

How the Greater Brunswick Charter School finds resources to 'individualize' learning

8 charter schools scheduled to open next year, including Perth Amboy, East Brunswick

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Patrick Mulhern is the boss at Greater Brunswick Charter School; the interim education director, meaning he's something like a principal and superintendent lumped into one.

Yet to the school's 293 students, he's still "Mr. Patrick."

"One of the things we do best is create an environment of respect and peace in the classroom, and I think when you have that as a foundation in a school and in a classroom, then you can teach," he said.

Devin Blake, 10, who attended a regular public school until three years ago, likes that environment, too.

"It's fun," he said. "There's no bullying. The teachers here are excellent."

The 12-year-old charter school, which serves students in kindergarten through the eighth grade, is one of 68 operating charter schools in the state, and the only one in Middlesex County. But the number of public, tuition-free "schools of choice" is growing — eight new charter schools are scheduled

to open next year, including schools in Perth Amboy and East Brunswick.

As the name implies, charter schools are governed by a founding charter and can't open their doors until they pass a rigorous application program with the state Department of Education, which provides funding and oversight for the schools. Admission is based on a lottery system, and many schools — including Greater Brunswick — have waiting lists.

Rick Pressler, a founder and former executive director of the school, said the idea for Greater Brunswick came from a group of home-schooling parents who wanted to merge the benefits of individualized home-based education with the social interaction of a school.

"It began as some very open-ended conversations among people who already knew each other, and it expanded to become an effort to engage different parts of the community," said Pressler, who currently is acting director of the New Jersey State Public Charter School Association.

Elementary classes at the school have about 23 students, spanning two grades and taught by two teachers, one certified and one assistant. Vanessa Jones, the school's head teacher and an original member of the school's teaching staff, said an extra teacher helps facilitate the school's educational philosophy.

"What you tend to do if you have one teacher in the room, you teach to the middle because it's too much; you can't possibly do anything else," she said. "So having two people in the room allows us to do differentiation. It allows us to individualize more and to avoid that 'teach to the middle' syndrome."

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Rebekah Cancel, 9, recently worked on a group project doing the ExploraVision science contest.

"Ours was about how to use electricity to make things move by itself," she said.

Three times a year, parents, teachers and students come together for conferences to devise a Personal Education Plan – three individualized goals the student will aim for. Goals can include learning to play chess, improving their typing skills or reading Harry Potter books.

William Watkis, a 7-year-old second-grader, is studying hummingbirds.

"The way I got interested in them, I was reading a book about birds and in the back page it had a whole bunch of different types of birds and I saw a hummingbird . . . so I wanted to research it," he said.

Opening and operating a charter school is not easy, and funds are almost always tight. Charter schools don't have access to state school construction funds, so they often rent their school space.

"You'll find charter schools in a whole array of facilities, but often if they are lucky enough to find an old vacant school that's ideal," said Christine Oztan, a board member at the school and project manager at the nonprofit Real Estate Advisory and Development Services. "Often you'll find them in former Catholic schools that were closed."

Greater Brunswick, for instance, has used six buildings at various times in its history. But it has owned the former bowling alley at 429 Joyce Kilmer Ave. since 2004, and by the fall the school plans to renovate a currently unused portion of the building to bring its middle school under the same roof. The expansion also will allow the school to expand to a financially sustainable enrollment of 360 students.

Though the largest share of its students come from New Brunswick, Greater Brunswick's students live in about 15 districts.

Cara Cuite, who lives in Metuchen, sent her two daughters to Greater Brunswick because Metuchen did not have full-day kindergarten. She has been

impressed with the charter school.

"I love the school. I love the diversity, the educational approach with the multiple grades in each classroom," she said. "And the other thing that blows people's minds is it has two full-time teachers in each classroom."

One common misconception about charter schools, according to Tia Kolbaba, chairwoman of the school's Board of Trustees, is that the schools are funded by a voucher system, where parents receive funds from the state and can send their student to any school.

In fact, charter schools receive their money, a combination of state funds and local tax dollars, directly from local school districts, Pressler said. Each district that has a child attending a charter school is asked to send an amount equal to 90 percent of the district's per-pupil program budget, according to the state's 1995 Charter School Act. But Pressler said due to exemptions and other factors, on average charter schools only receive about 70 percent of school districts' per-pupil costs.

Pressler also noted that charter schools are currently barred from receiving funds from the state's School Development Authority, complicating the facility issue. His association is hoping to change that will change under the administration of Gov. Chris Christie, who has said he supports the development of more charter schools.

More than half of Greater Brunswick's students are

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Latino, prompting the school to hire an English-as-a-second-language teacher, Daniel Scibienski, who also holds adult classes in the evenings for parents.

Pressler said the charter schools in general are more prevalent in urban districts, but he said there are charter schools in suburban areas too, including Princeton and Morristown.

Pressler said academically, urban charter schools perform well compared with their urban host districts, though he said when compared with statewide averages urban charter schools do not fare as well.

An analysis of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge scores from the 2008-2009 school year shows Greater Brunswick and New Brunswick Public Schools have relatively similar rates of proficiency or advanced proficiency. Generally, Greater Brunswick scored higher in language arts and science, while the city's school system scored higher in most grades in math.

Mulhern said his teachers try to balance student-directed learning with test-taking skills.

"We feel that if a student is self-directed, we're really preparing them for the real world," he said. "But also you have to prepare them to take tests too."

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