

Pickens could get charter school

Educator hopes to open in fall of 2012 with 48 sixth-, seventh-grade students

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PICKENS—An educator who spent 12 years at Holly Springs Elementary School is working to bring a different kind of public school to Pickens County.

The Youth Leadership Academy, a charter public school, could open in the fall of 2012 for students who “want to experience success outside the traditional school setting in a small

group, hands-on learning environment,” according to the school’s application.

The educator, Patsy Smith, chairs the planning committee that wants to create a school that can be a model across the state.

They’re aiming for classrooms where ideas and experiential learning can flourish, with teacher as facilitator instead of conveyor of knowledge, Smith said, putting “more responsibility for learning on the students.”

In addition to Smith, who is now with Clemson University’s Youth Learning Institute, the planning committee includes a representative from the state Department of Education and two administrators from the Youth Learning Institute.

Smith, who came on board when developer Jim Anthony’s Cliffs Communities and foundations donated the ZestQuest program to the university, said the Youth Learning Academy plan calls for the school to start with 48 students in the sixth and seventh grades.

Each year a higher grade will

be added until the school extends to 12th grade, and each year a new group of 24 sixth-graders will be admitted.

The curriculum will focus on science, technology, engineering and math, Smith said, with an emphasis on group work using instructional materials from another school partner, Pitsco Education Inc.

“As opposed to memorization of facts, they actually do problem-solving and group projects where you actually create something—you apply what you learn,” Smith

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said. “It’s not just learning for the sake of learning facts, so students get that very important experience with application.”

While Smith was quick to commend the School District of Pickens County, she said the committee opted to organize through the state Public Charter School District rather than through the local district so the Youth Learning Academy can draw students from across county lines.

“We are not far from Greenville, from Anderson, Oconee, so we are really hoping our student

population will be diverse, as far as the districts we draw from,” she said.

If the application is approved, Smith said, the school will open in the Youth Learning Institute headquarters in Pickens, and future Youth Leadership Academies could be opened at other YLI facilities around the state.

Applying doesn’t guarantee approval. The committee’s application, almost 70 pages long, must first be approved by the state Department of Education, then by the state Public Charter School District.

Statewide enrollment is expected to increase from 9,000 this year to 11,000 next year, said Wayne Brazell, superintendent of the statewide district. But not

all charter schools succeed, and failure means closure.

“I suspect that some of the 40-plus schools that are open now will be closing this year,” he said.

One charter-school success story is in Greenville County, where Greenville Tech Charter High School has spawned two sister schools during its 11-year run. Principal Fred Crawford, a veteran of the Pickens County school district, said Pickens County is certainly large enough to support a charter school.

He also noted his school’s partnership with Greenville Tech, and said Clemson would be a valuable partner for a school in Pickens County.