

State OKs application for charter school

By **John Zucal**
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The first charter school may come to Orange as state education officials granted approval to 23 applicants, the largest batch accepted in state history.

The Arete Charter School is one of five schools for which the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey, led by its executive director, the Rev. Reginald Jackson, pastor of St. Matthew AME Church, was an applicant. In a Jan. 18 announcement by the state Department of Education, it was among the schools which received approval.

Under the terms of its application, the school would begin by serving 60 students each in kindergarten and first grade. Students would come from Orange and East Orange. It would expand yearly by one grade until it reaches 300 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

Jackson, a member of the Board of Edu-

cation, was Arete's applicant. Jackson and his organization have supported the concept of school choice. He serves on the board of Excellent Education for Everyone, which has been vocal in its support for charter schools and vouchers for alternatives to public-school education.

Students from Orange also were selected as part of the student body of the Pride Academy Charter School, which opened in September 2008. It is located along Elmwood Avenue in East Orange.

Derrell Bradford, the organization's executive director, said last week's announcement should send a message to everyone who is involved in education.

"The governor is aware there are options to district schools," said Bradford. He noted school choice is slowly getting bipartisan support; President Barack Obama was among its earliest supporters. "There are creative and committed people in New Jersey

who have a vision and desire to educate our children and charter schools are the way to do that."

Another topic which may be gaining traction is the concept of school vouchers. Legislation, known as the Opportunity Scholarship Act, last week was voted out of the state Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.

Under the bill, corporations would receive tax credits for contributing money to organizations that provide scholarships to low-income students in designated districts, which include Orange. Such scholarships could be used to fund tuition at private schools or out-of-district public schools.

While there are opponents to charter schools, including some teacher unions and public-school supporters, Bradford said school choice will have a greater share of any education discussion in the future. He added it would force public schools to become

more accountable to parents. The New Jersey Education Association has expressed strong opposition to the scholarship legislation, citing concerns with the handling of special-education students.

"There are significant proposals in the Legislature that will change how people will interact with their schools," said Bradford.

School choice also will be discussed next week when St. Matthew will host a panel discussion as part of national tour for National School Choice Week. Bradford said he believes the program, which is scheduled for Feb. 3 at 7:30 p.m., will increase that discussion.

Scheduled panelists will include Jackson, community activist Curtis Sliwa, conservative talk-show host Michael Medved, Club for Growth founder Stephen Moore and journalist Michele Bernard, president of Independent Women's Forum and Independent Women's Voice.