

Charter school eyes campus expansion

Charter

California-based PUC Achieve envisions revitalization of Hudson Avenue, and of public education in the city

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When PUC Achieve Charter School opened in 2014, its location in a worndown former church off Hudson Avenue was no selling point. Three years later, the school and its backers are looking to make it into the cornerstone of an educational dynasty.

The school, imported from California by the charter school support organization E3 Rochester, has already begun working on an ambitious expansion it believes would contribute toward a revitalization of Hudson Avenue, and of public education in the city.

That former church on Mark Street has a new gymnasium and classrooms, thanks to a \$5.1 million addition put on over the summer. And E3 Rochester, having collected more than \$8 million in loans from banks and individuals, is now buying up properties across three city blocks as part of an envisioned PUC K-12 campus.

The school now serves grades 5-7 and will add eighth grade next year. It wants to expand to high school in 2018 with a new building two blocks south on Wads-

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Students, from left, Darrell Bruce, sixth grade, Shawnique Hagen, seventh grade, and K'Lah Gause, fifth grade, play ball last week inside the large new gym, part of the recent addition at PUC Achieve Charter School on Mark Street in Rochester.

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PUC Achieve Charter School at 14 Mark St. in Rochester currently serves grades 5-7.

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worth Street. After that, it would add a K-4 elementary school farther east on Mark Street.

In the middle of the three school buildings, PUC and E3 envision a fullsize athletic field with bleachers on what is now Reed Park. E3 has bought up most of the houses on the block and has its sights on the others.

“We could create a walkable neighborhood, with this as the education corridor,” said E3 Vice Chairman Bryan Hickman. “It would transform the perception of the entire northeast quadrant.”

Indeed, the PUC expansion plan — tentative as it is — fits in with a spurt of investment happening along that stretch of Hudson Avenue, where businesses and nonprofits are growing in place.

David Carr, construction manager for the Coalition of Northeast Associations (CONEA), said about \$150 million worth of development will be taking place between now and the spring. That includes an expansion to the Anthony L. Jordan Health Center on Holland Street and a possible apartment complex near Cleveland Street.

“We have some good stuff going on, and all the projects are lining up,” Carr said. “You’ve got a lot of vacant land and properties that should be torn down; we need to bring it back up.”

High expectations

PUC Achieve Charter School is the first Rochester location of the Los Angeles-based PUC charter network. It offers long school days, long school years and an emphasis on the performing arts.

In the school’s first year, students performed very poorly on the state math and English exams. In 2016, the results improved incrementally to 10 percent proficiency in English and 13 percent in math.

Arkee Allen arrived as principal midway through last school year after working at East High School, Sodus High School and University Prep Charter School.

Allen, one of the top wrestlers in the Ivy League during his days at Columbia University, is a commanding presence in the building. He's a stickler for discipline but is equally quick with praise and encouragement. The school only has one suspension so far this year, he said.

The core of his academic philosophy is insisting on high expectations, even while acknowledging children's trauma and challenges.

"Sometimes a teacher will say, 'Well, how can I give them homework when they get home so late?' " he said. "But they have to learn just like anyone else's kid. ... We have to do more, not less."

E3 Chairman Joe Klein said hiring Allen will propel PUC Achieve toward success; students all named him first as the best part of school.

"It's way more nice and civilized and welcoming," fifth-grader Amare Edwards- Ferrell said. "They don't yell as much as at my last school."

As with all charter schools, PUC will need to prove it is succeeding within five years to receive a renewed charter. It will also seek an amendment to change from grades 5-8 to 5-12 starting in 2018.

Neither of those are sure bets. E3 found many banks weren't enthusiastic about lending money to buy buildings for a school that could close in two years.

Instead, it secured low-interest loans of at least \$100,000 from about three dozen individuals. Hickman and Klein chipped in more than \$600,000 together, according to 2014 financial statements.

That, together with \$4 million from local banks, makes up the starting capital for the envisioned expansion. E3 owns the current school building and leases it to PUC at a rate that just covers its mortgage payments.

The arrangement highlights the difficulty charter schools face in finding and financing school buildings. Unlike traditional public schools, they do not receive capital money, making it useful to have well-heeled backers.

PUC is an acronym for Partnerships Uplifting Communities, and the school hopes to become an anchor for the city's entire northeast quadrant.

Klein said E3 is petitioning the state to change its charter school law to allow them to draw students from just the surrounding neighborhood; as it is, that is where the school advertises and recruits most heavily. About 60 percent of the current students live within a mile and a half of the school.

E3's grandest vision is eventually to open 11 schools with seats for another 6,000 students. E3 also proposed opening a charter school in the Beechwood neighborhood but was rebuffed by residents there. Conversely, CONEA's Carr said charter schools and traditional public schools are all the same to him.

"A lot of people don't like PUC because it's a charter school," he said. "I don't care who educates these kids as long as they get educated."

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