

SCHOOL DOING THE ABCS OF START-UP

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It was a thrilling moment for organizers of **Hill View** Montessori Charter School of Haverhill last February when the state Department of Education formally awarded them a charter.

But leaders of the future Haverhill school, set to begin operation in the 2004-2005 school year, have barely had a chance to catch their breath in the eight months since. In the aftermath of the charter vote, they lobbied on Beacon Hill against a budget measure that would have placed a moratorium on charter schools, effectively nullifying their charter. The budget measure was defeated.

Even as that episode was unfolding, **Hill View's** organizers were busy on other fronts. They established a board of trustees, which then had to learn how to operate. The new board, which includes many of the founders, met with community groups, hired an executive director, and established temporary office space. It also successfully sought to amend the charter so the school could serve kindergarten students.

In the coming months, school officials will focus their attention on recruiting students. At the same time, they will seek to finalize their search for a site for the school in Haverhill, expand their board of trustees, and set in motion fund-raising efforts.

"We found out the work really begins when you become chartered," said **Hill View** board member Alison Caruso, noting, "It's a huge undertaking that requires an enormous amount of commitment."

But she and other **Hill View** leaders remain upbeat.

"We are extremely excited and we are extremely honored to be involved in something like this that is going to make such a difference potentially in the future of thousands of children's lives in the city," Caruso said.

"We have a lot of challenges ahead of us, but we have a very strong and very committed team," said Janet Begin, chairwoman of the board.

The school is set to serve 120 students in grades K-3 when it opens. It will add a grade each year until it reaches capacity as a K-8 school serving 246 students in the 2009-2010 school year.

The state Department of Education on its website defines a charter school as "a public school that is managed by a board of trustees and operates independently of a school committee under a five-year charter granted by the [department]. It has the freedom to organize around a core mission, curriculum, theme, and /or teaching method, and to control its own budget and hire [and fire] teachers and staff."

Hill View will become only the second Montessori charter school in the state; the other is the River Valley Charter School in Newburyport.

The Montessori approach to teaching features hands-on learning, an individualized curriculum, classes of multi-age students, and slightly longer uninterrupted work time, according to Caruso. It also emphasizes professional development.

Hill View's recruitment efforts will begin in earnest Oct. 23 when it holds the first of five informational nights for parents interested in sending their children to the school.

Next week, **Hill View** plans to mail an informational guide on the school to 2,000 families who had either previously contacted **Hill View** for information or who appeared on a mailing list acquired by the school of families with children under 7. A postcard will follow, informing families of the dates of the information sessions.

Families are required to attend one of the sessions to obtain enrollment forms, which are due Dec. 12. Students at the various grade levels will be admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, with Haverhill children receiving priority. A lottery will be held Jan. 6 to fill any vacancies.

Caruso said the school is "cautiously optimistic" about filling all 120 slots, despite the challenge of seeking commitments from parents to a school that is not yet in operation.

"It's a leap of faith by the parents, but hopefully we have provided enough information that they will have faith in the success of the school as much as the trustees do," she said.

School trustees are exploring a number of options for a school site, including leasing space from the school district in one of two former Haverhill school buildings, or leasing space on the former Bradford College campus from the current owners.

Caruso said she is confident a site will be found to meet the school's initial space requirement of 15,000 square feet. But the school may have to relocate later as it approaches full capacity, when it will need 35,000 square feet.

While charter schools receive a per-pupil assessment from the state - which is then deducted from state aid to the local public school district - Caruso said that money does not cover facility costs. She said **Hill View** is in the process of establishing a nonprofit organization to raise funds for the school.

Already, **Hill View** has generated a number of grants, including two awards totalling \$210,000.

Hill View leaders say they are heartened by the welcoming reception they have received in the city, including from school officials. Charter schools have been the focus of controversy in some communities, with opponents saying they hurt regular public schools by draining money from them.

School Committee chairman Thomas F. Behan said his panel does not oppose the **Hill View** Charter School, though he said, "The timing is difficult because of what we are going through," referring to the budget difficulties facing the school system.

Calling the charter school organizers "very responsible," Behan said, "Personally, I hope they succeed and that they establish programs that are top-notch."

(For information on the school, visit its website, www.hillviewmontessori.org or call 978-521-2616).