

Two different groups propose new charter schools in New Bedford

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NEW BEDFORD — Two different groups have submitted proposals to the state education department to open new charter schools in the city, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education announced Thursday.

The state received a total of 22 prospectuses in this round of charter school applications, seven more than last year, according to a DESE news release.

The two proposals under consideration in New Bedford are the New Bedford Cheironeum and the City on a Hill Charter Public School New Bedford, the release stated.

All prospectuses submitted to the state are under review, and the groups with the strongest proposals will be invited in mid-September to submit a full application.

Those applications will be due to the state in early November, and new charters will be voted on by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education at its February meeting.

The New Bedford Cheironeum — named after Cheiron, a creature in Greek mythology who was revered as a teacher — is a proposal to establish a school serving about 756 students in Grades 6-12, according to Richard Porteus Jr., the proposed school's lead founder.

Porteus was the founding president of Sturgis Charter Public School in Hyannis, which opened in 1998.

Porteus said the New Bedford Cheironeum would use the International Baccalaureate model, which offers challenging programs of international education and rigorous assessments, according to the International Baccalaureate Organization's website. (Sturgis also uses the IB model.)

New Bedford is in many respects an ideal place for such a school, said Porteus, who noted that the closest schools offering the IB program were in Boston or Hyannis.

"The advantage to New Bedford is, basically, without forcing a standard on anyone else, it recalibrates the standards here," said Porteus.

New Bedford also has rich cultural resources, which the school would draw on, according to Porteus. The proposed school would open in fall of 2013 with Grades 6-8, he said. The application lists the Nashawena Mill building on Belleville Avenue as its proposed site. An official with City on a Hill, which has been operating a charter high school in Boston since 1995, announced in May that it wants to replicate that model in New Bedford.

The group is proposing to open a school serving about 280 students in Grades 9-12, according to Erica Brown, executive director of City on a Hill Boston. Brown said the school has a proven track record of closing the achievement gap with its students, many of whom are African-American or Hispanic.

That success need not be limited to Boston, she said.

In conversations with people in New Bedford, Brown said her group was impressed by the community's level of thoughtfulness about wanting more for its students.

"It really was up our alley," said Brown. "It was something we thought we could add to, not replace. ... We thought we could really add to the work that is currently under way in New Bedford."

Under the group's proposal, the school would open in the fall of 2014 with 110 ninth-graders; the school would expand over the following four years to reach its full size of about 280 students.

According to a news release issued by the Massachusetts Charter Public Schools Association, the two proposals would put New Bedford near its cap for charter schools. Other cities whose latest charter school proposals would place them near their caps are Springfield, Holyoke, Lowell and Somerville.

The association press statement urged the state to look at lifting its remaining caps on charter growth.