

## Emerald Youth Foundation eyeing charter school for Knox County

By Lydia X. McCoy

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Last year, the Emerald Youth Foundation conducted a study that looked at the gaps for youth in “urban Knoxville,” and one of the ideas was to create a new charter school.

The organization is finalizing details to set up a separate nonprofit organization, called Emerald Charter Schools, to operate a proposed charter school in North Knoxville. The school, to be named the Emerald Academy, would be for kindergarten through eighth-grade.

The Emerald Youth Foundation, an urban ministry that works with youth through a number of programs, including after-school tutoring and sports, said it plans to submit a letter of intent to Knox County Schools for the charter school by the end of the month and an official application in April.

“We’ve spent quite a bit of time in inner-city Knoxville and have had a good, long-standing relationship with the district. Coming out of a study that we did about a year ago, it became clear to us that we’ve got to, as a community, accelerate the pace of work toward closing the achievement gap between our urban kids and our urban schools and nonurban schools in Knoxville,” said Steve Diggs, the organization’s executive director.

“So we decided that we’re going to keep investing and try to invest more resources into traditional public schools, doing tutoring and other services, but we also felt like we needed to try to get a charter application approved.”

Diggs said if they get the approval from the school system, they hope to open in 2015 with about 100 kindergarten and first-graders. They plan to add on two additional grades each year following, with the school ultimately being able to take up to 400 students. The program will follow the models of a middle school and elementary school in Cleveland, Ohio.

He said the location of the school has not been determined, but they are looking at the Fulton High School zone or the North Knoxville area, where the organization is currently located.

Diggs said the goal is to have more students ready when they enter high school.

“Our urban high schools are big anchoring institutions in our urban communities ... there just seems like there’s a real critical need to have more kids ready in the ninth grade,” he said. “The current numbers are just clearly reflective that that’s not happening right now.”

Melissa Ogden, spokeswoman for Knox County Schools, said it would be inappropriate to comment on the organization’s intended application, because they have not received it.

While there are a number of charter schools in Nashville, Memphis and Chattanooga, Knox County has yet to open one. The district has received a handful of applications over the past several years, but none has been successful.

In 2012, the school system went to a charter school process that requires applicants to first submit a letter of intent, which gives some basic details about the proposed school and evidence of public outreach. That letter must be submitted no later than Feb. 1, while the actual application is due April 1.

Some school board members said they are aware that the organization has been working on an application but limited their comments on the proposal, since they haven’t seen it.

Indya Kincannon, whose district the school would be located if approved, said she has a lot of respect for the work that the Emerald Youth Foundation has done for students in the community. She said she looks forward to seeing the organization’s proposal and discussing it further.

“I think they have very positive intentions for helping kids and families in our community,” she said. “I’ll be curious to see what their plan is, what they propose to do that we aren’t doing already. ... If they do submit an application, I’ll certainly give it careful consideration.”

School board member Doug Harris, who said he is on the Emerald Youth Foundation’s board, believes there is still some work to be done to get all the pieces together. He said it is a great organization that knows and loves children.

Harris, who represents a portion of West Knoxville on the school board, said he also has yet to see the application, and noted that “they will have to have a good application for me to vote for it.”

