

## Former schools administrator among charter leaders

By Amy Nolan

Monday, February 3, 2014

The longtime leader of Emerald Youth Foundation, a local lawyer and a former Knox County Schools administrator are expected to be the three founding board members of an organization seeking to open a charter school in Knoxville.

Steve Diggs, Emerald Youth's executive director, said in early January a spin-off organization would be submitting a letter of intent by Feb. 1 with Knox County Schools stating that it would apply to operate a charter school in Knoxville's center city.

Should the school board approve its application, Emerald Academy would likely open with 100 kindergarten and first grade pupils and eventually grow to serve children through eighth grade. The organization has not chosen a site, but it will likely be in neighborhoods served by Fulton High School, Diggs said.

Emerald Academy would be free to students and much of its operating costs paid by the tax dollars that would educate those students in public schools.

The organization hopes to raise between \$300,000 and \$500,000 for its startup costs.

Founding board members will be Diggs, who founded the urban ministry 22 years ago; Tim McLemore, a Knoxville lawyer and member of Emerald's board of trustees; and Ed Hedgepath, a former Knox County Schools director of high schools and principal.

Emerald Youth operates programs for inner-city youth, many in partnership with churches, that include after-school tutoring, ACT preparation courses and sports leagues.

Diggs said the charter would be focused on attracting many of those same young people, and he points to the long-standing gap between achievement within inner-city schools and those in the suburbs as the necessity for creating an alternative.

The foundation's work has drawn the interest of high-profile donors including Gov. Bill Haslam and his sister-in-law, Dee Haslam, a television production executive, both of whom have served on its board of trustees.

The school would be modeled after Breakthrough Schools' E Prep middle school and

Village Prep elementary schools in Cleveland, Ohio, which serve primarily low-income, African-American children and claim to have significantly elevated their academic achievements.

The school claims a ratio of two adults to every 25-pupil classroom; uniforms; serves three meals a day; and has an extended school day.

Breakthrough has agreed to assist Emerald in opening its school, but the Knoxville school will not be a “cookie-cutter” version of the Cleveland sites, said John Crooks, an Emerald spokesman. “While our intention is to export some of what they are doing, they are not handing us a big binder that says here are all the details,” he says.

Instead the local organizers continue to talk to many organizations involved in operating charter schools and have talked with about 80 parents, community leaders, pastors and others in Knoxville, he said.

Among Breakthrough’s funders are the Charter School Growth Fund, which has its donors foundations synonymous with U.S. business, including the Sam Walton family, Bill Gates and Michael Dell.

According to its website, the fund also has a Tennessee affiliate whose donors include the state of Tennessee, the Hyde Family Foundation (AutoZone); Orrin H. Ingram Fund (Ingram Industries); and Tommy and Julie Frist, the brother and sister-in-law of former Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist.

Crooks said Emerald has not yet sought outside funding and is unfamiliar with the fund.

Tennessee currently has 65 charter schools but none in Knox County.

