

ALBANY

Veteran educator starting new school

Program geared to grade K-4 pupils

BY MARY MARTIALAY
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Lillian Turner could retire. But she's having too much fun.

Turner had 35 years as a Niskayuna teacher and administrator under her belt when she left public education to open Schenectady's first charter school. And after four years as director of the International Charter School of Schenectady, Turner decided she wanted to do it all over again.

This fall, Turner expects to open the Henry Johnson Charter School, planned as a small, independent K-4 with an emphasis on character and academics. For the past several months, Turner has busied herself laying out a curriculum, preparing a school building and staff and get-



Turner

ting the word out on Albany's newest educational option.

"It's creative, and it's creating something with a positive outcome," Turner said. "I truly enjoy the work."

Last week, Turner spent three days promoting the schools at a Black History Month celebration at Empire State Plaza. She is proud of the school's link to its namesake, a black Albany native who distinguished himself with exceptional valor as a sergeant in the New York National Guard's 369th Infantry Regiment, an all-black regiment known as the "Harlem Hellfighters." Johnson earned France's highest military honor and a posthumous Distinguished Service Cross from the U.S. for single-handedly rescuing his comrades from capture under heavy fire. Turner is particularly pleased to have formed a link with a local VFW bearing Johnson's name, and hopes to enlist those veterans in school activities.

Peter Murphy, a Henry Johnson board member and policy director of the New York Charter Schools

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Association, said few public school educators have followed a path like Turner's.

"I really wish a lot of traditional educators should look at someone like her — a career educator in public schools who really stepped out — and have the impact that she can have," Murphy said. "She's a rarity, someone with the experience that she has in the traditional system, to be part of a fabulous school in Schenectady and now come over and do the elementary school."

Henry Johnson Charter School has the backing of the Brighter Choice Foundation, which is financing the purchase, renovation and expansion of the former P.S. 3 on Watervliet Avenue for use as the charter school's new home. The school enters a field of nine open or approved charter schools within the city. It plans to open in September with 125 students in grades K-1, expanding to a maximum of 350 students K-4.

Unlike the International Charter School of Schenectady, Henry Johnson will not employ a manager. The Schenectady school employed Sabis Educational Systems Inc., which required member schools to follow a strict curriculum, predetermined materials and teaching methods.

Henry Johnson will carve its own path, choosing teacher materials and methods that Turner and her team deem most appropriate to their students.

"Having teachers involved in making curriculum decisions gives them ownership," Turner said. "And we're acknowledging that they're the experts."

However, the school won't be going it alone. Henry Johnson's board has chosen a model in the Milwaukee College Prep school, a Wiscon-

sin charter school founded in 1997. Statistics provided by the school on its Web site show that students sharply outperformed their peers in the city's public schools on 2005 assessments of reading, math, language and science. Some scores were double those of city's public school results.

Turner, who visited Milwaukee Prep, said the success of the school will be based on combining heavy character education with three hours of English and reading daily in a longer school day and a longer year.

"I think the attention to character is going to be important," Turner said. "Milwaukee sweats the small stuff and if you sweat the small stuff, you don't have to deal with the big stuff."

Character education starts with week-long lessons based on a reading and activities that build the idea of choices and consequences. Readings may include classics from Aesop's Fables or Benet's "Book of Virtues." Nearly any story will do so long as there is a discussion of how choices lead to consequences.

"There will be things that go on around the school daily that teach kids how to make good choices," Turner said. "Good choices equal good consequences."

Turner said the school will bring choices and consequences even down to such minor details as how uniforms are worn, how students sit in their seats and stand in line. But for all strict standards, Turner said the school will teach and enforce expectations with a light hand.

"It's done in a very loving way, with all kinds of positive reinforcement of kids," Turner said. "If you get those things in place, then you can pay attention to the learning and what's happening in the classroom."

Academics will include three

hours of English and reading instruction daily, a school day that begins with breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and extends to 4:30 p.m., and a school year that runs about three weeks longer than the public schools. With the longer school day, students will also have time for two weekly lessons apiece in science, social studies, art, and physical education.

Two teachers, both New York state certified, will share each classroom with a maximum of 25 students in a classroom. Turner said the teachers will switch off with one serving as lead teacher in English and the other as lead teacher in math. With the help of a consultant, Henry Johnson has chosen the Macmillan/McGraw-Hill "Treasures" reading program and McGraw-Hill SRA Real Math.

Murphy said Henry Johnson doesn't so much offer a unique program as a determination he finds lacking in the city's public schools.

"The public schools don't have to be innovative, they have to do what they're supposed to do for a longer time and do it better," Murphy said. "Brighter Choice K-4 boys and girls are the highest performing schools in the city, not because the kids are smarter but because they're getting more out of the kids."

Both Turner and Murphy said they believe their program will overcome the drawbacks of students who come to school not ready to learn.

"That's not an excuse for not doing better by the children. When I hear that from educators I say, 'When did you find that out? That's not new,'" Murphy said. "Working with parents, having school uniforms, having a values-centered building from day one, that there are rules and that we're here to achieve: Kids respond to that ... It's not a magic formula."