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Charter School's First Step

by Annette Hinkle

The first school day of 2001 dawned bright and clear on the East End. And while many a student no doubt grumbled and groaned about returning to the classroom after the long holiday break, for 23 local children, including one from Sag Harbor, it was an exciting way to start the New Year - making friends and learning the ropes on the first day at the new CDCH Charter School tucked in the woods near East Hampton Airport.

The CDCH Charter School is for children age 5 to 11 (K-4), and is Suffolk County's first charter school. Occupying a 5,000 square foot building at East Hampton Indoor Tennis on Daniels Hole Road in Wainscott, the bright and airy school is decorated with the 50 state flags hanging from the high ceiling. The two classrooms and a large resource room are delineated with portable walls and there is a small kitchen area for lunch or arts projects and a large play area downstairs.

The brain child of East Hampton's Dawn Zimmerman, the school grew out of a need Zimmerman saw for special education opportunities relative to her own son, Jon.

"My main concern is special ed kids," says Zimmerman, the school's founder and executive director. "My son has autism and at age 3 he had to go to BOCES in Westhampton. If you live on the East End with a severely disabled kid he has to go to Westhampton."

Zimmerman eventually was able to enroll her son, who is now 11, in the Amagansett public school. In 1997, Zimmerman opened the Child Development Center of the Hamptons (CDCH) for children under age 5. Today, 120 children attend the preschool, which is integrated with both special ed and regular ed children. The CDCH Charter School now offers the next step for children, and plans are to soon begin adding a grade each year.

While the CDCH Charter School comes too late for Jon, who will soon be entering East Hampton Middle School, Zimmerman is thrilled that her dream has become a reality for other children.

"My vision was to take care of all the kids out here," she says. "I've learned in the past four years since he's been in Amagansett how wonderful it is to be included with your regular peers."

"The regular ed kids learn from the special ed kids and vice versa," says Zimmerman. "It's kids teaching kids. What's wonderful for the regular ed kids is that they do learn to respect kids that may not be at the same ability level. They learn empathy."

"We currently have 10 regular ed children and 13 with resource or special needs," says CDCH Charter School principal Steve Berman. "They are evenly distributed from kindergarten through 4th grade." The school has two classes, one for the K-1 children and another for grades 2, 3, 4. Currently, there are two teachers certified as both special ed and regular

teachers and two teachers aides, as well as speech, occupational and physical therapists and a social worker.

Charter schools are a fairly new idea in New York State. They are public schools and often designed to offer parents and students educational options. Since charter schools are public, students bring to them any public money that would normally go to their local public school. Berman admits that this, alone, will not be enough to finance the CDCH Charter School and fundraising efforts will definitely be a part of the school's future.

"Really the idea behind charter schools is to bring options in the educational services industry to kids and their families and bring more competition in," says Berman. "I think public schools do a wonderful job, I was a principal in the city at a public school, but it's not one size fits all."

"When we get special needs kids we will be able to accommodate them," adds Berman. "We use small classes, rich staffing and a thematic approach to teach kids at different levels and ages in the same class. It also helps teach talented and gifted students. We are set up to deal with all children."

"The curriculum is theme based," explains Berman. "We're going to be using a content area topic and deal with that for six weeks. All the instruction - reading, math, science, art, music and technical skills - all focus on the special topic."

"That allows us to have individual small or large group instruction based on what the kids need. They are all learning the same topic that will fit when the school grows. All the students work on the same subject at the same time of day. If one child is brighter and can move ahead, he can be grouped with kids a little older on his level. The theme is the same so the kids can move up or down."

This sort of flexibility is what Berman believes attracts the parents of regular education children to the school.

"They like the fact the class size is small," he says. "There is individual attention and flexibility in terms of grouping and the concept of the curriculum. They like the idea of being in a program that includes all children. It reflects what the real world is. It's a good place to learn sensitivity, mentoring and a wonderful place for children to make good friends."

But not everyone is thrilled with the new CDCH Charter School. Some local school superintendents, including Sag Harbor's Kathryn Holden, are upset that the school's focus has changed since they gave their initial approval for the project.

"When I signed off on it as the superintendent of Sag Harbor, it was with the original understanding that it would be only for developmentally disabled children," says Holden. "I agreed that for the severely developmentally disabled, the only program we had was at BOCES in Westhampton and we needed something that delivered comparable services for our children here."

"When I attended the last superintendents' meeting, that's the first I had heard that the state had changed the original proposal," says Holden. "It was no longer just for the developmentally disabled and now will be integrated."

Holden and other school superintendents fear that charter schools, especially those that compete for the same student body, could draw children and public funding away from their own districts.

"The resources charter schools drain from public schools could be devastating," says Holden. "If I receive x amount of money for one student, if I lose 50 to 100 students, there would be a definite impact."

"Now to find the original intent is overturned, I'm upset about it," says Holden who is disappointed that neither the state nor CDCH contacted her to inform her of the change. "Philosophically, I'm not opposed to the idea," she says. "I'm a firm believer of integrating the disabled with the regular population. But I signed off on something else."

"Initially we thought a school just for special needs children would be the most appropriate. That was the premise," acknowledges Berman. "But the application has gone through refinement and in terms of working with the state, you can't do that. It's considered a discriminatory action. In terms of the charter process we needed to change the focus."

Berman states that the school informed the community of the change at a meeting last March 3 in East Hampton. "We invited members of the local school districts," he says. "The purpose was not only to keep them informed of the status, but let them know if we were going to proceed, we needed to change the focus. We did talk to some of the superintendents. The school districts have always been supportive and we want to continue working with them. We're sorry if they didn't make the meeting."

Holden also expressed concern that charter schools aren't required to meet the same demands as public schools in terms of certified teachers, unions, or student assessments. But Steve Berman disputes this.

"We take the same tests," says Berman. "Part of the chartering process is where accountability, assessment and curriculum are surveyed very closely, plus there is ongoing monitoring. We have to maintain the same standards. We have to issue a yearly report card and an accountability plan that looks at school goals and how to measure them."

"There is a good bit of accountability. All students must take all the tests public schools do, in addition there is an extensive assessment program using standardized tests, portfolios and rubrics, which are a way of quantifying behavior or performance by looking at where a kid is at, and judging it against his own performance."

Berman is well aware that some local school superintendents are nervous about the CDCH Charter School and stresses the school will remain modest in size.

"We've tried to keep the program small, with slow growth, so there is no negative impact on other school districts," says Berman who expects to have no more than 50 students next fall.

"We feel we should expand in a controlled way."