

# New charter school in Atlantic City focuses on literacy

By DIANE D'AMICO Education Writer | Posted: Monday, September 22, 2014 7:53 pm

**ATLANTIC CITY** — The focus of the new Atlantic City Community Charter School is literacy and that includes sending books home every night for students to read with their families.

That's fine with Oliver Crumble, whose 5-year-old twin boys attend kindergarten at the school.

"They are getting parents involved with their children," he said as he waited for school to dismiss last week. "Every day they bring books home, and when I am (at the school) they will ask me about the books we read."

The school opened in September, filling a gap left when the Oceanside Charter School closed in June 2013. The school started with 150 students in grades K-5, but is approved by the state Department of Education to expand to as many as 950 students in grades K-8.

Latefah Shannon said her son attended Oceanside, and her daughter, who is in third grade, wanted to come to the new charter school.

"She just wanted to be in a smaller school," Shannon said. This year there is just one third grade class.

Unlike Oceanside, which was started and led by local resident Jeanine Middleton, the new school is operated by a company, CSMI Education Management, based in Chester, Pa. CSMI operates a large charter school in Chester, and another in Camden, which opened last year.

While most of the board of trustees currently are not local, the board president, Dominick Potena, retired as superintendent in Margate, where he lives. He was 2009 state superintendent of the year and said in an email that he is using his knowledge and expertise as a superintendent for 27 years to help the new school.

The school is currently leasing space in a former day care center at Baltic and Fairmount avenues. There are also three classroom trailers on a lot across the street that house grades three through five. There are plans to purchase land on which to build a brand new school building similar to the one built in Camden, possibly as early as next year.



## AC CHARTER SCHOOL

Atlantic City Charter School kindergarten teacher Jennifer Houser works with her students, Wednesday Sept. 17, 2014.

Parents interviewed said they enrolled their children at the charter school because of its small size compared with the city's larger public school, because they see it as being safer, or because their child was not doing well in the public school. A good number of students are from the Stanley Holmes Village. A few have also come in from Pleasantville, Ventnor and Somers Point.

Charter school Principal Jessica Richard of Sicklerville, who came from a Charter School in Philadelphia, said they have also enrolled quite a few special education students and are looking to hire a second special education teacher.

The average class size is 17, and all of the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms also have a paraprofessional aide to help with small group instruction and one-on-one tutoring. There is no school library, but each class has 400 books. Carts of tablets are available for the students.

Families are also eligible for a free home computer and broadband access through a grant from the Gureghian Charitable Foundation. Richard said applications were sent home last week and computers will be distributed in October.

During a recent tour visitors saw kindergarten teacher Jennifer Houser working on early literacy skills with students, and taking turns reading with them. First-graders drew pictures to decorate their reading and writing journals. Third-graders learned about non-fiction and true stories, and how to come up with their own ideas. In the fourth and fifth grades, students read to themselves, some working their way through chapter books, others still reading from advanced picture books.

"We have students at all levels," Richard said. "We are working with the teachers on how to differentiate instruction."

In all grades, reading lessons focus on four areas: comprehension, accuracy, fluency and vocabulary.

In its temporary location the school has some limitations. There is no real playground or gymnasium, but school officials are working on an agreement to use the city park across the street. There is no on-site cafeteria, so meals are brought in each day. There is a before-school program that starts at 7:30 a.m. and includes breakfast. The school is working with the Boys & Girls Club to accept students who need after-school services. The school provides busing for students outside the state two-mile walking limit, and for the after-school program.

Lakeyia Hitch especially likes the busing, but enrolled her son hoping the school will academically challenge the second-grader more than she felt had been done in the regular public school.

"He's happy with it so far," she said. "And I'm happy he can take the bus."

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