

Monday April 4, 2011



**New digs:** Visitors enter the new Southland College Preparatory Charter High School during its opening celebration Sunday in Richton Park. | MATT MARTON-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

## 'A real high school'

Southland charter school moves into new Richton Park home. **Page 6**



# A 'beautiful' new home

## Charter school moves into new building in Richton Park

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Since she began attending Southland College Preparatory Charter High School last August, Brandi LeBlanc has felt like a big kid stuck in a little kid's school.

Classes have been held at Huth Middle School, but starting Monday morning LeBlanc and 120 of her classmates will begin a new chapter in the young history of the Southland's only charter school when they walk through the doors of the school's new home.

On Sunday, students and their parents got a preview of the school, inside a renovated office building at 4601 Sauk Trail in Richton Park.

"This is beautiful," LeBlanc, 15, said as she toured the quiet classrooms with her mom, Aresha Terry.

With school being held at Huth, "it didn't feel like a high school," LeBlanc said.

"Now it feels like a real high school," she said.

The 85,000-square-foot building has 28 classrooms, three computer labs, two science labs and a dance studio and fitness center.

The building at one time had been a call center for Prudential Insurance. Matteson School District 162 purchased the property late last year, and the charter school is leasing space from the district, which also has moved its administrative offices there.

Terry, of Country Club Hills, said she applied for the lottery last year for one of the 125 spots at Southland College Prep.

"It was a good opportunity for my daughter to go there," she said Sunday.

The school will add another 125 students each year until it reaches an enrollment of 500.

Educators and community leaders attending the school's preview praised the facility and recalled the struggle to get the doors open.

Rick Reinbold, Richton Park's mayor, called the renovation of the office building as the school's new home "an enhancement not only for Richton Park, but one also shared by the region."

District 162 Supt. Blondevan Davis said that in getting the charter



**Spiffy:** Future student Brandi LeBlanc looks through a classroom Sunday at the new Southland College Preparatory Charter High School during its opening celebration in Richton Park. | PHOTOS BY MATT MARTON-SUN-TIMES MEDIA

school up and running, her district had "made a decision on behalf of all children in the Southland." Davis serves as the charter school's chief executive.

Speakers roundly praised Davis, who's will alone in getting the charter school opened at times seemed more powerful than the forces operating against it.

District 162 board president Alicia Rodman McCray described Davis as "the engine, the driver, the dreamer" behind the charter school.

Davis is credited with transforming District 162 into one of the higher-performing elementary districts in the state, but Davis had bemoaned the poor performance of Rich Township High School District 227 schools. District 162 is among the elementary districts feeding into District 227, which has suffered from a low percent of students meeting state academic standards.

Southland College Prep's new home is just a half-mile from District 227's Rich South High School.

District 227 initially turned down the charter school's proposal, with the charter school appealing to the Illinois State Board of Education. It was a long shot by any measure, with at least 20 charter school hopefuls previously seeing their appeals turned down by the board.

After a hearing last May in Springfield, however, the state board overruled District 227's denial of the charter school proposal.



**Drawing a crowd:** Cars are parked Sunday at the new Southland College Preparatory Charter High School for its opening celebration.

In searching for a permanent home for the charter school, Davis had initially considered the long-shuttered Marshall Field's store in Park Forest but reconsidered when the Richton Park property became available. The eight-acre site offers room for expansion should the state at some point agree to allow Southland College Prep to increase its enrollment beyond 500, Robert Hall, an attorney for District 162, said.

District 162 sold \$11.5 million in bonds to buy and renovate the office building, he said.

Charter school officials noted the school has strong music and arts programs, as well as extracurriculars such as track, golf, swimming and tennis. But Southland College Prep won't be fielding a football team any time soon, although students would like to see the school compete in basketball.

District 227 sued the Illinois State Board of Education over its decision regarding the charter school, and that lawsuit is pending. Hall said a ruling could come by the end of this year or in early 2012.

## CHARTER SCHOOL HISTORY

Here are some key dates in the establishment of Southland College Preparatory High School.

**August 2009:** At a Matteson School District 162 board meeting, Supt. Blondevan Davis lays out her proposal for a charter high school within the boundaries of Rich Township High School District 227. A nonprofit organization later is established to operate the yet-to-open school.

**December 2009:** As required by state law, the charter school proposal is sent to District 227 for review.

**February 2010:** District 227 rejects charter proposal, and Southland College Prep appeals the next month to the Illinois State Board of Education.

**May 2010:** State board votes unanimously to overturn District 227's rejection of the charter school proposal.

**June 2010:** District 227 files lawsuit against the state education board, arguing the charter school will divert much-needed state aid from 227 and bankrupt the district. At the same time, the district asks a circuit court judge to halt the planned August opening of the school while the lawsuit is being considered.

**July 2010:** A Cook County Circuit Court judge refuses to block the charter school's opening. District 227 asks a state appellate court to intervene.

**Aug. 17, 2010:** Two days before the doors are to open, a state appellate panel also dismisses District 227's request to delay the school's opening.

**Aug. 19, 2010:** First day of classes for Southland College Prep are held. School is being housed, temporarily, at Huth Middle School in Matteson.

**Late 2010:** District 162 buys former Prudential Insurance call center in Richton Park that will be used to house Southland College Prep as well as district administrative offices.

**April 4, 2011:** First day of classes in charter school's new permanent home.