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in news

New charter school gives dropouts a second chance

BY ROBERT KELLY
Of the Post-Dispatch
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Administrators of the new Tomorrow's Builders Charter School in East St. Louis bubble with optimism when they talk about taking high school dropouts and turning them into productive construction trades workers.

"We won't be teaching any magic here, but we want to offer the students every opportunity to learn and grow," said Kevin Murphy, program manager for the local YouthBuild organization that is helping organize and operate the charter school.

The new school, with about 60 students in its first class, will open by mid-September in a one-story building leased by the Emerson Park Development Corp. at 1400 State Street.

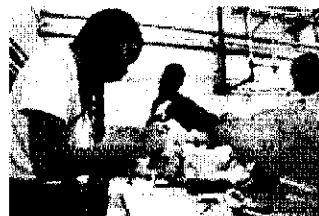
"We'll start small," Murphy said. "We'll teach them how to make a coat rack, if they've never even done that. And when they look at their little coat rack, they can say, 'OK. I can do that. Now let's move on to the next level.'

"And before you know it, we're building up their confidence level so that they can do more."

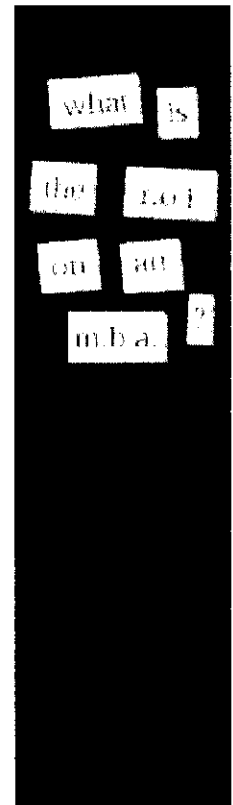
Paul Seibert of Charter Consultants, another operator of the new school, said: "We have a proven formula here for success. It will improve the graduation rate" for the East St. Louis School District.

Murphy and Seibert said they hoped to draw on the successes of the national YouthBuild organization, which has helped dropouts and high school students at risk of dropping out in 42 states to earn their high school credentials and move on to lucrative construction careers.

The East St. Louis charter school is one of two similar schools opening this fall. The YouthBuild St. Louis Charter High School will open Aug. 19 in the Soulard neighborhood for



Kenya McCray (front) works one of the small projects, a coat rack, that they learn to build at the Tomorrow's Builders Charter School in East St. Louis. While Michael Dotts (center) and Justin Anthony (right), who had finished theirs, watch. (Odell Mitchell Jr/P-D)



dropouts of the St. Louis Public Schools. The YouthBuild program in East St. Louis has been run for nearly a decade by the Emerson Park Development Corp. Some of the program's graduates are now members of trade unions and work with area contractors, Murphy said.

But the new charter school will expand on that program and add more high school courses so its students can go back to school and learn trades at the same time with intensive studies at one location, he noted.

A 30,000-square-foot Tomorrow's Builders school is under construction at 15th Street and Natalie Avenue and should be ready for students by the end of 2002, he said.

Meanwhile, the charter school will open for business in less than ideal quarters at 1400 State Street. Even so, that old building has shop rooms and makeshift classrooms sufficient to get the school up and running, Murphy and Seibert said.

Three recent participants in the East St. Louis YouthBuild program all said they had put their shiftless and sometimes lawless dropout days behind them and were eager for Tomorrow's Builders to start its fall semester.

Quantell Green, 23, Donte Foley, 21, and Cortez Williams, 23, all of East St. Louis, said they learned quickly after quitting school early in their high school years that it's virtually impossible to earn a living without a diploma.

Green was arrested on a burglary charge after dropping out, and all three admitted to taking part in some gang-related activities.

Foley said they had suffered from "young teenage problems. You'd be hanging with your friends, but you wouldn't be making a living. Basically, the YouthBuild program gave me a second chance."

Green said he quit East St. Louis High after ninth grade.

"Class was just so crowded," he recalled. "Everybody was in the hallways, and there wasn't nobody learning anything. So I started roaming the streets, getting into trouble."

Green fathered three children and came to realize he wanted to support them, he said.

"I like doing construction, and I don't want to be here with no future," he said.

Williams said he and the other older students enrolled in Tomorrow's Builders' first class wanted to teach the younger ones not to make the same mistakes they did in wasting time after dropping out.

"We're going to make an effort to teach them along with our teachers," he said.

Green added: "I like to motivate people. You've got to help somebody to get help for themselves."

All three young men said they hoped to get into union apprenticeship programs and work in construction after finishing the program at Tomorrow's Builders.

Participants in the YouthBuild program have cleaned up old lots and rehabbed old houses throughout East St. Louis. Students enrolled at Tomorrow's Builders will be involved both in rehabbing old units and building new houses, Seibert said. He said graduates of the charter school should be ready to enroll in trade union apprenticeship programs.

Vickie Kimmel Forby, executive director of the Emerson Park Development Corp., said the group hoped to raise \$2.5 million to help pay for the charter school building and eventually to expand its capacity to 200 students and 50 YouthBuild participants.

A donation of \$350,000 from the Deaconess Foundation and \$323,000 in federal grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development already have been received, Forby said.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent to Emerson Park Development Corp., P.O. Box 6126, East St. Louis, Ill. 62202.

Reporter Robert Kelly: