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Charters 1st To Be Under State Control

By Andrea Schoellkopf

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Four Albuquerque charter schools on Friday became the first to be authorized by the state, bypassing the oft-lamented process of going through the school district.

The state Public Education Commission gave the OK for two new charters to open in the fall and allowed two existing charters to come under state control.

“We’re a school now!” Cottonwood Classical Preparatory co-founder Lynn Carey excitedly whispered to her colleagues after their International Baccalaureate middle and high school won state approval to open next month, the first to do so after changes in state law allowed the state to authorize charter schools.

Cottonwood plans to open at the Unser Racing Museum on Montaña to 135 sixth- through 10th-graders.

The state also authorized Media Arts Collaborative, which will emphasize post-secondary education and media arts careers and plans to eventually add a distance-learning component. It will open Sept. 2 at 4401 Central.

“This is a very exciting day,” said co-founder Patti Gladstone, whose school will open with 125 ninth- and 10th-graders.

Both schools plan to expand to 240 students, each with the addition of further high school grades.

The scene at Friday’s Public Education Commission meeting was full of celebration at the Central New Mexico Community College Workforce Training Center. After a signing ceremony and speeches, state officials stood for pictures with the grinning charter founders and supporters, who were given framed, colorful certificates of their authorization to hang in their new offices.

While many of the charters were diplomatic about their reasons for going through the state process, the reason often cited in other discussions is a hope to avoid the politics and bureaucracy of being part of a school district. Under the new arrangement, the state will oversee the charters and their budgets.

“We didn’t want to be tied to APS,” said Cottonwood co-founder Lynn Barr, a former APS teacher.

Two other schools, Horizon West and North Valley Academy, chose to renew their charters with the state this year instead of APS.

“Going with the PEC, we’re going to be allowed a lot more flexibility,” said Horizon executive director Amie Duran. “We have the possibility of getting more grants and more funding.”

In January, 17 new charters around the state submitted letters of intent to the Public Education Department announcing their plans to apply for a new charter for 2009. The deadline for applications is July 1, with most expected to apply through the new state process.

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