

Plan brings public charter school to Kansas City

By Joe Robertson
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A move toward collaboration between Kansas City Public Schools and public charter schools is about to be put to the test.

Kansas City Superintendent Steve Green and midtown parent organizers Kristin Littrell and Andrew Johnson said Wednesday the group and the district intend to continue supporting one another to mold a new neighborhood public school with Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World Charter Schools.

A group of midtown parents trying to mold a new neighborhood public school has chosen a partner – Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World Charter Schools. The group plans to announce its decision Thursday.

This would be the first foray into the heartland for Citizens of the World, which has three schools in the Los Angeles area and last year opened two in New York City – encountering the tensions that have marked the advance of charter schools throughout the country.

But some uncommon factors give the Kansas City venture an opening for a smoother landing.

“We wanted families in midtown to have an energetic, innovative school for their neighborhood.”

- Kristen Littrell, parent organizer

The midtown parents' quest began with conversations with the school district about building support for opening a school in the same manner that the district is reopening Hale Cook Elementary School in the southwest area.

Midtown parent organizers Kristin Littrell and Andrew Johnson and Kansas City Superintendent Steve Green said Wednesday the group and the district intend to continue supporting one another.



Kansas City Superintendent Steve Green (pictured) and midtown parent organizers Kristen Littrell and Andrew Johnson said Wednesday the group and the district intend to continue supporting one another to mold a new neighborhood public school with Los Angeles-based Citizens of the World Charter Schools. | FILE PHOTO

Citizens of the World, which was cast in the role of invaders by charter school opponents in New York City, comes to Kansas City at the invitation of parents who took the unusual step last fall of seeking potential school partners by distributing a request for proposals.

“That was the first parent request for proposal we had ever seen,” Citizens of the World CEO Kriste Dragon said by telephone from Los Angeles.

Much still must happen for a school to open by a target date of fall 2016.

Missouri law requires charter schools to be sponsored – generally by a university or the surrounding school district – and the sponsorship has to be approved by the state school board.

Conversations about potential sponsorship, including with the district, are just beginning. The site for the school, if it happens, is still wide open within the midtown area.

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And what the school would look like – its programming and partners – will depend on community conversations still to come, Dragon said.

But the parents and the charter organization agree on some core visions, which is what married them.

From the beginning when midtown families began gathering last summer, they wanted a neighborhood school racially and economically diverse and inspiring creative, project-based learning.

“We wanted families in midtown to have an energetic, innovative school for their neighborhood,” said Littrell, whose children are 5 and 2.

The families organizing the opening of Hale Cook farther south at 7302 Pennsylvania Avenue determined they had enough confidence that Kansas City Public Schools, with their support, could open such a school.

A district school for midtown was an option as well, Johnson said. But it was a difficult decision. The group had more than 300 Facebook followers and 80 adults who attended a meeting last August at Redeemer Fellowship, and consensus was hard to find.

Instead of trying to pick the best option from what they could see, Johnson said, the group created the request for proposals describing the school they wanted and put it on the Internet.

The potential school’s midtown area is loosely described as extending from Union Station at the north end to Brush Creek on the south end and between the state line and U.S. 71.

The district’s Longfellow and Faxon elementary schools sit toward the eastern side of that boundary. Its magnet schools – Foreign Language Academy in midtown and Border Star Montessori School in Brookside – have enrolled some midtown students.

Kansas City’s charter schools have tended to segregate by race. The more segregated schools in the district are its magnet schools, not the neighborhood schools.

Citizens of the World looks for neighborhoods where it can promote a diverse school, Dragon said. Its five schools on average are 62 percent students of color, 25 percent English language learners and 50 percent students who qualify for lunch assistance, the organization reported.

When the midtown group was looking at the request for proposal responses last fall, Kansas City Public Schools was wrapped in controversy over its current unaccredited status, the threat of student transfers and potential state intervention.

The group is encouraged by signs of stability and improvement in the district, Littrell said. But the charter organization’s proposal became their choice.

“We do think the district is making positive change,” Littrell said. “We want to continue to work with the district.”

Kansas City is keeping the door open, Green said. The district already has worked with charter schools in turning over some of the district’s vacant schools. Several conversations are underway about other potential partnerships, such as collaborating on schools or sharing buildings, he said.

The district is open to sponsoring charter schools if the conditions are right.

“This is not the old Kansas City Public Schools anymore,” Green said. “We’re trying to change the dynamic between the district and charter schools. I think there can be common ground.”

Johnson, whose children are 4 and 1, wants the faded memory of the neighborhood school to come back in the city. His own survey found there are 20 school-age children living on his block in Hyde Park and they attend 12 schools.

Having that one school where most of the kids on the block go together, he said, “is an essential part of what makes a community strong.”

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