

Newly OK'd charter school set to open in Rochester

It intends to enroll 525 students in grades K-6

Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

A new charter elementary school will open in Rochester in the fall, with a focus on STEM education and an enrollment preference for English language learners.

The school, the Citizenship and Science Academy of Rochester Charter School, received approval from the Board of Regents at its December meeting. It is the first charter school approved to open in Rochester since the Academy of Health Sciences Charter School opened in 2019.

The school intends eventually to enroll 525 students in grades K-6, with a promise to “create a college-bound culture starting at kindergarten and hopes to expand after its initial term to become K-12. It has not announced a location in the city. It will be part of the Syracuse-based Science Academies of New York (SANY) Charter Schools organization, joining existing schools in Syracuse and Utica. There will be no local board of trustees; rather, the school will be governed by the overarching SANY board, with one Rochester representative, Lindsay Cray, to be appointed.

Tolga Hayali, the SANY superintendent, said

the governance structure allows for cost-savings and “replicating its successful model.” A spokesman for the state Education Department added that the school pledged to rotate the meetings among Syracuse, Utica and Rochester, and to add more Rochester representatives.

The SANY schools and their chairman, Fehmi Damkaci, are part of a wide-ranging network connected to exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. The existing Rochester Academy Charter School is, as well.

Damkaci is founder and chief executive officer.

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utive of Terra Science and Education, a nonprofit educational organization that works directly with SANY. Reporting by the *Democrat and Chronicle* and NorthJersey.com has found previous connections in procuring, hiring and real estate transactions between Terra and entities with connections to the Gulenist movement.

Terra intervened in Rochester Academy Charter School’s purchase of its building on Latta Road in 2016, resulting in a fast windfall of at least

increase of about 450 students from 2019-20. That will divert about \$96 million in state funding from RCSD.

At the same time, RCSD projects its own enrollment to decline by about 600 students to 27,700. Together with the Urban-Suburban program, that means that more than one in five public school students in the city will be attending school somewhere outside RCSD.

\$300,000.

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SANY and its leaders, including Damkaci, deny any affiliation with Gulen, or between Rochester Academy Charter School and the official network that the new Rochester school now joins. Fethullah Gulen himself is viewed by many as a legitimate political rival of authoritarian Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Charter school enrollment in the Rochester area is projected at about 6,700 for 2020-21, an

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