

SOUTHTOWNSTAR

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FIRST CHARTER SCHOOL IN THE SOUTHLAND



JOSEPH P. MEIER - SOUTHTOWNSTAR

The grand experiment

Are charter schools the best option?

This one is banking its reputation on it. **STORY, PAGES 8-9**

New challenge: English teacher Samantha Nham (left) and world studies teacher Tara Heywood pick up their books and school blazers to break for lunch during a meeting at Southland College Preparatory Charter School in Matteson. It is the Southland's first charter school.

Newest Southland school

With legal battle as backdrop, charter starts teaching today

MEET THE STAFF

More than 1,300 teachers applied for jobs at Southland College Preparatory Charter High School. Here's a look at those who were hired: The school also has hired five part-time fine arts teachers.

Kevin Steele, technology teacher

Steele, 32, recently was laid off from his job at Central Middle School in Tinley Park because of budget cuts. Before that he was a technology manager for Edline, a Web-based system that allows parents and students to monitor grades, assignments and messages from teachers. Edline has also been implemented at Southland.

"I like the concept of Southland, the longer school days, the uniforms. The students want to be here, and the parents are involved," Steele said.

Samantha Nham, English

Nham, 22, recently graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a bachelor's degree in English.

"I really wanted to work with the charter school because I liked that they had direct goals for their students," Nham said.

Jennifer Santiago, math

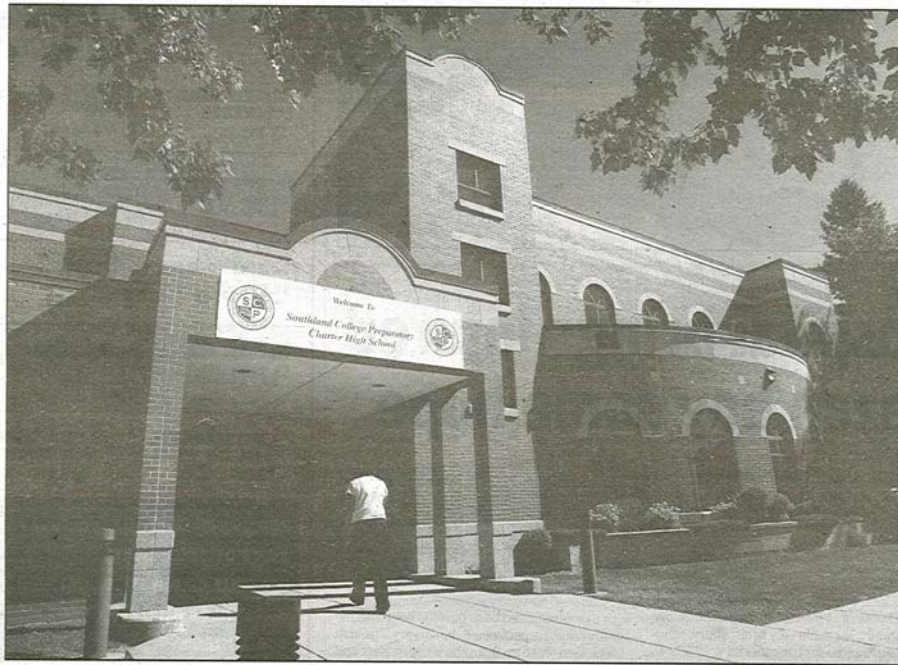
Santiago, 22, recently moved to Tinley Park from Chicago after graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She also has worked as a math tutor and piano teacher and is fluent in Tagalog, one of the languages of the Philippines.

"It just seems revolutionary, what they are trying to do. All students are required four years of math, science, social studies," Santiago said. "We're really pushing for high student achievement."

Melanie Sprengel, biology

Sprengel, 37, of Joliet, recently was laid off from her job at Proviso East High School because of budget cuts. The self-described "elder" of Southland's teaching staff, Sprengel said she was attracted to Southland because of the smaller class sizes and the intimate setting.

"Southland is making huge strides in education and I am really excited to be a part of something that could be a gateway for other schools to do the same kind of programs for other students," she said.



Facing the future: Southland College Preparatory Charter High School occupies part of Huth Middle School in Matteson.

PHOTOS BY JOSEPH P. MEIER — SOUTHTOWNSTAR

BY KATE MCCANN — STAFF WRITER

For nearly a year, Southland College Preparatory Charter High School has fought to exist.

And even as teachers tacked up final decorations in their classrooms this week, Southland's attorneys were battling last-minute efforts by Rich Township High School District 227 to shut Southland down.

A state appeals court brushed aside the challenge, ruling the school can remain open while the district's lawsuit against the charter school and the state

board of education is pending in court.

This battle is far from over and will be argued in court for perhaps months to come.

But today, the school will put aside its uncertain future, as 125 freshmen enter their temporary school building and become Southland's Class of 2014.

In a white cinder-block room inside a Matteson middle school, eight teachers clad in matching khaki blazers have furiously prepared this week for the first day of school. Most of

them are fresh from college, steeling themselves to face their first-ever classrooms.

