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Heady days for charter schools

Six are approved, and 12 get renewed

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Six new charter schools have been approved and 12 existing ones renewed for New Jersey, as the independently operated schools continue to spread a decade since first written into law.

The state yesterday announced the new approvals, including an elementary school for Newark and a middle school in Trenton. Named after a prominent black educator, the Adelaide L. Sanford Charter School in Newark was approved on its third try.

"Three strikes, and we're finally in," said Fredricka Bey, one of the founders.

Three more schools also won approval in suburban communities within Bergen and Camden counties and Central Jersey, adding to the growth of the alternative schools outside the cities.

And maybe the biggest boost came from existing schools. The state renewed a dozen of the charters, including eight schools with plans to expand their rolls.

Two of Newark's stalwarts -- North Star Academy and TEAM Academy -- plan to more than double their overall enrollments with new grades and sites over the next several years. Together, the two schools could teach by the end of the decade nearly 2,500 students.

"This affirms our accomplishments and gives us the opportunity to serve even more Newark children," said Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, North Star's co-director.

The charter movement this year celebrates 10 years since former Gov. Christie Whitman's signing of its authorizing legislation in 1996. Fifty-one such schools are now in operation in New Jersey, with nearly 15,000 students. Charter schools are publicly funded, but operate under charter with the state and independent of local districts.

This year's approvals came from an application pool of 25, one of the biggest in years, and the bulk of them rose out of urban districts, where charter schools have made their greatest inroads.

But the new Central Jersey College Prep Charter School, serving three towns bordering the Middlesex-Somerset line, reflects the fledgling popularity of the schools in more suburban communities. Approved to open next fall, the new school would serve New Brunswick, North Brunswick and Franklin.

"We saw a great need, with so many students lacking the basic foundations, especially in math and science, and too many not motivated enough," said Ferhan Tunagur, a doctoral student at Rutgers who is among a dozen university educators listed as founders.

Not all of New Jersey's charter schools have thrived, though, and not publicized in the state's announcement yesterday was its decision last month to close the Gateway Charter School in Jersey City.

Gateway was among the first group to open in 1997 and the only one not renewed this year. The state cited in its decision the school's lagging test scores, weaknesses in its governing board, and a lack of adequate planning, programs and fiscal controls.

Gateway must close at the end of the school year, according to the state's order. Efforts to reach the school and its attorney yesterday were unsuccessful.

New charter schools:

- Benchmark Academy Charter High School, Corbin City region, Atlantic County, opening 2006-07
- Central Jersey College Prep Charter School, Franklin Township region, Middlesex and Somerset counties, opening 2006-07
- Bergen Arts and Science Charter School, Hackensack region, Bergen County, opening 2007-08
- TLC Charter School, Cherry Hill, Camden County, opening 2007-08
- Adelaide L. Sanford Charter School, Newark, opening 2007-08
- Foundation Academy Charter School, Trenton, opening 2007-08

Renewed charter schools:

- Elysian Charter School, Hoboken, enrollment expansion in 2006-07
- Community Charter School, Jersey City
- LEAP Academy University Charter School, Camden, enrollment expansion in 2006-07
- Learning Community Charter School, Jersey City, enrollment expansion in 2006-07
- North Star Academy Charter School, Newark, expansion in enrollment and sites over the next five years
- Princeton Charter School, Princeton, enrollment expansion over the next five years
- Robert Treat Charter School, Newark
- Soaring Heights Charter School, Jersey City, enrollment expansion over the next five years
- Sussex County Charter School for Technology, Sparta, Sussex County, expansion of enrollment, grade levels and facilities over the next five years
- Trenton Community Charter School, Trenton
- TEAM Academy Charter School, Newark, expansion of enrollment, grade levels and facilities
- University Academy Charter High School, Jersey City

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