



“Growing Students for a Sustainable Future”

Charter School Newsletter

A small, tuition-free public high school in downtown Ithaca

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New Roots to Open September 2009

What is a Charter School?

By Aileen Fitzke

A charter is a contract between a board of trustees and the State of New York to operate a public school. New Roots Charter School is a tuition-free, public high school. It is open to all students who are eligible to attend public schools in New York State. There is no selective admissions process, and if there are more students who wish to enroll than there are spaces for, a lottery will be held. The Charter Schools Act of 1998 was created to encourage innovation, improve student achievement, and provide families with a wider range of educational choice within the public school system.

New Roots Charter School is a research and development project that responds to the call of the 2005 New York State Education Summit to “redesign” high school, and to the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development. It will be one of the first models of best practices in sustainability education at the high school level in the nation. Our program is being developed through collaboration among faculty from Ithaca College, Tompkins Cortland Community College, Cornell University, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges; New

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Like these Ithaca College Students, New Roots students will work together in teams to identify and solve community problems.

Why New Roots?

By Tina Nilsen-Hodges, Principal

The climate is changing. Poverty is on the rise. Two thirds of the ecosystems that support human life are in decline. The UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development says we must completely rethink education to create the social change we need to address pressing social issues and bring our communities into balance with natural systems. Heeding the call, we are bringing New Roots Charter School to life. New Roots will be an innovative high school that will nurture young

social entrepreneurs who will reinvent and renew our way of life, redesigning our communities for just, equitable social relationships, a thriving economy that meets the needs of all, and the environmental sustainability that is critical to support all human endeavors—a model that we hope will inspire schools nationally.

New Roots Charter School’s standards-based, cross-disciplinary curriculum will lay a foundation for the analysis and insight necessary for visionary thinking and the creation

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What Does a Day at New Roots School Look Like?

by Becca Rodomsky-Bish

The creation of a new school program generates many questions in the minds of parents and potential students. What does the average day look like? What kinds of classes will be offered? When is lunch? How long are classes? Beginning in January, we will be offering Parent and Teen Information Sessions designed to answer these questions and more. In the meantime, we hope that what follows will help you develop a clearer picture of what the New Roots experience will be like on a day-to-day basis.

On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the day will be organized into seven one-hour blocks of time, five for classes, one for “mentoring community,” and one for lunch and enrichment activities. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, 90-minute blocks will allow for extended labs, field trips, community service activities and apprenticeships. Our extended learning sessions will allow for a deeper examination of concepts, greater emphasis on projects and group investigations, and more time for independent follow-up work during class. All students at New Roots will take all four core subjects (science, math, English and social studies) each year, plus classes such as Personal Wellness (a combined health and physical education course), Spanish, Art, Music, and other electives.

Though students will experience their core subject courses as individual classes, the faculty at New Roots will be working closely with one another to make lessons

interdisciplinary. A primary focus of educating for sustainability is teaching “systems thinking” in academic subjects across the curriculum. Systems thinking is a framework for understanding parts of a system in the context of relationships with each other and with other systems, rather than in isolation. Systems thinking helps people to better understand the relationships between our interdependent social, economic, and natural systems, an understanding that will support decision-making and action that will help move us towards a more just and sustainable future.

Our Farm-to-School lunch program will provide exceptionally nutritious, delicious meals at school that feature locally-grown, organic produce. Students will have opportunities to work with the Farm-to-School coordinators on meal planning and food preparation on a regular basis, and to be involved in projects and community service projects on local farms. Food is an excellent starting point for students to understand Earth’s systems and the relationship between people and these systems.

The New Roots school year will be divided into three parts, or trimesters. Between trimesters, students will participate in week-long intensive learning experiences in areas of interest, which could include organic agriculture, green building, theater, music, art, media projects among many possibilities.

Through carefully-designed daily experiences, New Roots will offer students the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be engaged, motivated and productive citizens who are prepared to address the key challenges of our time.

Check out our new office at the Women’s Community Building!

