

Proposals flow in as law sparks interest in charter schools

Education department logs 350 calls since Romer signed bill that allows new programs

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Efforts to create charter schools are steaming ahead one week after Gov. Roy Romer signed the law allowing them.

The Colorado Department of Education has counted about 350 callers requesting information on charter schools since the legislature approved the concept last month, with 85% wanting to create one in their school district with tax money.

Some groups have already formed proposals:

■ Castle Rock parents Joan Torres and Laurel Iakovakis have begun organizing the Academy Charter School in Douglas County, concentrating on rigorous academic standards and traditional teaching methods. Parents have committed 26 children to enroll in the elementary school, with a planned capacity of about 45. The group is searching for a site and plans a first-year budget of \$192,000, claiming a savings of \$35,000 from a regular school's cost.

■ A group of teachers and parents Tuesday night approached the Pueblo County School District 70 accountability committee with

a proposal to organize a charter school around technological innovations, using computer networks and distance learning. Pueblo District 70 school superintendent Mike Johnson said of the committee members' reaction: "They were overwhelmingly supportive."

Other possible charter schools: Colorado's League of United Latin American Citizens hopes to organize schools in Greeley and the San Luis Valley for students at risk of dropping out and a Denver group wants a school based on the philosophy behind the defunct High School Redirections.

The law allows parents, educators and others to set up experimental schools largely free from government restrictions. Advocates say the measure will invite innovation and foment reform in education across the state. Critics fear it will create elitist private schools with public funding.

Applicants must apply to their home school district. Rejections can be appealed to the state Board of Education. Local school boards must have plans to consider such applications by fall 1994.

Originally skeptical about charter schools, assistant state education commissioner Art Ellis said he is pleased by the interest.

"I think that what we're seeing now, by having legislation, it's opened the door for a lot of people who were frustrated," he said.