

Editorial: Emerald Academy could set standard for charter schools

By NEWS SENTINEL EDITORIAL BOARD

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As Knox County's first charter school, the Emerald Academy understandably will attract a lot of scrutiny after its opening in August 2015.

Nevertheless, the new school, a nonprofit created by the Emerald Youth Foundation, comes with strong credentials and solid backing. Success is not a foregone conclusion, but the groundwork is in place.

The Knox County Board of Education approved the academy last week on a 7-1 vote. Veteran board member Karen Carson voted "no," and Gloria Deathridge did not attend the meeting. The vote followed a positive recommendation from a charter school review committee and from Knox County Schools Superintendent Jim McIntyre.

Steve Diggs, executive director of the Emerald Youth Foundation, was encouraged by the vote. "People want to give us a shot to see if we can't close this academic achievement gap," he said.

A charter school is a publicly funded school usually governed by an organization under a contract with the local school board or state. It is designed to boost learning through a strong academic focus and more personal instruction. Nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Education, about 1.8 million students were enrolled in charter schools in 2010-2011.

Although the Emerald Academy request came with high credentials, it did not come without controversy. The primary issue was a recently passed law that allows the state of Tennessee to approve charter schools on appeal if a local school board initially rejects them. Carson believes the state law puts the local school board in the position of having to approve a charter school or being overruled at the state level, possibly losing some state funding. Carson said the law missed the fundamental question: "Is this what's best for all of Knox County kids?"

Other board members were more than willing to support Emerald Academy. Thomas Deakins, not always a proponent of charter schools, supported Emerald, saying before the meeting the school system should "get outside the four walls and try something new." Indya Kincannon said she viewed the charter school as an "opportunity for the community, not a threat."

The support of community leaders who serve on the foundation's board, such as Gov. Bill Haslam, Dee Haslam, the governor's sister-in-law, and others should bolster confidence that the school is a serious attempt to improve education for inner city youth.

The Emerald proposal calls for teaching kindergartners through eighth-graders with about \$4.8 million in public money. Classes would begin with kindergarten and first grade, adding two grades in each subsequent year, building to a student population of 450.

Part of the scrutiny in the next few years should include attention to the state's Open Meetings and Open Records acts in conducting its business in the public eye. The school board should insist on this in matters of funding, policy discussions and programs.

As the first charter school for Knox County with a huge possibility for success, Emerald Academy has set the bar fairly high. That is good. The school's success will enable it to establish a good standard for any charter schools in Knox County's future.



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