New Roots Charter School has rented space on the second floor of the Women’s Community Building to house our offices until we have found and moved into our permanent downtown space. Our mission to provide innovative educational choice to families in the Ithaca area fits nicely with the mission of The Women’s Community Building to “provide opportunities that enrich

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Parent and Teen Information Nights January 2009

These information sessions will introduce the New Roots Charter School staff, program, curriculum, and enrollment process to interested parents and teens. Please join us on one of the following dates:

Thursday January 8 6:00-8:00
Tuesday January 20 6:00-8:00

Wednesday January 14 6:00-8:00
Monday January 26 6:00-8:00

Parent and Teen Information Nights will be held at the Women’s Community Building, 100 West Seneca Street, downtown Ithaca. Call 339-6994 for more information. Dinner and childcare will be provided. Please RSVP so that we can plan appropriately by emailing newrootsschool@gmail.com or stop by our office in the Women’s Community Building.

How New Roots prepares students for success in higher education. . . and beyond

By Wanda Blackman

New Roots Charter School offers an exceptional college preparatory program that will serve students well as they make plans for their post secondary education. Students are required to exceed New York State graduation requirements by taking four-year sequences of math and science courses. In addition, each student will develop a portfolio that will clearly demonstrate that he or she has met and or exceeded all New York State learning standards. Grades and test scores alone do not provide this evidence.

As college admissions have become more and more competitive, it has become difficult for even very talented students with high grades and test scores to gain admission to the college or university of their choice. The project-based learning approach that is central to the mission of New Roots lends itself extremely well to allowing students to stand out. Students will work closely with their faculty mentors to design, implement and assess original projects that integrate their learning across the disciplines. At a college admission interview, a student from New Roots will be able to discuss in depth and detail what he or she learned from such projects and how they developed them. The ability to think and reason independently will serve students well as they progress through college and into their careers.

Finally, students of New Roots School will graduate with college credits from Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3). These credits will be automatically transferable to TC3 and will be as transferable to other colleges as any other TC3 credits. Admissions counselors tend to favor students that have demonstrated the ability to successfully complete college level

course work in high school.

Mrs. Blackman has worked as a counselor and financial aid advisor at several colleges and as a teaching assistant and counselor in New York State high schools.

New Roots Now Enrolling Students!

New Roots is now accepting enrollment forms for students who wish to be part of our 9th and 10th grade cohorts in 2009-2010. Prospective students and their parents are encouraged to attend a Parent and Teen Information Session to learn more about what New Roots has to offer before submitting an enrollment form.

Enrollment forms can be downloaded from the web site, or you can call 339-6994 to have one mailed to you. Forms will also be available at Parent and Teen Information Sessions located in the Women's Community Building 100 W. Seneca Street, downtown Ithaca.

If the number of students enrolling exceeds the number of available openings, New Roots will hold a lottery on April 1, 2009. There are 65 slots for incoming 9th graders, and 60 for 10th graders. This makes New Roots open to nearly four times as many students as are accepted into the Lehman Alternative Community School on a yearly basis.

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the lives of women of all ages and their families." Having space in the Women's Community Building also provides us access to the other spaces in the building to use for our Parent and Teen Information Nights, Teen and Parent Focus Groups and Community Dinners. We're excited about this new partnership!

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of innovative, hands-on solutions to emerging problems. Learning directly from urban and rural community life in Ithaca, and its surrounding farms and natural lands, our students will engage actively in experiences such as wetlands restoration projects, farm-based food plant research, installing solar panels in low-income neighborhoods, and creating small green business enterprises. Our budding social entrepreneurs will meet critical real-life problems head-on, using democratic decision-making and teamwork skills to mobilize adults in their communities to create a more sustainable future.

Young people want to make a difference; our school model will put the power of possibility and optimism in their hands at a time when their future hangs in the balance, empowering new generations of citizens with vision who are invested in and responsible for their communities. Transforming high school education at its roots, we will create a living laboratory for educators and community members who want to transition to a way of teaching and living with potential to turn the tide.

Our Mission

New Roots Charter School will prepare our diverse student body to meet the challenges of citizenship, work, and life-long learning in the 21st century. Our interdisciplinary academic program will feature hands-on, community-based learning that supports students in solving real-world problems. New Roots Charter School students will earn a Regents diploma and demonstrate readiness for higher education by earning college credit and creating a graduation portfolio that demonstrates that they have met or exceeded all 28 New York State Learning Standards. Our school community will create a model of secondary education that integrates best practices in sustainability education with those proven to support educational equity.

