

# Charter schools feature community feel

By ALAN D. McNARIE  
For the Kama'aina Shopper

**T**hey don't look like school buildings. One is a restored downtown department store with colorful columns and ornate iron grillwork, a visual and performing arts center for an entrance and a private ice cream store in its midst. The other is a cluster of World War II-style Quonset huts remodeled into a rustic lodge on the edge of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

But determined parents hope to make these unlikely sites into a new kind of educational setting for their children. Next fall, if all goes as planned, both sites will open as Hawaii's newest public charter schools.

Connections Public Charter School has already started holding classes, sharing space with Mountain View Elementary School. But last week it marked a milestone at its future home in Hilo's downtown Kress building, with the opening of exhibits in its new gallery and performing arts space, "Expressions," in the front of the building's first floor.

"Expressions" will showcase the work of from Connections and other charter schools around the state, as well as the work of invited adults. One of those adults is Bob "Steamy" Chow, the Kress Building's longtime manager and advocate, whose exhibition of tsunami photos is currently on display.

"We've dedicated that space to Bob Chow, for his lifetime of commitment to the downtown Hilo area," says Tom Helms, Connections' chief educational officer.

The Kress building's three floors will house students from kindergarten through 12th grade,



Photo by William Ing

Led by teacher Bill Lloyd, center, students of Connections Public Charter School play music for guests at a May 11 ceremony at the Kress Building.

along with two existing private businesses. Construction and permitting for the school is still underway, with classes scheduled to start Aug. 1. But the Kress got a trial run as a schoolhouse during the recent teacher's strike. "We had well over 100 kids downstairs on an emergency basis," observes Helm.

Meanwhile, at their office in the former Menchune Lodge in Volcano, Dina Kageler and Jana Smith are planning the opening the Volcano School of the Arts and Sciences, the village's first public school since the elementary school closed there in 1971. Kageler is president of the interim board of directors for the new charter school; Smith is its consulting educational director. The new school hopes to start classes for grades 1-6 at the lodge in

August, with seventh and eighth grade classes to follow in 2002 and 2003.

"A group of people got together and said, 'What if?'" says Kageler, when asked how the school got started. "What if we had a school in Volcano? What if it were based on the strengths of the community: the arts and sciences? What if the community could shape our own vision of education, reflective of our community values?"

"The purpose is to give families an option," believes Smith. "Right now we have a choice between Del Monte and Del Monte. At least give us a choice between Del Monte and Libby's."

In an effort to give communities just that sort of choice, public charter schools were autho-

rized by the state legislature in 1999. The Big Island already has more charter schools than any other island in the state: Kanu o ka 'Aina in Waimea, Waters of Life Charter School in Kurtistown, West Hawaii Explorations Academy in Kailua-Kona, and Connections. Two more schools, including the Volcano school, are scheduled to open this fall, and six more schools are planned.

Charter schools are public schools, licensed by the state Board of Education and meeting all state curriculum requirements. But the new schools differ from Hawaii's traditional public schools in several ways. While most public schools are controlled directly by the state board, charter schools are run by

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community school boards. While Hawaii public schools on average are the largest in the nation, charter schools are generally small and personal: Connections will have a total of 340 classroom seats for its K-12 curriculum, while Volcano School of Arts and Sciences initially plans to serve just 90 students.

Public schools are usually contained on large insular campuses. Charter schools, both by necessity and by design, rely much more heavily on community resources outside the school building.

"We think it's important for our youngsters to be involved with the downtown community," says Helm. "The proximity to museums and libraries and the outside areas are very good." The Kress building is within a few blocks of the Lyman Museum, the East Hawaii Cultural Center, the Hilo Tsunami Museum, the Hilo Public Library, and acres of parks and soccer fields. "We're talking with the YWCA about several things," notes Helm.

The storefront arts area, meanwhile, will let the public see what the students are up to. The public promenade on the Kress's first floor will remain open, along with the Tropical Dreams Ice Cream Parlor, inviting citizenry into the heart of the school. Next to the ice cream shop, the school is planning its own store, possibly carrying a stock of school supplies, consignment items and student crafts. The store, says Helm, will be "student owned and operated. What we want to teach there is entrepreneurial education, so we want the kids to take a hand in the planning." The school is also working with the downtown community to plan "service learning projects."

Without strong community involvement, the new Volcano school would never have gotten off the ground.

"We had a community meeting in October of 1999," recalls Kageler. "A lot of families came out, and they began to give us some of their ideas of what a school would look like. A lot of hands-on activities in the sciences and arts. An emphasis on Hawaiian culture. Teach languages of the islands. Stress global environmental awareness. Teach kids to become lifetime learners ...."

But the support didn't stop with just ideas. Community members pitched in with everything from serving on planning committees to folding brochures. Senior citizens

mailings and the like. The village's large visual and performing arts community volunteered to help teach the arts, from dance to photography to fiber arts.

The fledgling school also reached out to local governmental entities and community organizations, and those institutions met the school halfway.

"The partnership — that's another strong feature of our school," says Kageler. "The school will operate in partnership with Volcano Art Center, Kilauea Military Camp, Keakealani Outdoor Educational Center, Cooper Cen-

ter and the National Park Service.

But the biggest benefit for both the children and residents may be that the entire community becomes a stakeholder in its children. Kids meet the community, and the community meets the kids.

The result, believes Smith, will be "whole children."

"I was totally in love with the curriculum here, because it addresses the needs of the whole child: social, emotional and physical as well as cognitive," she says. "Children aren't just these little empty heads that need to be filled up."

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