

From charter back to public schools

BY RACHEL KONOPACKI
rkonopacki@theaegis.com

Publicly-funded charter schools are on the rise, with 36 in Maryland and about 4,600 in the nation.

But, students and parents won't find one in Harford County.

During a time when public charter schools are a growing educational trend in the nation, the Harford County Board of Education did not renew the contract of the Restoration Academy Alternative Charter School in Aberdeen for the current school year.

Restoration Academy, which had an enrollment of 75 sixth to 10th grade children in the 2008-09 school year, had operated for two years and was the only charter school ever approved in Harford County.

The school board approved a three-year contract with the charter school in August 2006. It provided \$777,000 to the charter school in 2008-09.

Charter schools are public schools that operate with freedom from many of the restrictions that are placed on traditional public schools, with the understanding the charter school is accountable to either the state or local school board.

"They run independently from school districts and can make important decisions on how to teach, how to spend their funds, how to structure and design the school and who they can hire to best fit their needs," according to the Maryland State Department of Education's Web site.

While Harford's school board shut down its only charter school, the state opened three new public charter schools this fall to bring the total to 36 in

Maryland.

The Harford school board, citing failures to meet yearly progress targets and to implement individual education plans, as well as high teaching staff turnover, voted in February to close the charter school at the end of the 2008-09 school year.

The school board also was unhappy the Restoration Academy, which was allowed to temporarily use the basement of the school system's alternative high school in Aberdeen, had been unable to secure a permanent home in its own facility, a condition under the school's original approval.

Though he was clearly upset with the board's action, the person most responsible for getting Restoration Academy off the ground remains upbeat about the project.

"I think charter schools are a good thing and it's unfortunate we could not move forward," Pastor Nathaniel Johnson, founder of Restoration Academy and president of the school's charter board, said. "We had a great working relationship with Harford County Public Schools."

Each of the 75 students at the Restoration Academy Alternative Charter School worked with Roger Plunkett, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and Dave Volrath, executive director of secondary education, to identify where the student should go for 2009-10 school year.

"Before the end of the school year last year, Roger Plunkett and Dave Volrath met with parents and students at the [charter] school and went over the child's needs," Teri Kranefeld, manager

of communications for the school system, said, adding that together a decision was made on whether the student should be sent back to the home school or to the Center for the Educational Opportunity.

Johnson said charter schools are important because of the environment and focused teaching they provide.

"I think what they are able to do is provide a smaller environment, which addresses some of the wrap around issues," he said, adding that the school not only assists students with academics, but also with social, spiritual, financial, behavior and community issues.

Johnson said charter schools also need to be diversified to be successful, with a mix of students struggling academically and behaviorally and others excelling.

He said with a mixture of students, those who are struggling will be able to follow the example of the kids who are doing well.

"The reality is kids support kids, kids help kids and that is the environment I would like to see," he said.

Without a charter school in county, Johnson is looking for other ways to help students in need.

"I have some plans for some things to go forward, not necessarily a charter school," Johnson said. "The way the laws are written in Maryland make it difficult for a charter school to move forward."

Johnson said he doesn't know exactly what he wants to move forward with, but he said he would like to partner with the school system.

Mann House faces cut

MANN, from A1

who are on maintenance drugs.

"There were stipulations in the award of contract that we were not willing to go along with," Haywood said of the board's unanimous decision. "We did not sign the contract with the county health department because the Mann House has been in existence for 38 years and it's remained a chemical-free environment for 38 years."

Since Mann House opened in 1971, Haywood said the facility has treated about 2,000 clients.

"I'm not against buprenorphine and methadone," Haywood said. "My position

is there's a place for it. I just don't feel there's a place for it in this house at this time because this is a small house. I think it's not a philosophy that we follow because we are a sobriety and abstinence-based program. It's been this way for many years."

According to Haywood, the health department has a program to help drug addicts, particularly heroine addicts. The program places drug addicts on suboxone, or buprenorphine, which assists the addicts in maintaining their lifestyle.

"It's not that they pulled funding," Haywood said, referring to the health department. "We have not agreed to sign a contract with them for that particular reason because we want to remain chemical free. We're a private, nonprofit organization."

According to Haywood, the Mann House has a \$190,000 annual budget for operating expenses. While Harford County government provides \$83,000, the organization depends to a large degree on donations.

"For all these years, we provided a chemical-free environment for our clients," Haywood said. "Most of our clients are chronic relapsers."

Haywood also said the Mann House follows the 12-step program for recovering alcoholics and hosts between 17 to 20 meetings each week in the conference room, which is open to the public. The white 13-bed Victorian home houses clients who come directly from treatment centers and went through a detoxification phase.

Haywood, who has been clean and sober for 34 years, finds the 12-step program successful.

"Somebody who is going into addiction becomes spiritually bankrupt first, emotionally bankrupt second and physically bankrupt third," Haywood said. "They recover in reverse order. Physically they get well. They detoxify. The next thing the person has to do is deal with their emotions. The third thing is to rely on something outside yourself. Some people would call that a higher power or spirituality. That's what our clients do. It's rebuilding the person. It's rebuilding those areas of our life."

If a client is accepted into the house after an interview, he has to pay \$125 a week for housing and treatment. Once a client enters the program, he must find a job within a two- to three-week period.

"We also help them develop a budget and save money," Haywood said. "We ask our clients to stay anywhere from six months to one year ... People come in here in the middle of crisis without hope. Over the course of six months to a year, their confidence comes back. Their hope comes back. You're seeing the reemergence of a person that was there."

After work, clients are required to attend Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. The house also provides group therapy and individual counseling in addition to therapy for the client's family.

"Many of our clients have settled in the county and have started businesses and families and are paying taxes," Haywood said. "It brings people back to life. It helps them heal their life. You take someone who was a drain to the community and make them an asset to the community. If you can take a person who's been in and out of the court system, homeless at times and turn them back into a productive citizen, that's what it's all about."

In the wake of its decision not to take state funding, Mann House's directors have been accelerating fund-raising efforts, with some recent success.

On Aug. 30, the nonprofit sponsored the first Mann House Cookout for graduates of the Mann House and their families. More than 75 people attended the cookout to help launch an aggressive fund-raising campaign.

And last month, Robert Melville, a retired teacher, coach and school administrator who was named Harford County's Most Beautiful Person in 2003, gave \$20,000 each to five charities, including \$20,000 to the Mann House.

On Fridays after 8 p.m., the Double T Diner in Bel Air will donate 10 percent of patrons' checks to the Mann House when they mention the house.

For more information about the Mann House or to make a donation, please visit www.mannhouse.org or call 410-879-7619.

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