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## City welcomes first charter school

By Shawn Regan  
*Staff Writer*

HAVERHILL -- Jay Martin is aware of the school district's money problems, but that is not why he is sending his 6-year-old son, Alex, to Hillview Montessori Charter School when it opens its doors for the first time Monday.

Alex previously attended kindergarten at the private Merrimack Valley Montessori School in Haverhill, where Martin said his son thrived in an atmosphere based more on teamwork and less on individualism. Martin and his wife, Kelly, also plan to send their 4-year-daughter to the new charter school next year.

"I like the fact that the grades are mixed and that my son will be in a class with some second- and third-graders," said Martin, boasting that Alex is already reading at a third-grade level.

"He'll get to do some of the lessons of older students, and then when he's in second and third grade, he'll be able to help teach younger kids what he's already learned," he said. "I think this is an opportunity for him to get a different kind of education from the one I received -- hopefully a better one."

Under the Montessori style of teaching, students learn at their own pace and in multi-age classes. They receive hands-on instruction and individualized learning, with an emphasis on respectful conduct by students and teachers.

Martin, a Methuen native who has lived in Haverhill for 13 years, joined about 100 people at a ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday, officially opening the doors to the city's first and only charter school at the newly renovated Bartlett School. The former public school at the western end of the city's Mount Washington neighborhood closed four years ago.

Teachers and administrators at the charter school joined politicians, business people and neighbors in wishing the school well. An American flag was hoisted up the flagpole at the entrance to the old brick building, as the crowd listened to stories about how the school came to be.

Later, school officials led a tour of the school and its eight classrooms. The smell of fresh paint still hung in the air.

"The first floor is done and we're still working on the second," said Hillview Executive Director Peg Roberts. "Our volunteers have been working day and night to get ready for Monday."

Last month the city agreed to lease the old brick building to the charter school for \$288,250 for three years. The school will open with 122 students in kindergarten through grade 3.

About 220 children applied for admission, with a lottery used to winnow the list. About 100 students are on a waiting list for open seats, said Janet C. Begin, the chairwoman of the school's board of directors.

At yesterday's ceremony, Begin was recognized as the driving force behind the school and was given a bouquet of sunflowers and a plaque. She said she is excited to see her vision about to become a reality, but disappointed her children didn't get in. Begin's daughter will attend first grade at Bradford Elementary this fall, and her son will attend the Montessori private school for pre-kindergarten.

"I'm disappointed they didn't get in," said Begin, noting her daughter is tenth on the waiting list. "But I didn't just do this for them. I wanted to help all the children in this community have this opportunity."

Charter schools choose their own curriculum, usually with a focus on anything from science to literature to music.

State Reps. Brian Dempsey, D-Haverhill, and Harriett Stanley, D-West Newbury, attended the ribbon-cutting. Both said they have supported the school since it was just a concept.

"It's another option that I think cities and towns should have," said Dempsey. "The Legislature will continue to oppose (Gov. Mitt Romney's) attempts to put a moratorium on new charter schools."

Critics of charter schools say they take money away from public schools, as they receive state financial assistance, but are not bound to elected school committees like public schools.

Haverhill public schools have seen their budgets cut three years in a row. Since 2002, a total of 182 positions have been cut. Last fall, 21 teaching positions were cut and many programs, courses and activities were eliminated or scaled back.