

Trades charter school will open this fall

A new charter school in East Multnomah County is partnering with apprenticeship training programs to offer classes focusing on construction trades, engineering and architecture.

The Academy for Architecture, Construction and Engineering (ACE) will open its doors in September to 250 high school juniors. Enrollment could double the following year when both juniors and seniors will attend.

The academy will operate out of the Willamette Carpenters Training Center, 4222 NE 158th Ave., Portland.

ACE is the brainchild of the Oregon Building Congress, an organization that for years has brought together teachers, businesses, public agencies and training programs to increase the quality and diversity of applicants entering the building industry.

OBC has partnered with Reynolds, Centennial, Parkrose and Gresham-Barlow school districts, and five apprenticeship training programs — WCTC, the NECA-IBEW Electrical Training Center, the HVAC & Metals

Institute of Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, the Northwest Laborers-Employers Training Trust, and the open shop Northwest College of Construction — to create the new school.

Reynolds School District is the actual sponsor of the charter. Charter schools are independently run, but publicly funded. ACE has its own board of directors who formulate policies, curriculum and budgets. Among the board members is Ken Fry, director of the NECA-IBEW Electrical Training Center.

John Steffens, director of the Willamette Carpenters Training Center (and vice president of OBC), and Ric Olander, president of Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, also serve on committees that will hire teachers and establish the curriculum at ACE.

Students will follow A Day/B Day schedules, receiving core classes at their home schools on on day, then attending the academy the next. The two-year program will offer graduation credits in math, science and Eng-

lish, as well as opportunities to intern and job shadow. All juniors will take construction courses to learn the basics. As seniors, they can specialize in architecture, engineering or one of the trades.

"This is project-based learning. Students won't be sitting around at a table. They will be learning by doing," Dick O'Connor, executive director of OBC told the NW Labor Press.

Students will be organized into small "work crews," with four or five crews creating a learning group. Two learning groups will be anchored to a certified teacher and a technical education instructor.

O'Connor said 140 applicants have applied for the six teaching posts. ACE faculty will consist of a state certified teachers for math, science and English, plus three instructors with skills in either construction, architecture or engineering.

"We should be able to hire some fabulous teachers," O'Connor said.

At an open house for students and parents last month, Mike Taylor, a retired superintendent from Parkrose High School and the newly-hired principal of ACE, said that in addition to the teachers, students will have access to the training centers.

"These are state-of-the-art facilities with top-notch computer labs and CAD labs," Taylor said. "The HVAC Institute has some of the best math art on its walls that I've ever seen. It's a wonderful facility."

"This is a resource I guarantee you no other school can provide," he said.

A trades charter school has been in

the works for several years.

"We sat down with industry and educators, shared our ideas and desires, and found we could really help each other by building this school," O'Connor said. "The collaboration on



this has been phenomenal,"

Fry, a past president of OBC, said that in 2006 the organization presented its plan to Portland Public Schools, but was turned down ... twice.

OBC then took its proposal to school districts in East Multnomah County, where poverty rates are high and schools are busting at the seams. "The reception there was quite different," Fry said.

Reynolds School District Superintendent Terry Kneisler was eager to listen, Fry said. Meetings were arranged with administrators from other school districts in the area, and the result is the new charter school.

"My initial reaction was, 'someone pinch me, I can't believe this is finally happening,'" Steffens told the NW Labor Press.

ACE is leasing space for three years from the Willamette Carpenters Training Center, which is located in the Reynolds School District. If all goes as planned and it performs to state standards, ACE can apply for another five-year grant.

The Willamette Carpenters Training Center has remodeled about 7,000 square feet of its second floor to accommodate students this fall. It is already talking about adding six more classrooms, a library, new restrooms

and a meeting hall with a serving kitchen that can seat up to 200 people.

Applications to ACE are available at high school counseling offices. Each school is guaranteed placing a certain number of students based on its enrollment. If schools don't fill their slots by March 15 they will be redistributed. If there are more applicants than space, students will be selected by lottery. The only requirement is that applicants be a junior with at least a 2.0 grade point average.

"This is not an experiment," Taylor said at the open house. "Everything has been demonstrated to be an acceptable practice. We'll do what we do extremely well."

Editor's Note: ACE Academy is modeled after the Center for Advanced Learning, another charter school in East Multnomah County. CAL focuses on health care, manufacturing technology and engineering. It is in the Gresham school district.

OBC's Dick O'Connor said talks are ongoing with the affiliated training programs and the state apprenticeship office as to whether ACE grads will be allowed direct entry into training programs.

"Our hope is to provide direct entry. But it's not official yet," said John Steffens, director of the Willamette Carpenters Training Center.

Ken Fry of the NECA-IBEW Electrical Training Center and Ric Olander of the HVAC & Metals Institute told the NW Labor Press that graduates may not get direct entry into their programs, but they'll definitely have a leg up on other applicants.

"Entry is being discussed," Fry said. "It depends on the trade and what each training center wants to do."

Currently, graduates from Benson High School in Portland and from the Clark County Skills Center in Vancouver, Wash., can apply to the Electrical Training Center monthly, while others can apply only during open enrollment, which takes place twice a year.



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