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York State certified teachers and administrators; diverse community members and organizations; and the EcoVillage Center for Sustainability Education and the Center for Local Farms and Foods. Our national partners include the State Environment and Education Roundtable, the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, and Expeditionary Learning.

New Roots Charter School is also a member of the Green Charter Schools Network, a cohort of 130 schools nationwide. Consequently, the school will be able to learn from the experiences of established schools with an “environmental” focus and a strong track record of success, as well as share our innovations in the emerging field of sustainability education.

The New York Charter Schools Institute (CSI) is one of the most respected charter authorizers nationally.

Through their oversight and evaluation processes, the Charter Schools Institute will ensure that New Roots Charter School will provide a high quality education, meeting all state standards and supporting the success of all students. As a charter school, we will be accountable for demonstrated results—and our charter will be revoked if we fail to achieve our goals.

Being a charter school is a privilege and a tremendous responsibility. We are honored to have the opportunity to bring this school to life on behalf of Ithaca’s young people.



Students from Radnor School’s Watershed program test stream water quality.



Volunteer to help New Roots Grow!
Email us at newrootsschool@gmail.com,
call us at **339-6994** or stop by our office in the
Women’s Community Building, 100 West Seneca Street in downtown Ithaca.

Students at New Roots School will

- ⇒ graduate in four years with a Regents diploma and college credits
- ⇒ take a core curriculum sequence of four years of science, math, social studies and English featuring interdisciplinary connections and project-based learning
- ⇒ consider urban spaces, college campuses, natural lands, EcoVillage at Ithaca, and local farms their classrooms
- ⇒ apply academic learning to understanding their community and bioregion
- ⇒ develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, considering the world from multiple perspectives
- ⇒ celebrate diversity and work actively to eliminate bias
- ⇒ receive individualized attention and develop personal learning plans
- ⇒ participate in democratic school decision-making processes
- ⇒ learn the skills and knowledge needed to be a “green” entrepreneur
- ⇒ take leadership on community sustainability initiatives



You can contact New Roots by email at newrootsschool@gmail.com or stop by our office.

Research Basis for Big Expectations From Small, Community Based Schools

By Jessica Traynor

When evaluating various school options, the information can be daunting and contradictory. It takes time and familiarity to sift through the information. Fortunately, since 1999, the Charter Schools Institute of the State University of New York has provided “ongoing oversight” in areas of academic achievement and fiscal responsibility. The Institute “strives to become a nationally recognized repository and disseminator of research, training and best practices for charter schools, public school choice and charter authorizing.”¹ In addition, ample research over the last decade supports community-based, sustainability-oriented education. This article reviews some of the studies available espousing the merits of a few of the design elements of the New Roots curriculum.

As you begin to question whether New Roots Charter School is the appropriate choice for your family, you may start by asking, what can you expect from the New Roots educational experience?

An Inquiry-Oriented, Standards-Based College Preparatory Curriculum

New Roots offers a rigorous four-year college preparatory curriculum that meets or exceeds all 28 New York State standards for learning, and requires that all students take a sequence of four required courses in all four core content areas. The traditional core curriculum integrates into innovative courses, such as: Earth Systems Science, Mathematical Reasoning, Mathematics for Sustainability, and Contemporary Science and Technology. These inquiry-oriented courses feature place-based applications of academic knowledge and investigations of the relationship between natural and human systems.

Data collected by the Charters School Institute from New York State standardized exams for the 2007-2008 academic year shows:

* 92% of SUNY authorized charter schools outperformed their local district in the state’s standardized exam in mathematics.

