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Charter school operator adds three campuses

Uplift Education will serve 2,500 students

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Eleven-year-old Uplift Education is experiencing a growth spurt, with three new locations.

The nonprofit charter school operator is opening Williams Preparatory at 1750 Viceroy Drive in Dallas, the Hampton Campus at 8915 Hampton Road in Dallas and Summit International Preparatory at 1100 Roosevelt St. in Arlington for the 2007-2008 school year.

Uplift has operated the North Hills School at 606 E. Royal Lane in Irving since 1996 and Peak Preparatory at 4605 Live Oak in East Dallas since 2004.

About 2,500 students will attend Uplift schools this year, with about 1,200 at North Hills, 400 at Peak Preparatory, 400 at Summit International, 200 at Williams Preparatory and 200 at the Hampton Campus, said Rosemary Perlmeter, Uplift's executive director. Plans call for the schools to have 6,000 students by 2012.

"We're seeing consumer demand for stronger education," Perlmeter said. "As the statistics get worse and worse for college graduation rates, especially for students of color, everybody gets more and more focused on it."

Uplift looked at more than 100 properties before settling on the new locations, said Eliza Solender, president of the real estate firm Solender/Hall Inc., which represented the nonprofit in its search.

The challenge was finding sites in "underserved" areas, or areas with limited educational choices, Solender said.

"It was a very, very, wide net to look at all of Dallas County, targeting areas with higher numbers of lower-income kids," she said.

Williams Preparatory has two buildings on 12.8 acres. One of the buildings is 60,797 square feet and the other is 11,424 square feet. The former office buildings were converted to schools this summer. It opens for the fall semester Aug. 27.

The Hampton Campus, which also opens Aug. 27, consists of a 78,000 square foot building on 7.6 acres. The site formerly was leased by the University of North Texas.

Summit International, which opened Aug. 16, is operating on an 18-acre campus formerly used by Country Day School of Arlington. The private school's elementary and middle schools were converted to a public charter school this year after being acquired by Uplift.

Classes are being phased in, but each of the new schools will eventually offer kindergarten through 12th grade. Each will need to grow by 30% over about three years to accommodate K-12, Perlmeter said.

Selling bonds

Perlmeter and Solender declined to disclose the purchase prices for the new school sites. All required less than \$1 million apiece in modifications to make them functional for this school year, Perlmeter said.

Charter schools do not receive state money for building improvements, so Uplift Education will sell about \$10 million in bonds to finance part of the cost of purchasing and building improvements at the three new schools, and a 40,000-square-foot expansion of Peak Preparatory, doubling that school's size, Perlmeter said.

A year ago, the Texas High School Project gave Uplift a \$2.68 million grant to open two science, technology, engineering and math schools. Texas High School Project is a partnership that includes funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation.

Uplift in May received an additional \$2.5 million from a foundation led by Dallas philanthropists Abby and Todd Williams to establish Williams Preparatory, which is one of the two science, technology, engineering and math schools. The site for the second such school has not been selected, Perlmeter said.

Charter schools are public schools that operate under a contract granted by a chartering entity such as the State Board of Education. The Texas Legislature authorized the establishment of charter schools in 1995.

Charter schools don't charge tuition, but receive varying amounts of state funding based on their

enrollment and the area they serve, Perlmeter said. For Uplift schools, it amounts to about \$5,000 per student, she said.

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Uplift schools teach a rigorous, multi-disciplinary curriculum. Located in underserved communities, the schools stress core skills, accountability, question-asking, college preparation and foreign languages.

Uplift's North Hills School was ranked 13th out of the top 100 public schools in the United States in 2007 by Newsweek magazine.

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