

Disgruntled parents charge that the Academy's Michigan-based for-profit management company, Charter School Administration Services, runs the school with profits rather than students as the priority. The DeKalb County school system is investigating the school and may take steps to close it at the end of the school year.

After The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported on the school's problems, the state board voted last week to postpone the grant, which is usually a routine matter.

"I think one of the things we need to do is wait for the local board to make a determination," said Marquette McKnight, who is chairman of the charter committee. "It is federal funding and it is critical for us to be able to see both sides of the issues."

To date, state officials have never visited a local charter school to evaluate problems in the educational program.

"We want to see if there's real instruction going on and if the instruction is in conjunction with what they said they would do in their charter," said Melanie Stockwell, the state's director of charter school compliance.

She said it's not uncommon to hear parent complaints when a charter opens, especially as they figure out "how to govern one another" on the school's board. A state inspection may help determine whether the complaints are simply based on differences of opinion, Stockwell said.

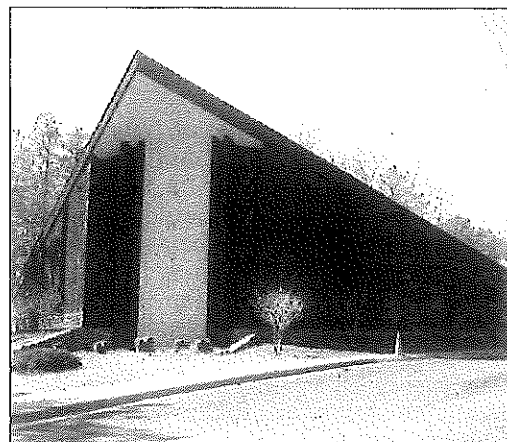
"For all the parents who say they hate it, there's also a large group who say they love it," Stockwell told board members.

Several parents attended the state board's charter committee meeting last week in support of the school. Cheryl Mathis, president of the school's board, asked that the state not hold up the grant.

"There are some needs we are asking for as parents to make instruction more effective," Mathis said.

A report to the state board from DeKalb County school officials indicates the academy has had about 300 students through its doors, although half of them have not

➤ Please see **ACADEMY, J5**



RENEÉ HANNANS / Staff

Although numerous parents complain about the Academy of Lithonia, officials say other parents support it.

Lithonia Academy gets state scrutiny

Charter school's grant put on hold

By JEN SANSBURY
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Problems at the troubled Academy of Lithonia charter school continue to mount.

The academy's application for a \$200,000 federal charter school start-up grant has been put on hold until state education officials visit the southeast DeKalb school.

The State Board of Education's charter review committee asked the Department of Education to send a team to the school, which has suffered from funding problems and massive student and staff turnover. The school, which opened in August, is now on its third principal.

Parents who removed their children from the school have also complained to local and state officials about other problems, including the lack of an entrepreneurial instructional theme as promised in the school's charter, dirty bathrooms and a shortage of supplies.

Academy under state scrutiny

► Continued from J1

stayed. It has never had more than 200 at any one time and is down to about 145 now.

Because of the enrollment drop, the county cut the school's budget by nearly \$362,000. Mathis said the management company has stepped in with a loan.