* 76% of SUNY authorized charter schools outperformed their local district in the state’s standardized exam in English language arts.²

Small School Design

Research shows that smaller high schools (no more than 400 students) afford a more engaging and connected learning environment, leading to more equitable achievement outcomes for all. In a 2007 report, “Smaller, Safer, Saner Schools,” the University of Minnesota’s Center for School Change concludes, “When comparing similar groups of students, those who attend small schools of choice are safer, have better attendance and behavior, demonstrate higher achievement, and are more likely to graduate.” Moreover, based on the outcomes of a small schools restructuring project in the Cincinnati, Ohio public high schools, small schools show great promise for eliminating the graduation gap between white and minority students.³ Other studies similarly demonstrate achievement benefits of small schools for students who are at-risk for school failure.⁴

The key elements for successful small schools identified by the University of Minnesota’s Center for School Change include: a strong culture of caring, teacher mentoring and support, parent involvement, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and service learning through community-based projects. In a separate study, Lehr and others found a similar set of elements in school intervention programs that were successful in mitigating high school drop-out rates among the most at-risk populations: caring, mentoring and counseling, reading, tutoring, block scheduling, and community-service opportunities.⁵

Expeditionary Learning

Expeditionary Learning (EL) schools educate students through interdisciplinary, project-based “expeditions”

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that culminate in exhibits, performances, publications, and public service to organizations in the community. The EL model has woven many best practices of teaching into a comprehensive system that supports each individual student in reaching his or her potential.

Students in EL schools succeed. In an independent evaluation of a K-12 EL school in Denver, 9th and 10th grade students consistently outscored the comparison group on reading and writing tests.⁶ Additionally, in a 3-year qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the ten original EL demonstration schools located in five cities, the Academy for Educational Development found that students produced high quality work, often higher than they had ever attained in the past; teachers reported that students' final products often met not only school district but also professional standards; and students demonstrated a strong level of engagement and motivation.⁷ An analysis of 29 comprehensive school reform models conducted by the Center for Research on the Education of Students at Risk in 2002 ranked EL as one of the top models, first among designs that had been in the field less than 10 years.⁸

Environment as Integrating Context

Supporting the New Roots curriculum is the belief that relevant, engaged, active learning will produce high-achieving graduates with a strong sense of how they can use their skills and knowledge within the community. The main model used for curriculum development is the Environment as Integrating Context (EIC) model. EIC is a proven framework, developed by the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER), in cooperation with 16 state departments of education, for creating interdisciplinary, collaborative, hands-on learning that uses the natural environment and surrounding community as the context for learning.⁹

The EIC model is used in over 130 schools nationwide. In fact, this model has been called an "educational equalizer, improving reading, science achievement, and critical thinking skills across racial and ethnic groups." Evidence gathered from 40 K-12 EIC-model schools across the nation reveals:¹⁰

- * Better performance on standardized measures of academic achievement in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies
- * Reduced discipline and classroom management problems
- * Increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning
- * Greater pride and ownership in accomplishments.

SEER has documented these results in schools across the nation, with urban, rural and suburban students in elementary, middle and high schools, and has pledged to work with New Roots Charter School to do the same.

Thus, small, community-based schools that offer project-based learning, using the natural environment are successful and sustainable, preparing our youth for tomorrow's challenges and creating a higher quality of life for them in the present.

¹ <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/missionStatement.htm>

² <http://www.newyorkcharters.org/parentPerformance.htm>

³ "Smaller, Safer, Saner Schools." University of Minnesota Center for School Change. 2007. www.ncef.org/pubs/saneschools.pdf

⁴ Eckman, John M. & Howley, Craig B. (1997). Sustainable Small Schools. Charleston, West Virginia. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

⁵ Lehr, C.A., Hanson, A., Sinclair, M. F., & Christensen, S.L. (2003). Moving beyond dropout prevention towards school completion: An Integrative Review of Data-Based Interventions. *School Psychology Review*, 32, 342-364.

⁶ Sternbensky, A. (November, 2002). Rocky Mountain School of Expeditionary Learning: Evaluation report. Center for Research in Educational Policy, University of Memphis.

⁷ Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (Summary Report, 1996). Academy for Educational Development. New York: NY.

⁸ Borman G.D., Hewes, G.M., Overman, L.T., & Brown, S. (2002). Greensboro Comprehensive School Reform and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis. Center for Research on the Education of Students at Risk. CRESPAR Report # 59.

⁹ Environmental Literacy in America (2005). National Environmental Education and Training Foundation. www.neefusa.org/pdf/ELR2005.pdf

¹⁰ Lieberman, Gerald, & Hoody, Linda (1998). Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as Integrating Context. (Executive Summary). State Education and Environment Roundtable, San Diego, CA.
