

Local

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Board reviews charter request

■ Feelings mixed on plan for academy

By Lydia McCoy
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Some Knox County school board members appeared divided Monday over an application that would make the Emerald Charter Academy the district's first such charter school.

The proposal by Emerald Charter Schools, a nonprofit created by the Emerald Youth Foundation, calls for teaching kindergartners through eighth-graders and would be modeled after the Breakthrough Schools' E Prep Middle School and Village Prep Elementary School in Cleveland, Ohio. Officials hope to open it in August 2015.

It would start with 120 kindergarten and first-graders, and each subsequent year would add two more grades. The total proposed student population would be 450.

Knox County Schools Superintendent Jim McIntyre and a charter school review committee have recommended the board approve the school.

Steve Diggs, executive director for the Emerald Youth Foundation, answered a number of questions from board members on everything from disciplinary actions to the enrollment of special education students.

Diggs told the board the foundation wants to continue its long-standing partnership with the school system.

"We are very excited about this possibility of providing a strong school with a strong academic focus with personalized instruction," he said.

Some board members said they believed that the application was strong but still had a lot of unanswered questions. The board is slated to vote on it Wednesday.

Board member Karen Carson was one of the strongest voices during Monday's discussion against the application.

Carson said the state put the school board in a difficult situation by saying if a charter school meets or exceeds the scoring on the charter school application rubric, the board must approve it.

"I think it missed the fundamental question of: Is this what's best for all of Knox County kids?" she said.

Board member Thomas Deakins said he planned to support the application, even though he hasn't been a proponent of them in the past.

"We've never really had a good charter school application that came across from a local entity that was partnered up with Knox County Schools and really understood the need ... and being that strong," he said.

"I would say for the first time, I will probably support this."

Deakins said there may be some things in the application that he doesn't fundamentally believe in, but he believes the school system should "get outside the four walls and try something new."

Wednesday's meeting is open to the public. It will be held at 5 p.m. in the first-floor boardroom of the City County Building.



PHOTOS BY SAUL YOUNG/NEWS SENTINEL

Jessica McCollough, of Maryland, laughs while taking part with her colleagues in a team-building exercise at Alex Haley Farm on Monday during the Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute. The Institute is a weeklong training and education seminar for educators at the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom Schools. The Freedom Schools are summer and after-school education programs that serve disadvantaged youth.

Teaching kids to succeed

■ Freedom School workshop begins 15th season

By Kelsey Keny
Special to the News Sentinel

"What've you got?"
"Talent."
"What are we building?"
"Community."

Minnesota theater instructor Jan Mandell guided a group through this question-and-answer exercise Tuesday at the Alex Haley Farm in Clinton. This was no theater class, though.

Mandell was one of more than 1,000 people from across the country at a weeklong workshop for the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School program.

The program began in 1995 as a means to offer free summer-school programs of academic enrichment and civic engagement to children, specifically with efforts to improve reading skills. Available for students in kindergarten through grade 12, more than 100,000 scholars have participated. Approximately 12,500 will take part in the program this summer.



Rashem Sharpe of Minnesota climbs a wooden tower at the Alex Haley Farm in Clinton during a team-building exercise Monday with the Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute.

More than a decade ago, Rashida Ford, of Maryland, was one of those scholars. She continued as a leader and now serves as an Ella Baker trainer, teaching the servant leader interns this week.

"We train them in team building, child development and other supplemental workshops," Ford said.

She emphasized the program is available for all children, but they aim to reach underserved and underfunded communities.

"We like to go into those

neighborhoods where people say their children cannot, and show them that they can, through the Freedom School program."

Ford described the integrated reading program as the program's main focus.

"What we're learning here is how to implement the integrated reading program, No. 1 ... how to connect learning to everything we do. Whether it be through chants and cheers, critical thinking, making text connections to our world," Ford

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Video: Scenes from Monday's training

added. "We're looking at: how do I run a successful freedom school? How do I bring the spirit of community back to my own community? And then, most of all, what social action can I do?"

The workshop with Mandell and University of Minnesota theater instructor T. Mycheal Rambo focused on arts literacy. Rambo said these lessons help "engage the student in a way that allows them to find their own selves in the literature they're reading."

Kendall Hinote, of Nashville, made the drive to Clinton to participate, despite her own lack of immediate involvement with the program.

"We're going to have two new Freedom Schools in Nashville this summer," Hinote said. "I wanted to be able to go back to Nashville and help people see what formed those teachers."

The Children's Defense Fund will continue workshops through Thursday. The servant leader interns will lead Freedom Schools in more than 20 cities this summer.

Sad saga ends with joy as spelunkers reunite dog, owner

"Bell" may well be the luckiest unlucky coon dog in all of East Tennessee.

I found out about her from Knoxville Aaron Smith, 23, a student at Mississippi State. In late March, he and brother-in-law Heath Nicholls, both experienced spelunkers, were exploring a cave in Jefferson County.

Through a series of descents, they dropped approximately 90 feet into the main cavern and branched out to investigate a nearby passageway.

"It was real narrow," he recalled. "We had to sidestep between some boulders. Heath was in front. There was no light except for our headlamps."

"All of a sudden Heath hollered out, 'Dude! There's a dog down here!'"

The dog was scared, hungry and probably hadn't seen light until the

headlamps broke through. "She was wedged up in an alcove," Smith said. "We tried calling to her and coaxing her, but she was too scared. Finally, she whined. I got over to where she was and petted her for a long time. Then I took off my safety line and tied it to her collar."

By this point, the dog realized benefactors had arrived. Said Smith: "She was real compliant, just came right along with us."

Walking along the cave floor was one thing. Ascending was different. "Heath climbed to the top, got some webbing and dropped it down to me," he said. "I made a harness out of it so Heath could pull her up."

Back on top, the men found a telephone number inscribed on the collar. They dialed it. Lo and behold, someone answered.

"It was a miracle they found her," said Frankie Brown, who owns the 4-year-old Treeing Walker coon dog, valued at \$2,000. "I was tickled to

death."

Brown said his hound strayed into the cave while chasing a raccoon — 11 nights earlier!

He remained at the entrance until 3 a.m., listening to Bell's bark and calling her name.

"The next day he got hold of the rescue squad,



but when they realized it involved a dog in a cave, they declined," said Smith. "There wasn't anything else he could do but hope for the best."

"I went back several times, but she finally quit barking," said Brown. "I figured she had died."

The only thing that kept the dog alive was a small trickle of water on the floor of the cave.

Brown offered a hefty reward, but Smith and Nicholls turned it down.

"We checked back with him a few days later," Smith said. "Bell's fine and back to hunting."

In fact, she has earned enough field trial points to be named "night champion" from the Holston Coon Club.

I dare say she is avoiding any and all caves.



AARON SMITH/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS SENTINEL

Spelunkers Aaron Smith, left, and his brother-in-law, Heath Nicholls, found "Bell," a Treeing Walker coon hound, after she'd gotten trapped in a Jefferson County cave 11 days earlier.

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Sam Venable's column appears Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. He may be reached at 865-342-6272 or VenableS@knoxnews.com.