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Texas OKs Charter For UT Tyler Academy

By EMILY GUEVARA

Staff Writer

A charter school set to open in East Texas next year would provide students with a project-based learning environment emphasizing science, technology, engineering and math.

The State Board of Education on Friday granted a charter to The University of Texas at Tyler Innovation Academy.

The school is expected to open in fall 2012 with three campuses at the university's facilities in Tyler, Longview and Palestine, according to a statement from the education agency. The state authorized the school to serve up to 2,400 students.

In its first year, campuses would serve third- through sixth-graders adding one grade level each year after that. The school ultimately would serve third- through 12th-graders.

Dr. Michael Odell, one of a handful of people directly involved with the project, said in a prepared statement that organizers are very excited about the opportunity to work with the community in this way.

"We believe this initiative will allow us to continue to expand the university's influence within educational programming in East Texas," he said, according to the statement.

Odell is associate vice president for sponsored research and director of federal relations at UT Tyler.

Dr. Wes Hickey, an associate professor and coordinator of UT Tyler's superintendent program,

said in October that the university faculty began discussing the idea of operating a charter school two to three years ago.

He said they discussed whether it would be beneficial to the university, its students and the students who would attend the school. And last spring they began moving forward in the process ultimately applying for the charter in October.

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A charter school is a type of public school that receives state funding based on average daily attendance.

However, charter schools do not collect local taxes nor do they have access to state facilities allotments, according to the Texas Education Agency website.

Open-enrollment charter schools such as the Innovation Academy can receive private funds as well.

In 2010, there were more than 460 charter campuses statewide, according to the Texas Charter Schools Association. More than

119,000 students attended these schools.

By comparison there were more than 8,000 school district campuses last year. And statewide there are more than 4.9 million public school students, including charter school students.

In Tyler, there are five charter schools, according to the association's website. They are Premier High School of Tyler, Accelerated Interdisciplinary Academy, Cumberland Academy, Ranch Academy and Azleway Charter School. Palestine and Longview, the other two cities that will have the UT charter campuses have one and two charter schools, respectively, according to the association.

## HOW WILL IT WORK?

The school will be designed to operate somewhat nontraditionally with students working in an online and face-to-face environment.

The idea is that students would learn the material through an online curriculum and apply that knowledge in small groups through projects.

The campus will place an emphasis on science, technology, engineering and math.

The state altered the plan somewhat in that students will be required to log at least four hours of on-campus class time daily for the charter to get full state funding, Hickey said.

In the original plan, students would have completed much of their coursework online at home or another offsite location and come to school periodically for project-based learning instruction. Many homeschool parents attended a meeting in October where the original plan was discussed.

Now, Hickey said, they will work to provide flexibility while still meeting the state's requirements.

Once the school receives a state rating, it could apply to become a virtual school and incorporate a bit more online education, Hickey said. However, they always plan to have the face-to-face component.


The school will operate as an open-enrollment charter, meaning it will admit any student who applies.

If more students than capacity apply, the school would use a lottery system to determine who gets to attend.

Hickey said the real work begins now as they design the program to make it innovative while at the same time meeting TEA requirements.

He said they hope to have more public meetings and expect to begin accepting applications in February or March.

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**Krista Adams Wallace**

This is a move in the right direction! I founded an expeditionary learning K-12 school in the Dominican Republic nine years ago ([www.doulosdiscovery.org](http://www.doulosdiscovery.org)) and we have seen excellent results with project-based learning. We are using Outward Bound's Expeditionary Learning approach ([www.elschools.org](http://www.elschools.org)). Our school is bilingual, with half of our students on scholarship, but it is a rigorous college preparatory program. In fact, we have two Doulos graduates at TJC as sophomores this year! Kudos to TISD!

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**Ginger Cardwell** · Whitehouse, Texas

I agree, I'm am excited to see new opportunities for our students.

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