

Charter schools update

Two of 50 up and running

Two charter schools are operating in Colorado more than two months after the school year began.

Academy Charter School, operating in a storefront in Castle Rock, has had a rocky start. Joan Torres, chief organizer of the school, was fired in October from her post as acting dean by the parents on the K-6 school's governing board.

Academy Charter School is founded on "structured academics and individual instruction," and the curriculum is based on the core knowledge guidelines of the 1987 best-seller *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. Eight teachers work at the 110-student school, which is part of the Douglas County district. Melinda Windler, wife of Colorado Department of Ed staffer Bill Windler, is the president of the school's governing board, comprised totally of parents.

Despite its governance problems, Academy Charter School continues to operate, though some are critical of the school and believe the backers of the project moved too fast between May when SB 183 was passed allowing charter schools and late September when the school opened.

The other charter school is the Connect School in Pueblo. Founded by John Mikulas, the school is in Pueblo District 70. Mikulas is the district's computer systems head; his wife is a teacher at the school along with three others.

The Connect School is a grades 6-8 middle school with only 69 students and no principal or support staff. The emphasis is on math, science, computers, reading, and writing and hands-on learning is encouraged. The school is housed in a converted warehouse in downtown Pueblo, though the district with which it is aligned is the rural area outside of Pueblo.

The University of Southern Colorado has applied to the Pueblo District 60 school board for a charter for a K-12 school. The Pueblo Schools for Arts and Sciences would have 650 students and curriculum "anchored in the arts and in harmony with the sciences." USC, already in a co-op with the district called The Alliance, would form a governing board of parents, teachers, community members, and students.

USC has asked the district for not only the 85 percent of funding allowed under the law; it wants the district to provide the school site, student transportation, custodial services, maintenance, insurance, capital reserve funds, food services, athletic opportunities for students, playground equipment, media equipment, computers, and instructional and lab equipment and materials — and \$55,000 in planning funds in January 1994, though the school would not open until September.

Charter schools are managed by teachers and parents, but partially financed by a public school district, according to the law. Fifty charter schools are allowed statewide, 13 of which must be for at-risk students. Neither of the two current charter schools are for at-risk students.

Several charter school proposals are on the horizon. Eight Aurora teachers want a "child centered" school for next fall, similar to the British Primary School that emphasizes creativity and hands-on learning. The K-5 school would have 15-18 students per teacher. So far the teachers do not have a school site.

An "urban village" K-12 school in downtown Denver is being planned by several citizens, including Rex Brown (senior fellow at the Education Commission of the States), Joyce Meskis (owner of Tattered Cover Bookstore), and John Hickenlooper (owner of the Wynkoop Brewery). These and other groups are spending all year getting ready for their schools' 1994-95 openings, which depend in part on the charters being granted by the school districts.

If you want information on charter schools, contact the *Journal* editor at CEA. Several CEA staff are available to answer questions and provide information to Association members about charter schools.