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Friday, September 7, 2018

www.RisingMediaGroup.com

Vol 112 Number 36

Board of Regents Approves Yonkers Charter High School



The former Our Lady of Rosary Church, the site of the new Yonkers Charter High School.

By Dan Murphy

Over the summer, the New York State Board of Regents approved a request by the Charter School for Educational Excellence to expand its school from its current kindergarten to grade eight classes, to include grades nine through 12 and the first Yonkers Charter High School. The new high school will welcome its

first class of 100 freshman in the fall of 2019 at the former Our Lady of Rosary church and school, which is located next to the existing CSEE.

One of the requirements of the new charter high school is that 50 percent of the students come from Yonkers, while the remaining 50

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percent come from outside of Yonkers. CSEE made this change in its application before the vote by the Board of Regents, understanding that this was likely the only way it would get its new high school approved.

"When we first applied, we wanted to have all of our children coming from Yonkers because we know the desire from the people of Yonkers for a charter high school," said CSEE co-founder Sobeida Cruz. "But objections came from the myth that we are taking money away from the Yonkers Public Schools, so our application was made for a regional high school. Our students come from New York City and all over Westchester."

Because 50 percent of the students for the new charter high school will come from outside Yonkers, that means the student's per-pupil dollars will come from the school district they live in, like Mt. Vernon or the New York City school system, instead of taking away more dollars from YPS.

When a student attends a charter school, the per-pupil dollars allocated by the state and school district follow that student. So, while it is true that when a student from Yonkers leaves YPS and attends CSEE, the education dollars follow that student to CSEE – about \$16,000 per pupil.

But CSEE is able to educate its students at a lower cost per pupil than YPS, which is spending \$19,000 per pupil. So, the argument that charter schools are draining education dollars away from the public schools is inaccurate, or misleading, because the public school is no longer required to educate the student that has left for a charter school.

One of the reasons CSEE has a waiting list of 600 students whose parents want their children to attend is that CSEE students achieve higher test scores than YPS students at various grade levels.

To the surprise of some in Yonkers, the Board of Regents agreed with the analysis above, and recognized the successes at CSEE, and had enough confidence in this group of dedicated educators and members of the community to amend the charter to include a high school in Yonkers.

The memorandum of the State Education Department granting the charter revision for a new high school, effective July 1, 2018, states:

"VOTED: That the Board of Regents finds that: (1) the charter school meets the requirements set out in Article 56 of the Education Law, and all other applicable laws, rules and regulations; (2) the charter school can demonstrate the ability to operate in an educationally and fiscally sound manner; (3) granting the request to amend the charter is likely to improve student learning and achievement and materially further the purposes set out in subdivision two of section twenty-eight hundred fifty of Article 56 of the Education Law; and (4) granting the request to amend the charter will have a significant educational benefit to the students expected to attend the charter school, and the Board of Regents therefore approves the charter revision for the Charter School of Educational Excellence and amends the provisional charter accordingly."

Most notable was the approval of the NYS regent from this area, Dr. Judith Johnson, former superintendent of the Peekskill school district who started out the discussion for a Yonkers charter high school at a public meeting by praising the work of CSEE and supporting the application. This also came as a shock to many educators in Yonkers who thought Johnson would oppose the application, but came as a welcome surprise to board members of CSEE and the applicants for the new high school.

The 50-50 split of students from inside and outside of Yonkers will not occur for at least three years because of the existing students already attending CSEE. Specifically, 81 CSEE eighth-graders will make up the first freshman class at the new charter high school, with the remaining 19 students coming from outside of Yonkers.

"I'm thrilled that the children who have attended CSEE for years can continue to be educated in our environment," said Cruz. "The parents wanted that, and we can continue to give them the continuity and nurture them all the way into college."

Cruz also pointed out that during the application process for a charter high school, the State Education Department asked "how we would educate students who are not learning at higher levels, and how will we educate special education students. That's a misconception and

talking point from the YPS – that we cherry pick our students for charter school, which isn't true," she said.

"First, our students are chosen from a lottery system because there are too many students and parents who want to get in and not enough classroom seats. We have put more special education teachers into our charter high school application and will pull these students out and give them the support they need... We have more ESL students and special education students at CSEE than at PEARLS," YPS's top elementary school.

Cruz and CSEE Principal Cindy Lopez are confident they will be able to attract half the high school's student population from outside of Yonkers by 2021. In prior years, Yonkers students were given priority; now that will no longer be the case.

"We have lots of parents and families who are aware of our school and their children attend CSEE from outside of Yonkers, from the Bronx and Greenburgh, Mt. Vernon, Ossining and Rockland County," said Lopez. "We would not have agreed to this change if we knew we couldn't get 50 percent from outside Yonkers."

The 50-50 split of students means that Yonkers parents who wanted their children to attend CSEE and the new high school will have fewer seats in both schools. By 2021, half of the students from both schools will be from outside of Yonkers. But the other part of the agreement gave CSEE educators the ability to give existing CSEE students the option of attending the charter high school.

The new high school will enroll 100 students per year, per class, growing eventually to a 400-student high school. The current K-8 school is permitted a maximum enrollment of 729 students. When the high school will have four classes/grades of students, the total K-12 enrollment will be 1,129.

The new school will be built at the Our Lady of Rosary Church and School on Laramine Avenue. The church will be used as a gym and the school classrooms will be renovated for use next year. It is conveniently located just around the corner from the K-8 school.

The funding for the new school will come through municipal bonds through the Yonkers Industrial Development Agency, and not out of the YPS budget. Eventually, the environmental review for the project and the new school, and the IDA funding, will come before the Yonkers City Council. Currently, there is no public opposition to the plan from any member of the council.

"One of our big concerns was that after the eighth grade, our students didn't have a lot of good choices for a high school," said Principal Lopez. "Although the YPS claims that our students can pick any one of their high schools, the top two YPS high schools (Yonkers High School and Saunders) are never available and always full."

Now with their approval, the leaders of the charter high school are on the clock; they must complete their renovations of Our Lady of Rosary Church and be ready to accept students one year from today. Can they do it?

"We are confident that we will have our first ninth-grade cohort of 100 students starting next September," said Lopez. "I am elated and cannot wait to have my students go to the new high school next year. We have big plans for the high school and the curriculum."

Lopez noted that the charter high school was opposed by YPS administrators and the Yonkers Board of Education even after the change was made to have 50 percent students coming from outside Yonkers.

"Our teachers started Aug. 20 with professional development," she said. "Our philosophy is to make sure students are successful and if it's not working, then change it. I don't see that willingness to change in some of the failing schools in Yonkers. I also find it interesting that while they criticize our ability to educate our students, they are interested in hiring our teachers."

"Our expectation is to have a successful 9-12 school just like our K-8 school," continued Lopez. "Our high school will have the same culture as our K-8 school, where everyone is respected, and we are all treated the same – not only the students but every staff member from the principal to the custodian."

The charter high school will also have a uniform policy, which has been successful at CSEE. "It allows all of the students to dress the same and cuts down on criticisms about what you are wearing or what sneakers you have," said Lopez. "It also gives the mentality that it's time to learn and get serious."

For more information, visit charterschoolofeducationexcellence.org.