

Charter aimed at autistic students

The school, which is seeking approval from two Chesco districts, hopes to open in East Marlborough in Sept.

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A Chester County psychologist wants permission from the Kennett Consolidated and Unionville-Chadds Ford School Districts to open a charter school that would serve elementary students with autistic disorders.

If approved, the Institute for Behavior Change Charter School, which hopes to open in East Marlborough Township in September, apparently would be the second charter in Pennsylvania for autistic children and the first for elementary students.

The Spectrum Charter School in Allegheny County, outside Pittsburgh, helps students ages 13 to 21, most of them autistic, make the transition from school to work.

The two Chester County school boards are expected to vote on the request in February or March.

The school would serve children with autistic spectrum disorders, which are neurological impairments that hinder the ability to understand and use nonverbal and verbal communication, interpret social behavior, and know how to adapt behavior to suit specific situations. The degree of functionality of affected children can vary widely.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that as many as six in 1,000 children could have the conditions.

The Institute for Behavior Change charter wants to start with 30 children, in grades one to five, and eventually have 70 students.

The school, with a full-time staff of at least eight, would be housed in an office suite. It would mainly serve autistic children who are not communicating well or at all, those with severe socialization problems, and those whose behavior would stigmatize them in a regular school setting, said Steven Kossor, who put together the plan for the proposed school.

Because it would be the only school of its kind in the state, it is expected to draw students from throughout the Philadelphia area and beyond, Kossor said. "I had one family from Columbus, Ohio, call and ask me how they could get their child in if the school opens."

The school, Kossor said, would help students master acceptable social behaviors and learning skills so that many could return to their districts with an enhanced ability to fit in. "I think this is an opportunity to help the lowest-functioning kids have a chance at integration" in a normal school

setting, he said.

The Institute for Behavior Change is a Coatesville-based nonprofit organization that provides behavior therapy in home and school settings for about 70 area children.

Kossor is the institute's executive director and the director of the Network for Behavior Change, a group psychological practice.

Instruction at the charter would be provided by three special education teachers; three or more therapeutic staff members would administer behavioral therapy.

The therapeutic staff, Kossor said, would be reimbursed by the state Welfare Department for their services in a manner similar to the way the institute staff is now paid.

Payments from schools would vary according to the children's school district. The Kennett district now pays charters \$13,717 per special education student, and the Unionville-Chadds Ford district pays \$15,155.

Though the charter school would, by law, be open to all students, Kossor said, "the probability of a parent of a typically developing child being interested in this school is almost zero."

That stance troubled some school board members and administrators when Kossor presented his plan to the Kennett and Unionville-Chadds Ford districts this month.

Kennett Superintendent Rudolph Karkosak asked whether having a school just for autistic students "could be discriminatory against other children," contrary to Pennsylvania's charter school law, which says that the schools must be open to all students.

In an interview, Unionville-Chadds Ford School Board President Edward V. Wandersee said Kossor's proposal is "really being discriminatory and that's not allowed by the charter laws."

That is an incorrect interpretation of the law, according to Tim Daniels, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools, a charter advocacy group.

Daniels said the existence of the Spectrum Charter and of a charter school in Bethlehem, Pa., for children with severe mental health problems proves that the law does allow that kind of specialization. Other charters, he said, are organized around performing arts, math and science instruction, or other specialties.

If either district turned down Kossor's proposal on that basis, Daniels said, it would "be overturned by the [state] charter appeals board."

There were other doubts raised by the school districts about Kossor's proposal, ranging from criticism of the proposed curriculum to questions

about whether he could get zoning and licensing approval for the proposed site and whether he had demonstrated enough community support.

Only four supporters came to the hearings, but Kossor said that many current institute clients are interested. He said he would address the other criticism in supplemental filings.

Teresa Wickersham, of West Grove, has two autistic sons, ages 2 and 4, who receive behavioral therapy through the Institute for Behavior Change. She said last week that if the charter opened, she would almost certainly send her older son there. She spoke in favor of Kossor's proposal at the Unionville-Chadds Ford hearing.

"I think it would be wonderful; he has a terrific idea," she said. "Helping kids learn age-appropriate behaviors early on while at the same time working on their education will lead to less problems down the road... . He's got the right idea for how to help these children."

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