

First charter school gets official OK

Pueblo County board votes

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A school without walls, where technology will play a key role and where libraries, museums, parks and zoos will be "classrooms," has become the first school in Colorado to be created under the new Charter Schools Act.

The Connect School, established this week by a 5-0 vote of the school board in Pueblo County Rural District 70, will open in September, serving 60 students in grades six through eight.

"This is great news! This is really incredible," said Barbara O'Bri-

en, executive director of the Colorado Children's Campaign, which lobbied strongly for the act. "A lot of school boards are jumping in to help these groups start their schools, and they're happening faster than anyone expected."

The Charter Schools Act, signed into law in June, authorizes parents, teachers and other citizens to establish experimental schools through a charter, or contract, with a local school board. If the board is uncooperative, the group can appeal to the state board of

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education. The hope is to create new, more flexible ways of educating children within the public schools.

In Douglas County, hearings will be held Aug. 17 on a proposal by a group of parents for The Academy Charter School, where elementary students would meet rigorous academic standards and follow a curriculum modeled after ideas presented by E.D. Hirsch Jr. in his 1987 book "Cultural Literacy."

Those parents recently suffered a setback when a broker backed out on offering space the group was planning to rent.

"It's a blow, but it won't stop us," said parent Joan Torres, who still hopes to open the school in the fall. The school board must vote by Sept. 12.

Pueblo County's Connect School was proposed by teachers and parents.

"We want to connect our students to the community," said John Mikulas, a high school science and technology teacher.

"We'll go out to industrial parks and historic sites, to downtown areas and to nature centers. There we'll gather information and do long-term projects. The classroom will be the community." Students will use computers to link with national and global information networks.

The proposal from its earliest stages has had the support of Superintendent Michael Johnson. School board members see the school as a research lab, generating ideas that eventually can be incorporated into the rest of the school system.

So far, said school board Vice President William Bolt, there has been no opposition to the school. Some of the most enthusiastic backers are parents who home-school their children.

Under the law, the school is open to all children within the district. If too many apply for the 60 spaces available, selection will be by lottery, Bolt said.

Under the five-year charter plan, the school will be expanded by about 20 students a year to a total of 120.