after the vote.

But no one doubted that last night was indeed a win. The only charter school north of Pawtucket was saved, leaving Rhode Island among the few states nationwide that has never shuttered any of its charter schools.

Even the probationary status seemed not to faze Pilkington. "In a sense, charter schools are always on probation. We trade freedom for results and accountability and that's the way it is," he said. Charter schools are widely believed to differ from regular public schools in that they are free of some of the bureaucratic restraints that hamper those systems.

The Board of Regents last night praised the school's academic strides and its

new academic partnership with Johnson & Wales University, stressing that their concerns were strictly financial.

For the most part, BEACON has already identified answers to most of the state's demands. The Woonsocket City Council has agreed to pay \$50,000 of the outstanding debt with the remainder of the money to be paid out of pocket by two individual guarantors, real estate developers D. Wayne Daniel of Coventry-based AMC Construction Inc., and Edward L. Maggiacomo Jr.

The pair have also promised to issue the roughly \$225,000 line of credit (15 percent of the school's approximately \$1.5-million operating budget).

Provided the state's auditor general signs off on the school's amended budget, as is required by state law, the school is set to open on Sept. 12. Parents have already signed commitment forms promising to enroll their high schoolers in the arts and business-based charter school.

Still, the message from the state was clear: Stumble again and you're finished.

"I cannot in good faith or good employment go back to the governor with another supplemental request [for cash] this spring," state Education Commissioner Peter McWalters said. "That cannot happen."

After a series of financial troubles last year that left the state footing BEACON's deficit, a state hearing officer ruled this summer that the school would not be allowed to reopen. But then the Johnson & Wales plan emerged and Governor Carcieri went public with his wishes that the school be saved. Two weeks ago, the Board of Regents stepped in for a final ruling.

Board member Colleen A. Callahan, the only member in attendance to vote against allowing the school to reopen, insisted strict financial oversight is imperative to reassuring parents that the school is capable.

The Board of Regents also demanded that school stop worrying about moving to a fancy new headquarters in downtown Woonsocket and spend the next year focused solely on academics.

Oddly, that was the sticking point for BEACON officials, who otherwise heartily agreed to the board's requests. The lure of a new school, they

explained, would help in their recruiting efforts.

But again, the state was firm. Outside consultants will be allowed to do what they want when it comes to fundraising, but school leaders must concentrate on students.

"We believe that the limitations we've added will only strengthen the possibility that this school will be effective in the short run and extremely successful in the long run," Regents Chairman James A. DiPrete said.

Shortly after the vote last night, Governor Carcieri issued a statement commending the Regents and praising BEACON's efforts to help save itself.

"The real work begins in the next 10 weeks when you have to get this place open and going," McWalters said in closing.

"I couldn't be happier," Pilkington said. "I know I'm moving into a hard position [as head of school], but this is a school that never stopped believing in itself and that's the kind of place I want to be a part of."