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Charter School unveils new building

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Teaneck Suburbanite

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Bulldozers were in the parking lot and workers on scaffolds on Friday making certain that the Teaneck Community Charter School's new building at 563 Chestnut St. is ready for the opening of classes on Wednesday, Sept. 9.

The two-story, 37,000-square foot building rose only 11 months after ground breaking in October 2008.

The building contains 18 classrooms, an art room, resource room, language room, library-media center, cafeteria/auditorium and office space. Funding is being sought to add a gymnasium. The project cost \$9.9 million, including \$2.7 million to acquire the land and \$5.2 million for site preparation, financing and carrying costs.

Charter School Executive Director Rex Shaw said he has been told that the building is the first new public school built in Teaneck in 50 years.

From its inception in 1998, two years after the state legislature approved the establishment of charter schools, the Teaneck Community Charter School had been renting space at the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva on Palisades Avenue for 11 years.

But the rent, which Shaw said had reached \$700,000 a year, was too costly. With its own building, the school is in a better financial position, Shaw said.

The charter school serves approximately 300 children from grades K-8. Most are from Teaneck, but a few live in other districts. Shaw said that children who attended the charter school for two years are permitted to continue even if they move.

Admission is strictly by lottery chosen every January. However, siblings of current students are moved to the front.

Last year, 159 applications were entered for 32 kindergarten spaces.

By state law, charter schools are funded at the rate of 90 percent of the cost of a

pupil in the regular district. But Shaw said that recent changes have reduced that amount to 75 percent.

He described the school as a constructivist in its approach to education.

"We empower children. We encourage children to talk and participate in their education," Shaw explained, comparing the school to a Japanese learning center or a Montessori school.

"The children are encouraged to come up with problems and we teach them to think and to learn what they need to know to solve problems," he said.

Class size is small, averaging 16 pupils. The school emphasizes hands-on learning and sponsors numerous field trips. Instead of standard grade levels, with the exception of kindergarten, two grades share a classroom and teacher.

"In the traditional public school, it is assumed that if a pupil is seven, he or she is at the second grade level. But we have a curriculum that allows us to go up and down so that we can serve the children more appropriately," Shaw said.

He noted that with a 60 percent African-American, 38 percent white and two percent Asian and Hispanic enrollment, the charter school more accurately reflects the racial demographics of the township than the regular district. About 50 percent of charter school graduates go on to private or parochial schools. The 50 percent who enter Teaneck High School, he said, are competitive with other students. Shaw noted that two THS 2008 graduates who went through the charter school will be starting their freshmen years at Cornell University and Muhlenberg College this fall.

For many years, the Chestnut Street site was occupied by an unused warehouse and, on the southeast corner, by the old Sheffield Dairy building, which closed in the 1950s. Both buildings were demolished.

"We needed to take the Sheffield building down because the old wood supports were rotted," Shaw said.

Parent Doug Kutfer's three children are in the charter school.

"When our youngest son was entering school, we were looking for a school that has small class sizes and that would have an intimate environment where the teachers all knew my children," said Kutfer, whose wife teaches in the school. "And it has worked out that way. From K-8 the school is a small family of parents and students who all know each other and look out for each other."

Shaw, who has a doctorate in education, began his career as a social studies teacher, moved onto special education and later became director of clinical services for the City of Newark where he supervised a staff of 300. He spent 14

years in private industry before coming to the charter school in 1998 on a one-year contract to help it get started. He has remained there since.

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