



# The Times

## School's in

### Charters get jump on class

Thursday, August 23, 2007

BY ALEX ZDAN

TRENTON -- The two children sit quietly in their chairs, feet dangling above the floor. Both wear the new blue polo shirts they received earlier that day, the golden seal of the Foundation Academy embroidered over their hearts.

Emani Levine speaks softly but is apt to break into a huge, toothy smile at any time. Devaun Green is extroverted and can't stay seated for very long.

While children throughout the region are finishing out the last days of summer, the two fifth-graders are already a week and a half into classes at the city's newest charter school on South Broad Street. The school is part of the latest wave of a 10-year-old movement that is not showing any signs of ebbing.

While both Emani and Devaun can agree on the best part of the day -- snacktime -- and the best snack food -- animal crackers win over carrots -- they disagree on their favorite subjects. Devaun likes math and physics. Emani is more into social studies and science.

"I like history," she says.

And even though the school year has barely begun, the students already can grasp that things at Foundation do not work the same as at their old schools.

"It's different here from there, because here we have a lot of curriculums," Devaun says.

There are more teachers, and more classes, too, he explains. Then there's a pause. Devaun leans back a little, intertwining his hands, as if hesitating to mention what's on his mind. He takes the leap.

"Sometimes, it's even fun to be here," he says.

Housed in the former Sacred Heart School building, Foundation opened its doors on Aug. 13, enrolling 88 fifth- and sixth-graders. The school features a longer school year, with 200 days instead of the state-mandated 180, and a nine-hour school day, also longer than the required length.

It was chartered by educators and parents dissatisfied with the quality of the city public schools, most of which are falling short of federal No Child Left Behind standards.

"We were not happy with what we saw in Trenton as far as education goes," said Carla Hill, one of Foundation's founders. "We felt the children were not being challenged."

Examining charter schools all over the state, the group was impressed by two institutions in Newark. At North Star Academy, 100 percent of the graduating class has gone on to college for two years in a row. At TEAM Academy, the administration can boast of a 96 percent attendance rate. It was these schools the group decided to emulate.

"And we said, 'You know what, if they can do it, we can do it,'" Hill said.

At Foundation, every student is required to master a musical instrument. If a student is late, he receives an hour of detention after school. If a student leaves early without a note, he receives an hour of detention after school the following day.

Children file through the halls between classes in alphabetical order, nearly silent. The school has dance instruction within its physical education program, and along with standbys like English and math, geography and

Spanish, classes are mandatory.

In one of those Spanish classes yesterday, Principal Ron Brady was teaching.

"We're spending time this week working on procedures, because when Monday comes around we're going to be moving fast -- lightning fast," he announces to the students.

Procedures such as "tracking," which is maintaining eye contact with a teacher or fellow student who is speaking, or alternating fat and skinny binders in a backpack to avoid overcrowding are priorities.

"What we are trying to do is create the structures within which they can be successful," Brady explained.

Effectively creating these structures, balancing responsibility and discipline, will prepare students for college, the Foundation faculty believes.

"We say, 'Now that we're sure now that you've learned it, now you're on your own,'" Brady said. "We expect them to learn to do these things themselves."

"Even at the fifth- and sixth- grade level, it's all about college," Hill said.

The desire to produce "world ready" students is just a small part of what is driving parents to send their children to charter schools instead of public schools, says Heather Ngoma, director of the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center.

"I think they're leaving because they want other opportunities for their kids," Ngoma said.

In 1997, there were 13 charter schools in the state of New Jersey. Now, a decade later, there are 62, according to the state Department of Education Web site.

In Mercer County, Foundation is the seventh charter school in operation.

An eighth school, Mercer Arts Charter High School, is scheduled to open in Princeton in September. The school, where students will be immersed in arts studies, is open to students from West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional, Princeton Regional, Hopewell Valley Regional, Ewing, Trenton and Lawrence.

"It is finally starting to spiral upward," Ngoma said.

And there will be more on the way. Last month the state Department of Education announced it had received 22 applications from groups seeking to operate charter schools. One of the applicants was Mercer County Freeholder Tony Mack, sponsored in part by the David Sarnoff Corp.

Charter schools are privately operated public schools that receive state funding but have greater flexibility than traditional public schools when it comes to curriculum and method of instruction.

At Foundation Academy, where a huge sign reading "Excuses" with a big circle and line through it hangs prominently in the cafeteria, it's about cultivating the program to be able to add a new grade level each year for the next two years.

And for Emani Levine and Devaun Green, it's just about another day at school.

"Sometimes, we have so many binders, and we're about to get a new one," Devaun says.

"That'll mean we have seven binders," he adds.

"Eight," Emani corrects him.

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