"The time has come for Southland College Prep Charter School. And you are all on the forefront," Dwayne Bryant, a consultant to the school, told the staff Monday.

The unused wing of Huth Middle School — Southland's temporary home while a larger building is renovated in Richton Park — is a modest setting for the launch of a groundbreaking educational experiment.

opens under microscope

While charter schools long have been a presence in Chicago, they're virtually nonexistent in the suburbs.

The only other is Prairie Crossing Charter School in the largely white, wealthy suburb of Grayslake. While many charters have been attempted, few have been approved. Local school districts have been reluctant to approve charter schools, and the Illinois State Board of Education has only three times in history overturned a local school board decision — which is how Prairie Crossing and Southland were granted licenses.

Unlike at Prairie Crossing, every student at Southland, except for one, is black. All reside in District 227, where 60 percent of students are low-income, according to state statistics. Most of Southland's students also are girls. They will wear uniforms, like their teachers, and attend school until 5 p.m. The late afternoons will be devoted to study sessions and extracurriculars such as archery, chess and tennis.

Unique in the country

The idea was the brainchild of Blondean Davis who, as chief of Matteson Elementary School District 162, has been applauded for raising student test scores to above the state average even while the number of low-income students in the district has sharply increased. Davis' wish to send her eighth-graders to a college prep high school inspired her yearlong fight to establish a charter in District 227, which has been plagued by declining test scores, student discipline problems and school board infighting.

Nearly half of Southland's students are graduates of Davis' elementary school district.

"I've never heard of a situation like this anywhere else in the country," said Greg Richmond, president of the American Association of Charter School Authorizers, a consultant to charter schools. "The situation of an elementary school district starting a charter because of the high school district ... is quite unusual. This case strips away some of the stereotypical arguments about charter schools and reveals that in some cases, charters are the best options."

Other charter hopefuls have tried for years to establish schools in Chicago's suburbs, only to fail. Local districts are quick to reject the proposals, often citing financial concerns as the primary reason.

Andrew Broy, president of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, believes the money argument largely is a red herring. "It's vastly overstated by the districts," Broy said.

District 227 has spent time and money

'This case strips away some of the stereotypical arguments about charter schools and reveals that in some cases, charters are the best options.'

Greg Richmond, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS



Ready for school: English teacher Samantha Nham prepares her room Monday at Southland College Preparatory Charter High School.



On a mission: School CEO Blondean Davis talks Monday to the new teachers about expectations and guidelines at the charter school.

trying to convince the courts otherwise, arguing the charter school will render the district bankrupt within a few years because of the loss of the approximately \$13,000 per student it gets from the state. Within four years, Southland will house 500 students who otherwise may have attended District 227's three high schools — Rich South, Rich Central and Rich East.

Charter proponents say school districts are more threatened by a loss of control.

"Districts are used to a situation where they control everything. The orientation

has been not to challenge that over the years, and the charter movement is saying, 'Why don't we orient the discussion to how to serve kids well?'" Broy said.

If the courts allow Southland to remain open, the only guarantee is the school's progress will be closely watched by the education community.

"There is nothing automatic or guaranteed about having the word 'charter' in a school's name," Richmond said. "But each charter gives you the opportunity to do something that works. That's why it has power."

MEET THE STAFF

Daniel Higgins, physical education

Higgins, 23, of Oak Lawn, recently graduated from Monmouth College. He has taught physical education at the elementary school level and health and drug awareness to high school students, as well as working as a personal trainer and a sports camp counselor.

"The schools around here are having trouble. I look at the test scores, and they are not doing well," Higgins said. "Students need to be taught differently. This is a great opportunity for me as a teacher to make a change in a student's life."

James Burnette, special education

Burnette, 31, of Country Club Hills, recently earned his master's degree from Lewis University. Burnette is a former production assistant for an Indiana television station and has taught at Hillcrest High School and Indiana Elementary School in Matteson. He plans to produce a documentary about Southland's first year. Burnette will have about 10 students in his classroom.

"They might have a disability, but we're not going to let that hold them back. This isn't going to be where you're just going to finish high school one day and you're done. You're going to go to college," Burnette said.

Tara Heywood, world studies

Heywood, 28, of Chicago, is starting her fourth year of teaching. Heywood said she was drawn to Southland because of the chance to be part of something from the ground up.

"I'm all about action and not excuses, and I feel like this is a great place to put that into action. There are big expectations, but they are completely attainable," Heywood said.

Elise Hensler, Spanish

Hensler, 23, of Wheaton, recently graduated from the University of Missouri. She has student taught in public schools and worked as a substitute at a private school. Hensler said the parental involvement expected of Southland parents will be the key factor to the school's success.

"If your parents aren't on board, then no one is. I met a lot of the parents and a lot of the students, and it seems everyone is excited and motivated to be here," Hensler said.

Chip Johnson, assistant principal

Johnson, 50, of Chicago, is the former assistant principal of Matteson Elementary School and has served as a music consultant for Matteson School District 162 for the past five years. Johnson will run day-to-day operations at Southland, assisting Blondean Davis in her role as CEO of Southland.