NEXT next for Salem?

Crowd packs meeting to hear from charter school officials

BY STEPHANIE JADRNICEK
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SALEM — By 6 p.m. Tuesday, there was barely any standing room left in the Salem Community Center. At least 250 people were packed inside and another 50 stood outside, listening through the open doors of the hall.

The parents, students and residents gathered together to listen to a presentation offered by NEXT High School. Based in Greenville, the charter school is considering opening another school in Salem for the 2016-17 school year.

A panel of five representatives from NEXT spoke to a community that will lose its middle and high school at the end of the school year. Chief program officer Nathan Robinson broke the ice with the curious crowd.

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Edda Cammick
Oconee County Council member

"Regardless of where we go from here, what we've seen and what we've gotten to know of you as a community — the way you come together and show up — is really powerful," he said. "We want our communication with you to be open and transparent, and to make sure we're carefully considering every detail we need to consider.

"We're here to make sure we don't miss anything and you don't miss anything either."

Robinson and others from NEXT have been visiting Tamassee-Salem Middle and High School and the town of Salem for a while. On Monday, its board will decide if NEXT will open another charter site in Salem.

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NEXT High School director of student needs Travis Wharton gave the group a breakdown of the charter school's education model and goals. At NEXT, teachers are known as pros, since teachers are professional educators. And students are called peers.

"We want our students to be invited to learn alongside us, to understand what the process of learning is along with us and have the expertise of professional educators working with them elbow-to-elbow while they engage in what we call impact-based learning," Wharton said.

He said the school accomplishes its mission of preparing young people for life by making sure that it accommodates an individualized perspective on education and by understanding how each and every student learns.

"The secret sauce to what we do is called impact-based learning," he said. "It's similar to project-based learning, but our brand is specifically ... different because our goal is to make sure we are identifying each student's individual value."

They achieve this goal through a learning model they call the i3 process — focusing on interest, inquiry and impact. First, they help the students identify their own individual interests, then they teach them how to inquire about and research those interests.

"Inquiry is the process of asking good questions," Wharton said. "You've always heard that there's no such thing as a stupid question, and that's correct. But your questions can be more accurate, and the answers can be more productive if you are asking a good question."

Then the students make an impact by building businesses, inventions, weather stations, apps — basically anything they're interested in creating.

Several students at NEXT High in Greenville wanted to start a coffee shop in the school. So they collaborated with their pros to develop a business model, and now those students are creating their own cash flow.

NEXT also brings in guest speakers regularly, not to teach the students, but to expose them to various points of view.

"The goal is to think analytically, to think critically and to do all of that charitably," Robinson said.

Oconee County Council member Edda Cammick was among the crowd Tuesday evening. She voiced her approval about the potential of a charter school opening in Salem.

"It didn't take me long to figure out that Salem is the redheaded stepchild as far as the county goes," she said. "But we're going to put Salem back on the map — we no longer want to assume the role of the redheaded stepchild, and I think this is our first step toward a much brighter future."

As a college professor whose science classes are inquiry-based, Cammick said she is excited about any innovation in education, because the traditional method simply does not work for her.

Salem Mayor Diane Head was encouraged by the large turnout for the presentation and thought most of the residents embraced the idea of the charter school. She said the major questions were answered on Tuesday, but the representatives will respond to the remaining questions within the next few days.

She said many people wondered if the Salem charter school would be a middle and high school, because NEXT High School in Greenville only offers classes for grades nine through 12. But the representatives confirmed that the Salem charter would include middle school as well.

"The three things I've heard the most questions about are transportation, lunches and sports," Head said.

As an Oconee County school bus driver, Head doesn't transport that many students to school, because most are car-riders these days. She would like to see free and reduced lunches provided at the charter school and hopefully see sports added in the future.

"I don't think you'd find anybody who's into sports more than I am, and at the same time, I want our kids to get a good education here," she said. "I do want to see sports — I'm not sure it'll happen the first year. As far as fundraising and making our own money to have a team, that's nothing new to us.

"You can make things happen if you want to — you've just got to get a little creative."

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