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Sussex charter school is looking to grow

As it expands, it will make a major move

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A decade ago, Imogen Smith was a student in the Sussex County Charter School for Technology's first eighth-grade graduating class.

After finishing high school and college, Smith was looking for a job a few years ago and saw an ad for a teaching position at her alma mater. It had long been off her radar, but she still had fond memories of it and was excited by the idea of teaching at the charter school.

"I loved the fact that it was small. I loved the fact that you had two teachers at a time in class. I loved the community feeling and atmosphere," Smith recalled of her days as a student. "When I came back (to teach), I was absolutely amazed at how far it had come. I was really impressed."

The charter school has come far and is on the move.

From its inception, the charter school has occupied rented space at Sussex County Technical School on Route 94 in Sparta, where charter classes and offices are housed in a dome and some labs and teachers from the tech school are shared. Here, the charter school has been quietly plugging along and growing, and now is embarking on an ambitious expansion/relocation plan to a building to be constructed two miles up the road.

Charter school principal Jill Eckel, who has been with the school from the start, first as a teacher and now as principal, said of the plan, "It's really exciting -- and a little scary. We like our nice dome here, but we just can't fit into the space we have anymore."

One of the first crop of 13 charter schools to open in New Jersey in 1997, the school is now among some 51 charter schools in the state that together educate 15,000 students.

It began with only seventh- and eighth-graders, but its second charter renewal by the state, in 2006, allowed over a five-year period the addition of a sixth grade, (which began this year with 25 pupils), expansion of facilities and a doubling of enrollment, up to 200 students total.

A new charter school building is to be constructed by a nonprofit firm, Real Estate Advisory and Development Services Inc. of Metuchen, which has helped arrange financing and develop facilities for 19 charter schools in the state. The Sussex partnership is being called the first of its kind in the state because the consulting firm would for the first time become a charter-school landlord. The goal is for the firm to eventually sell the building to the Sussex charter school.

In a \$4.5 million project, the firm signed an agreement two weeks ago with a private landowner to buy three acres on Route 94 in Sparta. READS now will construct a modular building there and rent it to the charter school. Construction is expected to begin in the spring and be completed by March 2010, and the charter school would relocate to the new building for the 2010-11 school year. The goal is that the firm would eventually sell the building to the charter school, in five to seven years.

"There are multiple benefits to this arrangement for Sussex Charter School Technology," company president/CEO Brian Keenan said in a statement. "It can stay focused on educating its students, knowing that READS will be doing all the heavy lifting when it comes to the development of their new school facility. They'll also have control over the design, so that the finished facility is all that they dream it will be."

The charter school had been approved for 100 students, or 50 each in seventh and eighth grades. Under the 2006 renewal, enrollment was allowed to rise to 125 students this year, by adding 25 sixth-graders. Enrollment would rise again, to 150 pupils in 2009-10, by adding 25 seventh-graders. For 2010-11, the school can enlist 200 students, or 50 in sixth grade and 75 each in seventh and eighth grades.

Charter schools, which stem from legislation passed in 1996, are publicly funded, but operate under charter with the state and are independent of local districts. Under law, public school districts are required to fund charter schools at the rate of 90 percent of the district's per-pupil costs, for each student who attends a charter school. Some state aid that normally goes to a home district also instead goes to a charter school, while the sending district provides and pays for busing.

As a result, though housed at the Sussex technical school, the Sussex charter school is a separate, autonomous entity, with its own \$1 million budget and five-member school board. Charter students are selected through lottery drawings of applicants held each December.

"I think people have pretty much accepted us," Eckel said. "It's funny, a lot of people still don't even know we're here."

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