

Opponents want to block a charter school in Montclair

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THE MONTCLAIR TIMES

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The controversy over whether [Montclair](#) needs a charter high school continues to swirl.

Even as the organizers of the proposed Quest Charter Academy school finalize their legal challenge and await a decision from state education officials on their charter request, a new group opposed to the charter plan emerged last week, urging local residents to join in a letter-writing campaign to block the plan.

"[Montclair](#) doesn't need a charter school," declared Mary Beth Rosenthal, who is heading the effort against a charter school in the township.

"[Montclair](#) students can't afford a charter school," Rosenthal told The Times. "If it's approved, Quest Charter Academy with 160 students would be taking \$2 million from the other 97 percent of the children in the Montclair public schools."

Fearing that [Montclair](#) School District "can't sustain that kind of loss" without making substantial cuts in programs and services, Rosenthal is urging residents to write the state Department of Education and express their opposition to a charter school.

She has posted a sample letter on her group's website, thequestisover.webs.com, that residents can download. Rosenthal intends to collect 200 letters and take them to Trenton next Tuesday and present them to DOE officials.

"I'm not going to say that the [Montclair](#) High School and the Montclair public schools in general are perfect, because they're not, but when you look at communities like in Newark, where 22 percent of kids graduate from high school and one percent go to college, and you look at Montclair where you have close to 100 percent of the students graduating from high school, and you have 90 percent of your students going to college, I would say the need isn't there."

Rosenthal, who was a volunteer at [Montclair](#) High School and who served as co-president of the Montclair PTA Council, concedes that the situation was different several years ago when the Quest Academy group first proposed a charter high school.

"Five years ago, were things at the high school different?" Rosenthal asked. "Yes they were. But the high school has made changes. They brought in a principal who, very specifically, has expertise in developing and implementing small learning communities. In fact, he is committing to start two new small learning communities."

Tracey Williams, one of the Quest Academy founders, strongly disagrees with the effort to block the charter proposal. For nearly four years, Williams and the other Quest Academy organizers have argued that township students and parents should have another publicly funded option to the 1,900-student [Montclair](#) High School.

"It has not improved," Williams said, noting that [Montclair](#) High School has failed to achieve adequate yearly progress benchmarks in the standardized testing required under the federal governments No Child Left Behind legislation.

The Quest group is seeking to launch a small high school with a total enrollment of 320 that would feature more individualized instruction. It has applied for a charter on three separate occasions since 2008 and has been turned down each time by the state Department of Education. The Quest organizers are in the process of filing a legal challenge to their most recent rejection. They have also refiled their application and expect to get a decision from Trenton in September.

Williams hopes that the state will approve its application and that an accommodation can be reached with the [Montclair](#) School District. A copy of their application has been posted on their website, www.questacademynow.us.

"We could become a model for the nation of a charter school that can work with the district, and of a district that can work with a charter school to see that more kids do well," Williams said.

The debate over a charter school in [Montclair](#) reflects a larger discussion statewide. A recent poll by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University showed New Jersey residents were split on the expansion of charter schools.

According to the Eagleton survey, 44 percent of voters said there are in favor of the growth of charters, while 42 percent are opposed.

Currently New Jersey has 73 charter schools. The State Department of Education has approved 23 more which are expected to launch operations during the next two years. Another 58 charter schools have been proposed.

The same poll found that 52 percent of African-Americans favor the Christie administration's plan to expand charter schools. Eagleton also found that 48 percent of blacks prefer to send their children to a charter school with 43 percent preferring a public school.

On Monday, state legislators moved four bills out of the Assembly Education Committee that would have a dramatic impact on future charter school applications.

One measure would require that proposed charter schools win voter approval in the municipalities in which they plan to operate.

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