

Emerald plans to become a Charter School

By Mike Steely
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Will Knox County finally have its first Charter School?

With a high energy and receptive crowd packing the lunch room of the Emerald Youth Foundation on North Central Street, Executive Director Steve Diggs made it formal: The Emerald Academy will apply as a Charter School on April 1. This formal announcement was presented last Tuesday.

With temperatures dropping outside and snow falling, Diggs joked that it was the first day he felt they actually were a school and wondered if he should delay opening classes. Actually the school, if approved, won't open until August, 2015, but hopes are running high.

"We've been working with every department of the Knox County Schools," he said, adding there is even an understanding with the system's food service department to supply breakfast and lunch to the Emerald Academy. The idea is to give quality education to K-8 inner city youth.

Diggs said that the school will accept students including special needs children and said the Youth Foundation already has a long working relationship with Knox County Schools. He said the Academy hopes to have about 60 students

in every grade, with K-4 having no more than 15 students in any class. The school is planning a longer school day, 8 a.m. until 4 p.m., except Wednesday when students will be dismissed at 2:30. He said students will wear a uniform, basically a white shirt and black pants or skirts, and each student would have a life coach that follows them through their entire educational career, including college.

"There are two unknowns," he said, explaining the first is who will be principal, adding that applications will be accepted after the filing for Charter status. The second unknown is where the school will be located, but he said he would prefer the location be in the Northern part of Knoxville within the Fulton High School zone.

Diggs also said that the newly formed Board of Directors and others have asked that transportation be provided to and from school and he said he's added that to the application.

"We will call our students 'scholars,' not students," he said

"We will have a culture of high expectations," Diggs added, saying that teachers there will be certified and have competitive pay, preferably with urban teaching experience.

"By the end of the first



PHOTO BY MIKE STEELY.

Steve Diggs, President of the Board of Directors of Emerald Charter Schools, introduces three children dressed in the proposed school uniforms of the proposed Charter School. "Every child can succeed," was Steve Digg's main theme in announcing that Emerald Academy will apply to become a Charter School in Knox County.

ten years Emerald Academy will be a Reward School, in the top 5 percent of state assessment," Diggs pledged.

Student recruitment at the school would begin when approval is granted. He said that after the application is made it will go to a Charter Application Review Committee, probably in mid-April and,

in June or July, the Knox County system would announce a decision.

Preceding the announcement, the new Board of Directors met for the first time. During the ceremonies Diggs introduced them one at a time: Renda Burkhart, founder of Burkhart and Company; Cuille Cruze, Entrepreneur; Randy

Gibson, Chief Operating Officer of Lawler-Wood; Ed Hedgepeth, Principal in Residents at TNLEAD; Tim McLemour, Attorney and President of Gentry, Tipton and McLemore; Alvin Nance, Executive Director and CEO of KCDC; Sherra Robinson, Outreach Director of Western Heights Dental; and Daniel Smith, Director of Public Policy and

Education for the Knoxville Chamber.

Supporters of the Academy idea have been gathering feedback from parents, business leaders, educators, and community members in a series of public meetings.

School Board candidates debate

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to say that children are not property.

The candidates for District 6 also commented.

Terry Hill said that McIntyre has "always acted in what he feels is best in the best interest of the school system."

Sandra Rowcliffe seemed to defend the superintendent saying, "We're making huge strides, I think we have to give some credit in moving our schools." She also said that he is doing what the current board of education has asked him to do.

"He is not producing educational leadership," said Brad Buchanan. Buchanan had earlier commented that McIntyre's drafted budget looks at balancing the budget based on

teacher turnover and said, "That disturbs me."

Tamara Shepherd was the most critical of the superintendent, saying "McIntyre is a finance person" and that the superintendent takes a "business oriented tact" with the position.

"He's not a good match for us," she said.

When asked about their support of Charter Schools in Knox County, Deathridge, Rowcliffe, Walker and Hill said they would support the publically-funded private schools with some reservations. Shepherd, Buchanan and Boyd voiced their opposition to Charters.

"We're farming our children out," said Boyd.

When asked their opinion on the use of Common Core in the school system, Hill, Deathridge, and Rowcliffe appeared to favor the

standards. "It's of value to everyone," Deathridge said.

Buchanan said that some of the Common Core standards are not appropriate to some grade levels and called for "putting the brakes on."

Boyd said "It's just another form of testing. College students without testing in school are doing just as well."

Hill said, of Common Core, "We need to educate our teachers, give them training and support."

None of the candidates were in favor of a larger student body in classrooms.

When asked about the most important issue facing the school board today, Deathridge and Buchanan said, "Budget." Hill said "Better educating our kids on varying pathways."

Shepherd said teacher evaluations and bonus. Boyd said it was "money" but said he wasn't sure how the budget would work. Hill said the most important thing was how much money from the budget is getting into the classroom. Walker said it was simply, "How

students learn." The League of Women Voters posed a series of questions to all the school board candidates in all the districts and you can go on line at <http://lwvknnoxville.org/files/lwv3.0.pdf> and read each question and answer.

The next debate between candidates for school board will be April 1st at 7 p.m. and will feature those candidates from Districts 4, 7 and 9. It will be held at Pellissippi State University on Magnolia Avenue.

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