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New charter school is all business

BY GARY HABER
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NEW CASTLE -- When Dave Jones got a look at the view, he knew he'd found the perfect spot for a school whose mission is to teach students about business.

The Delaware River as seen from the back patio of Pencader Business and Finance Charter High School in New Castle is teeming with commerce. There's the Delaware Memorial Bridge carrying commuters and commercial traffic between Delaware and New Jersey. A barge eases its way downriver, gliding past the factories that help keep the region's economy humming.

What better place to teach youngsters about the world of business, said Jones, a Newark native who quit his job as an economics teacher at Glasgow High School to start what will be the state's first charter school with a primary emphasis on business and finance. Jones' goal is to make Pencader's students a productive part of the global economy taking place next door.

"I want them to leave here with the ability to succeed in the workplace or higher education," said Jones, 45, who is Pencader's principal. "They can offer more to an employer because they'll have the business ethics and the business etiquette."

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools licensed by the state. They often have a particular focus, such as math, science or the arts. About 6,800 students attend Delaware's 13 charter schools. Another four schools, including Pencader, plan to open next fall. The school received its charter from the state Department of Education in April.

Pencader will open its doors in August to as many as 200 ninth-grade students and 150 10th-graders. Its home is a vacant office building in the Riveredge business park.

The 44,600-square-foot building will be converted into



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Dave Jones got the idea for a business-oriented high school after discovering how little his students knew about Delaware's Chancery Court. Pencader Business and Finance Charter High School will open in the fall.

24 classrooms, a music room, cafeteria, computer room and library.

Plans call for building a 45,000-square-foot addition by 2007 that will include science labs, classrooms and a gymnasium/auditorium.

Jones is recruiting students and the 19 faculty members he will need the first year. He has gotten résumés from 70 teachers at other schools, and he's heard from people in private industry interested in teaching at Pencader.

The University of Delaware's Center for Economic Education and Entrepreneurship is helping to develop the curriculum.

Pencader is filling a void for students interested in business, said former Delaware state Treasurer Janet Rzewnicki, who is on Pencader's 12-member board of directors. "We're going to make this unique, something that's life-changing for young people," she said.

Jones hit on the idea for a business-focused school after reading an article about the state's Chancery Court. When he asked students in his economics classes about the court, he was stunned to learn they hadn't heard of it. Nor did they know that many Fortune 500 companies have operations in Delaware.

"I just stood there and thought, 'This is not good,' " Jones remembered.

Jones anticipates Pencader's student body will comprise college-bound students and those heading directly into the work force upon graduation. He anticipates drawing students from throughout New Castle County.

Delaware's banking industry provides a ready-made market for Pencader graduates, said state Rep. Deborah Hudson, R-Fairthorne, who serves on Pencader's board.

"We're the banking capital of the world," she said. "We're preparing students to work in that field."

Pencader has received a warm welcome from Delaware's business community. MBNA and Delaware Moving and Storage have donated furniture. Jones is talking with the New Castle County Chamber of Commerce about a cooperative education program in which Pencader students would work with local businesses. He also envisions bringing in business leaders to speak with students.

Pencader's leader took an indirect path to the classroom.

The University of Delaware history graduate was writing radio and TV ads for a small Wilmington ad agency in the summer of 1990 when he bumped into one of his old teachers from Christiana High School at a Newark supermarket. The teacher invited Jones to the school. As the two walked through the empty building, Jones began thinking of possibly switching careers.

That chance encounter led to Jones becoming a special education teacher at Newark High School and the start of a 15-year teaching career.

He still has a passion for education.

"The same sense of purpose I felt in the empty halls of Newark High School, I feel 1,000 more times today," he said.

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