

# City looks to privatize 9 schools

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**Nonprofits' plans  
for management due  
for approval today**

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**In search of improvement**

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**Chosen operators  
will take control  
starting in September**

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*By* JEAN THOMPSON  
SUN STAFF

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With the hope that private management will do a better job than bureaucrats, the Baltimore school board is expected to approve today plans from nonprofit groups to run nine public schools.

Chosen from 38 applicants, the winners include community groups that want to manage City Springs, Gilmor, Pinderhughes, Kelson and Thomas Jefferson elementaries in September.

In addition, one plan would convert a West Baltimore private school into a city public school. Three others would start new city schools that would draw enrollment from existing schools.

Getting a green light from the school board today would allow the venture to proceed, but there is much work to be done before city contracts can be awarded to the would-be school operators.

Set to open in September after less than a year of planning and development, these schools would be monitored as incubators of teaching experiments and as models that might be duplicated throughout the school system, said George Merrill, director of the program.

"Maybe this is a good way to manage schools in general, or maybe there will be specific practices or successes that we can learn from and expand to other schools," Merrill said of the New Schools program, which is backed by the school system and the Abell Foundation.

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# City to pick nonprofits to run 9 public schools

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nally conceived as a way to attract experts to schools that failed to comply with federal laws governing education for disabled students, the program was expanded to encourage other nonprofit-public partnerships.

This latest school management experiment would create hybrids, privately managed but publicly funded city schools tied to the central office by management contracts but independently choosing their staffs and curricula.

They will not quite be charter schools, the independent but publicly funded schools recently endorsed by President Clinton.

Maryland, unlike about 25 other states, has no legislation allowing public money to be spent to create independent schools. But the concept of public schools operating apart from central office control is similar.

Baltimore learned hard lessons about contracted management during the three years that for-profit Education Alternatives Inc. ran nine city schools. Separately, the school system allowed the Stadium School to open with parents and teachers at the helm.

This latest venture draws on lessons from both experiences: Only nonprofits were permitted to apply, and all the applicants were required to show that they would have strong ties to parents.

The nine schools would receive allocations based on the same per-pupil formula supporting all other public schools; the exact amounts have not been determined, Merrill said. Some also will receive start-up grants from donations raised by the New Schools office.

The schools must raise money to cover costs such as building space that are not covered by the city's allocation for instruction and staff, he added.

For Baltimore's would-be school operators, contracts with city schools hold a variety of attractions.

*"It means we are accountable to someone now."*

**Susan Tibbels**, principal of New Song Community Learning Center, on plans to affiliate with city.

Some have long wanted to open a school, but lacked the financial resources: Through the New Schools program, public funds provide the means.

Other applicants already manage educational programs or experiments — and saw the potential benefits of expanding to an entire school.

In West Baltimore, where the New Song Community Learning Center runs a 2-year-old private academy as well as morning and after-school programs, the city school partnership is an investment in long-term survival: "sustainability," says Principal Susan Tibbels.

The academy for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders is currently supported by donations and a \$10-a-month tuition charged to students, whose families often cannot afford more.

Founded by New Song Community Church, a congregation at Gilmore and Presstman streets with ministries for the poor, the center's academy is separately incorporated and does not have a religious curriculum, Tibbels said.

Becoming a city school is an opportunity that comes with strings attached, she said: "It means we are accountable to someone now."

The chance to operate City Springs Elementary in South Baltimore would be an expansion for the **Baltimore Curriculum Project**, said its director, Muriel Berkeley.

This year, the school is already one of six participating in the Abell Foundation-backed effort to design a stronger curriculum for city schools.

Instead of the city curriculum, teachers here are using highly scripted Direct Instruction methods and materials for phonics and eventually math lessons. A second commercially available curriculum is being used to teach other subjects.

Berkeley is not interested in becoming a school operator to take on responsibility for the building so much as in eliminating conflicts so that the curriculum experiment can flourish.

"What we are dealing right now with is conflicting directives given to principals by us and by the school system, which puts teachers in the crossfire," she said.

Today's school board action sets the stage for a frenzy of organizing: By April 1, planners must incorporate as nonprofits, draft budgets, solicit business and community support, pass background checks, set curriculums and, in some cases, firm up arrangements for building space.

The school system plans to award contracts by May, Merrill said.

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