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Charter school plans to expand

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Last year, music and art teachers at Greater Brunswick Charter School had to shuttle between classrooms a mile apart.

Attending assemblies required a long trek: Students in rented classrooms at Middlesex County College on New Street in New Brunswick walked the distance to the school's main campus on Joyce Kilmer Avenue.

Now, to avoid the schlepping and to create a more unified atmosphere for the K-8 school, founded in 1998, officials are expanding their main campus. Nine classrooms, a kitchen, and a gym are some of the features of the planned new space, expected to be ready for use by December 2010, said Michael DeBlasio, operations director.

The New Brunswick Planning Board approved the school's proposal during its regular meeting last week.

Expansion was part of the school's original plans a decade ago, DeBlasio said. Enrollment today is 293 students, and the school projects an enrollment of 360 in five years, he said.

Currently the school occupies half of a former industrial building on a lot the school owns. For years, the school rented the other half of the building, the side closest to Joyce Kilmer Avenue, to a T-shirt company and a sign-printing company, DeBlasio said. The school is using that space now for storage.

Plans are to expand into that remaining half of the property, a roughly 19,000 square-foot space, which is in an industrial area across the street from a retail center and homes.

For school trustee Jessica Tomkins, of Milltown, the expansion means more revenue coming from the state because the school will be teaching more students.

"It allows us to get into a more sustainable place," said Tomkins, parent of a third-grader at the school. She especially likes the new planned art room, with natural light, "things we can offer to all the kids by having a few more kids," she said.

Renovation costs are expected to be between \$3.1 million and \$3.4 million, and the school plans to take out a

loan to pay for the project, DeBlasio said.

Construction would begin in December and end roughly a year later, he said. School officials aren't worried the construction will create noise or air pollution and disrupt classes, and workers would put up protective sheets and soundproofing, he said.

"The disturbance will be minimal," DeBlasio said.

Visible from Joyce Kilmer Avenue will be two classrooms with a glass exterior, "a pretty beautiful design," he said. The school's entrance will remain on the side of the building close to where it is today, he said.

This year the school moved its rented middle-school classrooms from the New Street location to across the street, at 35 Elizabeth St., in a retail center near a beauty supply store, he said. After the expansion, no rented classrooms will be necessary, he said.

Students attending the Greater Brunswick Charter School live in New Brunswick, Highland Park, Edison, and 12 other school districts in Middlesex, Somerset, and Union counties.

Like all charter schools in New Jersey, the school's regular operations are run independently but curriculum must meet state standards.

The state funds the school's budget but only offers about 80 percent of the average per-pupil rate in public schools.

The school's emphasis is on tailoring educational programs for each child, based on learning style and interests, DeBlasio said.

Tomkins said she chose the school in part because of its tight-knit community and high level of parental involvement.

"People pitch in to weed the garden -- it's a very exciting place," she said.

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