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Sussex County Charter School begins \$5.2 million project



Photo by Amy Paterson/New Jersey Herald
Work continues at the site of the new \$5.2 million Sussex Charter School.

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SPARTA — After 13 years paying their dues leasing space at a high school, Sussex County Charter School for Technology broke ground this week to build its own \$5.2 million school on state Route 94.

The charter school has leased space at the Sussex County Technical School since 1997, but with both schools expanding class sizes, it was time to find a new home.

About two miles north of the charter school's current location, Principal Jill Eckel, 50, stood in the mud as bulldozers dug into the

ground on the 3.88-acre property. "Hopefully, this will be a good pilot for other charter schools," Eckel said.

The new school will have three separate buildings on the same property — a math, science, and humanities building, fine arts building, and a multi-purpose building — and initially is mainly paid for by the non-profit Real Estate Advisory and Development Services, or READS.

Metuchen-based READS is a real estate development and consulting firm that specializes in securing funding for community development projects.

The charter school will lease the building from READS until it is financially able to purchase it.

With the help of READS, the charter school is applying for a U.S. Department of Agriculture's Facilities Loan and Grant Program for rural communities.

"Lenders are uncomfortable because they feel (charter schools) won't be able to pay the loan back. So, that's where we come in," said READS President Brian Keenan.

The USDA program will help pay for the rest of the project through a \$1.5 million loan and \$1.5 million guarantee.

The charter school has been in session for New Jersey seventh- and eighth-grade students since 1997 and added a sixth grade program in September 2008. The current enrollment of 150 students is expected to increase to 200 for the next school year.

Students from Sparta are admitted first, but all other New Jersey students must enter a raffle each December for the chance to attend. Because charter schools are public schools, students are not required to pay tuition.

In addition to New Jersey core curriculum standards, the charter school students take technology courses in laboratory science, computer aided drafting, commercial art and computer literacy.

"It's basically a public school that feels like a private one," said Eckel, who has been teaching at the school since its inception and has been principal for five years. Eckel said the main selling points of the school are the small class sizes (usually about 25 students) and the experimental nature of its programs.

Terry Rocko, whose son, Joseph, attended the school for seventh and eighth grade and whose daughter, Saide, is now enrolled, said the school changed her son's "typical teenage middle school attitude."

"He actually enjoyed going to school," said Rocko, about her son who is now enrolled at high school across the street from his old school at Sussex County Technical School. He may find himself in his former school building next year as Sussex Tech plans to use the soon-to-be vacant charter school for extra classrooms.

The modular units used for the new charter school buildings will be delivered in March and the interior work will take place from April to June. Administrators of the charter school plan to have the building done in time for

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