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New charter school in JP is first in Mass. to focus on students from non-English speaking families

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One of MATCH Community Day Charter Public School's new students smiles to have his picture taken on the first day of classes on Aug. 29.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A new elementary school in Jamaica Plain is the first public charter school in Massachusetts, and among the first public charter schools nationwide, to focus on educating students whose family's primary language is not English.

The MATCH Community Day Charter Public School began welcoming 100 pre-kindergarteners and second graders to its campus along Forest Hills Street last week.

Following an aggressive campaign to recruit immigrant families and city school students with a background in a language other than English, the school's random lottery resulted in 85 percent of the student body hailing from families where the predominant language is not English, school officials said.

"Both the Governor and Mayor Menino have encouraged charter schools to reach these families," school leaders said in an announcement.

Compared with data collected last school year, just one charter school and around one dozen public schools statewide had higher percentages of students from non-English speaking families an academic year ago.

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The school said it was marketed this past spring and summer through various organizations with ties to non-English speaking communities and reached out to families including those that speak the five most prevalent languages beside English in the Boston public school system – Spanish, Cape Verdean Creole, Haitian Creole, Chinese, and Vietnamese. More than 450 applied for the school's 100 available seats.

MATCH Community Day is operated collaboratively by two charter school institutions MATCH in Boston and Community Day in Lawrence, and was established to specifically focus on educating English language learners.

Alan Safran, executive director at MATCH, said the school plans to implement a “very structured teaching style” and also hopes to draw from the unique experience and approaches of both collaborating institutions, pairing MATCH's small school size and personal tutoring for each student with Community Day's experience with English language learners.

“They have a long history of being of being very successful with students who come in knowing very little English,” he said of Community Day.

Community Day operates a charter school in Lawrence, a city where three quarters of residents speak a language other than English at home. Lawrence, which has Hispanic and Latino populations, has the state's highest percentage of families who primarily speak a language beside English, recent census data shows.

Around 80 percent of students at the Lawrence school come from families where the primary language is not English, officials said. And, around 30 percent are designated as having limited proficiency in English.

The new tuition- and entrance-exam-free school housed on Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church's former 4.5-acre Parkside Campus in Jamaica Plain will test students for English proficiency later this year, said Dominic Slowey, a school spokesman. Each year the school plans to add more grade levels to its current second and pre-K offerings, eventually becoming a K-12 school for around 700 students.

Administrators there say the school is one of the first charter schools in the nation to focus on students from families whose first language is not English.

The Massachusetts Charter Public School Association says the school is the first charter school established with an ELL focus in the state.

More than one-third of Boston residents and around one-fifth of Massachusetts say they speak a language other than English at home, according to U.S. Census Bureau data collected between 2005 and 2009. Eight Bay State municipalities have higher percentages of non-English speaking families than Boston.

The school is one of 16 public charters to open in the state this fall, 10 of which opened in Boston, after the Massachusetts education department granted the highest number of charters ever in a single year last spring. Two of the new Boston charter schools are part of the city's school district.

Charter schools are open to state residents. Enrollment preference is given to students in the district or region where the school is located.

Every five years, Bay State charter schools are reviewed by the state's education department, which determines whether or not to renew a school's charter.

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Students at MATCH Community Day Charter Public School listen on the first day of classes on Aug. 29.

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