



Charter school preps for change

Entrepreneurship school's students thriving, but enrollment, funding drops force plan alteration

By **SHANNON MORTLAND**

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Not everything has worked according to plan at Entrepreneurship Preparatory School in Cleveland, which is forcing the well-regarded charter school known as E-Prep to make some mid-course corrections.

Students at the school that's now in its third year are achieving high test scores, and all eighth-grade E-Prep students are on their way to college preparatory high schools next year. However, there have been a few wrenches thrown in the wheel, said John Zitzner, founder of E-Prep.

Enrollment is not as high as expected because so many Cleveland children move so often, Mr. Zitzner said. In addition, the credit crisis has delayed some of E-Prep's plans to renovate its new location in Tyler Village on the city's East Side, and raising money has been harder than expected.

"I thought that if we could prove that urban education works, people would come out of the woodwork" with financial support, Mr. Zitzner said. "That hasn't happened, and it's a dilemma we're dealing with."

The prospects for receiving more money from the state don't look bright, either. Charter schools in Cleveland only receive two-thirds of the money that public schools get from the state per student, so E-Prep must raise \$1 million in private donations each year just to break even, Mr. Zitzner said. Although E-Prep has hired lobbyists to urge state legislators to provide more state money for charter schools, he said the idea isn't gaining momentum.

"Nobody has ever said this isn't worth pursuing," Mr. Zitzner said. "They just say, "We don't have any money.'"

Feeder system

E-Prep currently consists of sixth, seventh and eighth grades. The school originally planned to expand into high school as its students progressed, but administrators determined that it would be smarter to start an elementary school in the 2009-2010 school year, Mr. Zitzner said.

Many children who have enrolled at E-Prep in sixth grade have been what Mr. Zitzner believes are some of the lowest-achieving children in the Cleveland public schools. It will be easier to teach future students at

higher levels if the school starts working with them before they have the chance to fall behind, he said.

Plans for a high school also were halted when enrollment levels dropped more than expected. This year, E-Prep has only about 50 eighth graders, and its sixth-grade class has only 175 students — 45 students shy of the expected sixth-grade enrollment of 220, Mr. Zitzner said.

E-Prep also had hoped to have at least 70 seventh-graders this year, but now has 55 students. The low enrollment numbers forced E-Prep to lay off six people earlier this month, he said. E-Prep now has employs 25.

Some students dropped out because they moved and couldn't find transportation to the school, Mr. Zitzner said. Other parents decided to put their children back in the Cleveland public schools because they didn't like the high levels of discipline at E-Prep, he said. For example, the students go to school from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and there is no talking in the halls.

For the eighth-graders who have stayed, E-Prep is working with local college preparatory high schools to enroll those students for the next academic year. Mr. Zitzner said 16 local public and private high schools visited E-Prep Oct. 8 to interview the eighth-graders, and several schools were so impressed that they offered to take all 50 eighth-graders. Two East Coast boarding schools even visited E-Prep.

"We feel really good about that decision" not to expand into high school, Mr. Zitzner said. "We're feeding (existing local high schools) with minority, inner-city kids."

Moving day delay

Mr. Zitzner isn't ready to give up on E-Prep. Indeed, the school plans to move next May to a new site at Tyler Village, which is a former elevator plant on East 36th Street that is being redeveloped into an arts, office, retail and education center. E-Prep has run out of room at the ShoreBank Building on East 105th Street.

Renovations on the first and second floors have begun at Tyler Village, but E-Prep will hold off on renovations to the third floor of one building, Mr. Zitzner said. E-Prep planned to take out loans for the third-floor renovations, but the credit crisis has forced the school to delay that phase until January 2010, he said.

E-Prep already has raised \$300,000 in private support toward a goal of raising \$8 million for renovations at Tyler Village, he said.

As Mr. Zitzner continues to solicit local foundations for more money, he's also in talks with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District to figure out how the charter school can sustain itself in the long run.

In that vein, the Cleveland, Gund and Martha Holden Jennings foundations granted a total of \$100,000 to E-Prep, the Citizen's Academy and Intergenerational School — all three of which are charter schools on the East Side — to hire a consultant to determine how those schools could collaborate to become financially self-sustainable, Mr. Zitzner said.



Despite some financial and enrollment troubles at E-Prep, founder John Zitzner says the charter school's eighth-graders are impressing officials from college preparatory high schools.

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