Doors opening for Salem students

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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Although one door closed in Salem over the last year, another door opened.

When School District of Oconee County decided to close the Tamassee-Salem Middle and High School at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, Salem residents started looking for another option.

"The thing about closing the school is when we lose the school, then we lose these students in town, then we lose the parents — all that's gone, and it's awful for this town," Salem Mayor Diane Head said. "So we've got to put something back. I think it will help the whole town's outlook to have a school."

Through a contact at Clemson University, the town of Salem reached out to Zach Eikenberry, founding CEO of NEXT High School in Greenville, about the potential of opening a charter school in Salem.

That got the ball rolling. Then town leaders contacted Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell for insight. Blackwell understands that schools are economic drivers.

"The three ingredients to generating commercial development are infrastructure, rooftops and community patterns," he said. "Build a school and residential growth will follow, then commercial development will follow."

NEXT's board of directors set several of its own stipulations for opening a new campus in Salem, but the board's initial target of 100 students was met within days of opening an online registration portal.

The proposed charter got another green light when NEXT High School made its presentation before the South Carolina Public Charter School District's board of trustees. The board conditionally approved the needed amendment to NEXT's charter, which allows the school to serve all middle and high school grades at an additional campus.

The charter is now focusing on expanding its reach to areas outside of the Salem community. Since the SCPCSD has no traditional school district boundaries, any South Carolina student could enroll at the proposed charter school in Salem. The school would hold a blind lottery to determine which students would attend if the demand exceeded the school's available space.

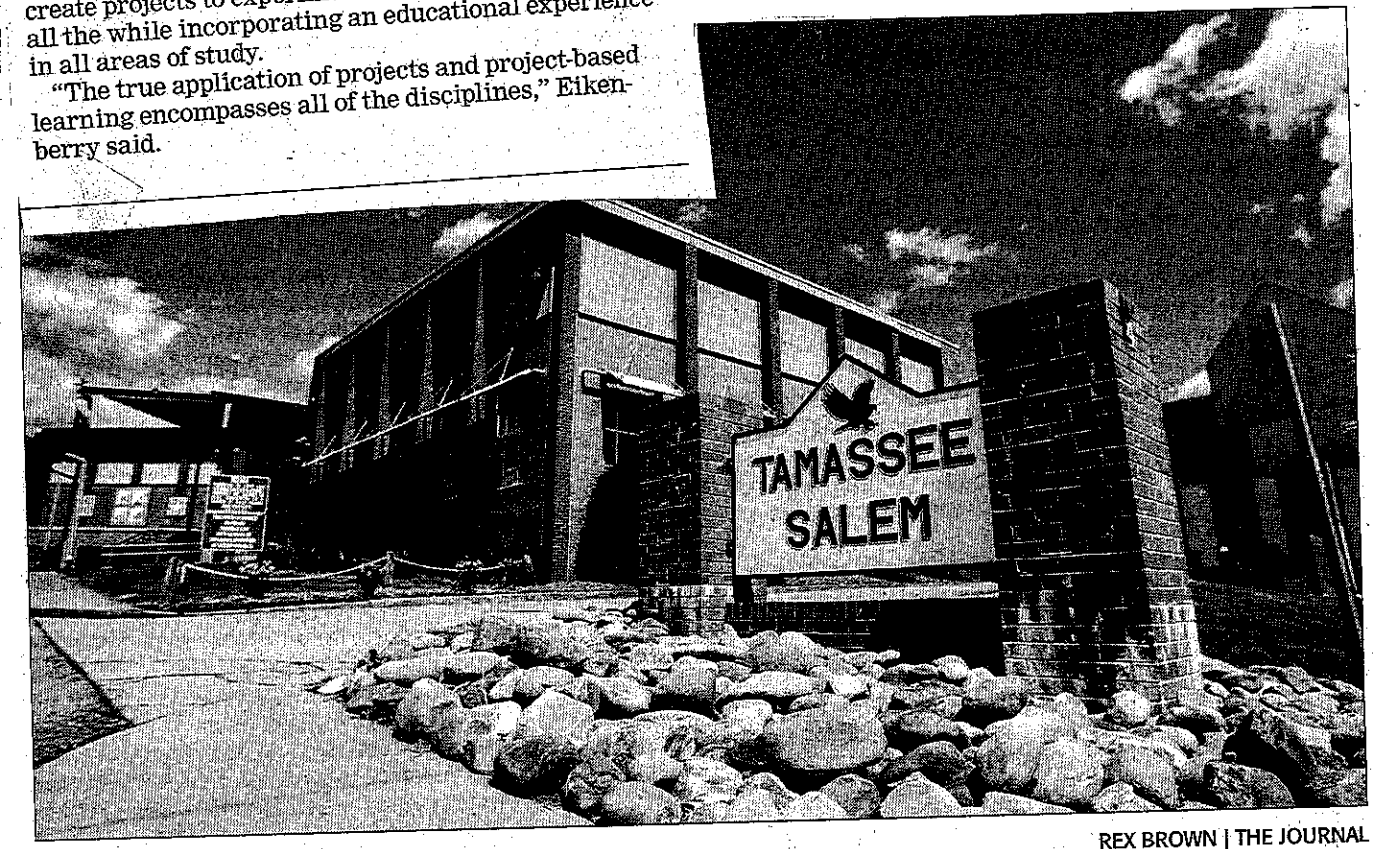
The proposed charter school would open in the building that housed the former Tamassee-Salem Middle and High. The town of Salem would retain ownership of the building and plans to lease it to NEXT to operate the charter school.

With an approval to expand at an additional campus, NEXT is in the process of conducting a required site and facility review to ensure code compliance requirements can be met to receive a certificate of occupancy from the State's Office of School Facilities.

Next School-Eagle Ridge is slated to open this fall is everything goes as planned. NEXT's model revolves around impact-based learning and focuses on the school's i3 process — interest, inquiry and impact.

The approach is to help students find what they're interested in, develop questions about that topic and then create projects to experiment in that area of interest — all the while incorporating an educational experience in all areas of study.

"The true application of projects and project-based learning encompasses all of the disciplines," Eikenberry said.



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