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Green Woods Charter: the past, present and the future

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By Sue Ann Rybak

Parents of Green Woods Charter students packed the basement of the former St. Mary's school located on Conaroe Street on Wednesday, Feb. 6 to listen to Green Woods Charter CEO Jean Wallace discuss the past, present and future of Green Woods Charter Elementary School.

Also in attendance were Steven Masterson, Dean of Faculty and Students, Gina Knowles, Special Education Coordinator, Kate Langdon, Curriculum Coordinator, and Nicole Starke, Technology Coordinator.

Last September, Green Woods Charter school moved from its original location at the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education, 8480 Hagys Mill Rd, to its current location in Manayunk.

Wallace began the meeting by discussing charter school law and the history of Green Woods Charter. She said charter schools are public schools because they are funded by taxpayers' dollars.

"Sixty percent of our funding in Philadelphia comes from the state and the remaining 40 percent comes from your real estate taxes," Wallace said. "In 1997, legislators created Pennsylvania Charter School Law to establish charter schools with an expressed purpose: to be "... innovative models for school reform," Wallace said. "Charter schools are supposed to operate independently of the school district structure. It was this anonymity that the legislative leaders believed we needed to break free of the status quo."

Wallace said charter schools weren't founded to be the traditional K through 8th school. She said charter schools were meant to be "schools that fostered innovation and infused a different energy under the public school system."

“Charter schools serve 2.3 million students in the United States,” Wallace said. “We are self-managed by a CEO and governed by a board of trustees. This is important because I am not an executive director of a nonprofit and I am not a principal. It’s a unique position to be a CEO of a school because you’re really looking at the business of education. You really have to think of your school in terms of resources and resource development, which is something the board and I will be working on for the next several years.”

Wallace said charter schools operate on 76 cents on the dollar compared to traditional schools. She said charter schools must finance their own facilities.

Developing curriculum from scratch

When we first went to the Department of Education, we said we would like to build our curriculum around the environmental ecology standards; can you tell us what you have got in the state. And what they came back with was we don’t have a K through 8th standard based curriculum in the state around environment and ecology standards.

Wallace said curriculum is modeled after the national researched-based program – EIC - using the environment as an integrating context.

Green Woods Charter School received its charter in 2002 from the School District of Philadelphia. The initial charter allowed for 225 students and was first renewed in 2007 with a renewal term of five years.

“Students learn through project-based learning and investigating real-world issues that make learning relevant,” Wallace said. “In 2008, our teachers presented our K through 8 EIC Curriculum to the Department of Education and they were flabbergasted.”

Wallace said in April 2011, Green Woods Charter was given the approval to grow the school to 675 students. She added that the school made settlement on the site in Roxborough in June 2012.

Breaking new ground

In October 2012, Green Woods Charter broke the ground on a 60,000 square foot building at 468 Domino Lane, the former site of Keenan’s Valley View Inn in Roxborough.

The new state of the art facility will have 27 classrooms to support a K-8 student population of 675 – more than tripling the size of its old facility at the Schuylkill Center.

“The building will cover 2.5 acres of the 5.5 acre site, which will highlight an outdoor learning area and urban green space with over a quarter mile of interconnected walkways for exploration and discovery,” Wallace said. “The new facility will feature an outdoor learning laboratory including aquatic habitats, (pond, stream, and wetland) as well as a greenhouse, an amphitheater, and wifi to hold class outdoors.”

She said the goal was to provide opportunities for students “to engage in experimental investigations with real questions and real answers. I think as a staff it has all the things we always talked about.”

Wallace announced that students will be able to move into the new facility in January 2014 after winter break.

Next year, Wallace said the Green Woods Charter hopes to join the WeatherBug Schools Program (www.weatherbug.com), the leading provider of consumer and professional weather products and operator of the largest weather observing and lightning network. The WeatherBug Schools Program includes a weather station, high-definition camera, lightning sensor and Web-based educational software tools.

Wallace said WeatherBug Achieve, the interactive software program, will enable teachers to apply real-world conditions to help teach concepts in math, science and geography. She added that students will study every component of the weather.

“The WeatherBug Tracking Station will allow students to think like a scientist by generating and testing hypothesis through its interactive lessons and integration of live weather data,” Wallace said.

Parents will be able to go to the school's website, www.greenwoodscharter.org, and click on a link to access the school's online weather center.

URL:

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