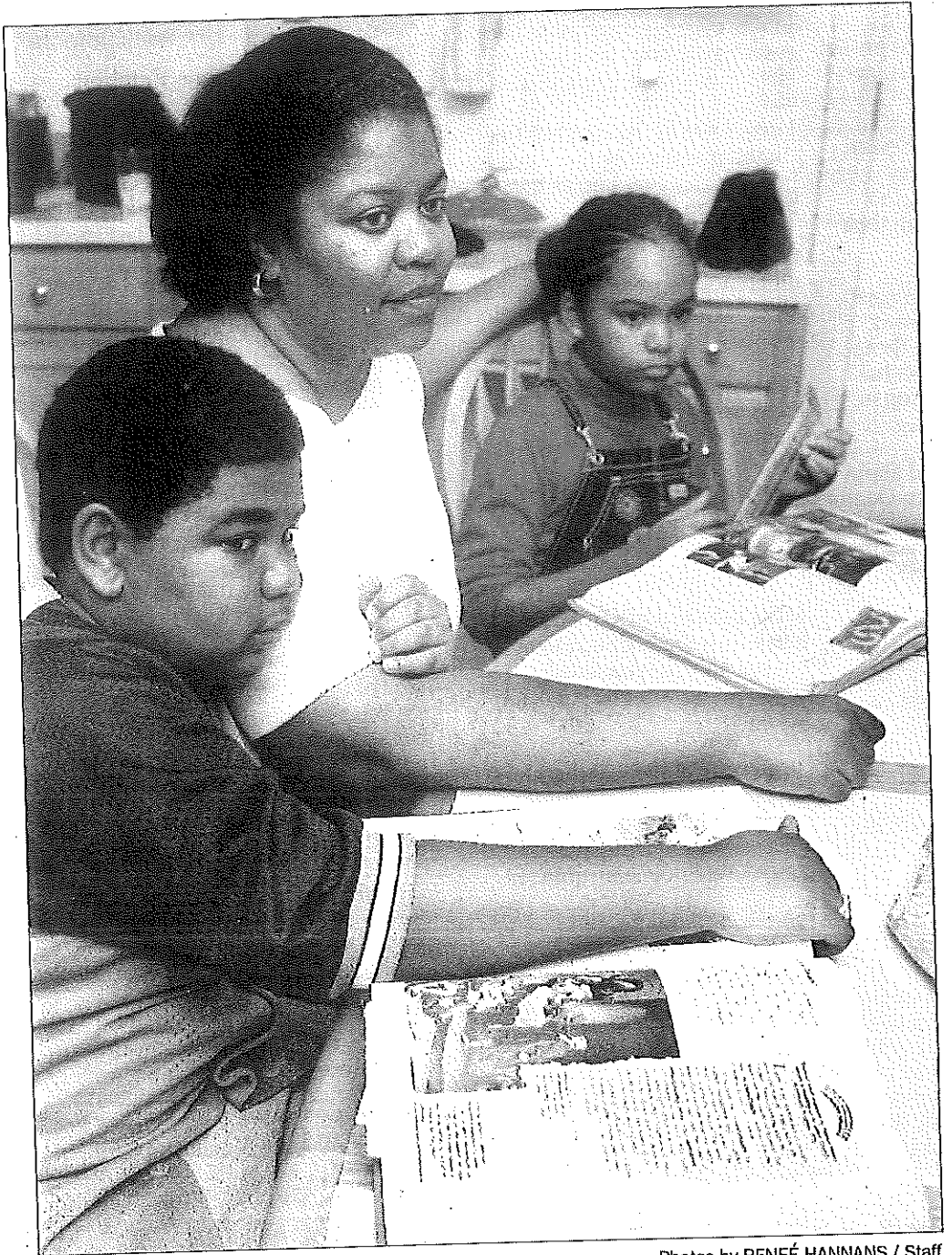
The DeKalb County district's School Improvement Department recently conducted an instructional audit of the school. The audit found

that teachers did not have a clear understanding of what curriculum they were teaching, the school did not seem to have business-related instruction and there were not enough books, teaching materials or classroom equipment.

But at the same time, parents have pointed out, the wealthy owner of the academy's management company, Leicester "Bill" Allen, is building a multimillion-dollar mansion behind the school.

Mathis said the school had not been able to establish a good working relationship with DeKalb school officials. She also said some of the allegations by former parents and DeKalb educators who visited the school to evaluate it are not true.

McKnight said problems surfacing at the Academy of Lithonia and a proposed Cobb County school may help bring concerns about for-profit charter operations "to the front burner a little more quickly."



Photos by RENÉE HANNANS / Staff

Gail Wright (center), has pulled her children **Logan** (left), 11, and **Kourtney**, 10, out of the Academy of Lithonia charter school after many complaints. Staff turn-overs, poor maintenance and monetary problems have plagued the project.

Charter school flop mocked by mansion

DeKalb dream falters in shadow of luxury

By JEN SANBURY
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2/1/02

When the Academy of Lithonia charter school opened in August, parents in affluent southeast DeKalb County couldn't believe their good fortune: a free, business-oriented elementary school had landed in their back yard.

"Everything was new and fresh and promising," said Gwenneth Willoughby, who saw the new school as an opportunity to take her two children out of overcrowded Murphey Candler Elementary. "This was so much better — it was like a little private school."

But shortly after the academy opened, parents say their dream school turned into a nightmare.

There was constant staff turnover — the first principal and many teachers were fired or resigned. Parents say bathrooms were filthy, there weren't enough books and the parent-teacher organization was dissolved after an argument with school officials over who should control money they raised.

All the while, the wealthy owner of the



Going up: The owner of the funding-plagued Academy of Lithonia charter school's management company is building this four-story mansion next door to the campus.

school's for-profit management company was building a four-story mansion next door.

Many parents pulled their children out. By the Christmas holidays, enrollment had dropped by more than 60 students.

Some parents say the school was run

➤ Please see **CHARTER, D3**

➤ **ON THE WEB:** For more information about this topic, see Metro Online, **D2**

Charter school flounders as DeKalb mansion rises

➤ Continued from D1

with the bottom line, not children, in mind. They want the school closed.

County school officials may recommend just that, which, if approved by the state Board of Education, would be the first time a charter school has been shut down in Georgia. A preliminary audit report obtained this week by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution outlines serious concerns over the school's instructional program.

"I feel the school has severe problems, such severity of problems that it probably shouldn't be allowed to continue," said Jim Mullins, the DeKalb administrator working with charter schools. "I am probably going to request a hearing at a date in the near future."

The owner of the Detroit-based company that manages the Academy said it simply got off to a rocky start. He is confident it eventually will be a "very good and productive" school.

"Our perspective is that you have a first-year school and, like anything, you would have some issues that come up, but I think that we're doing very well overall," said Leicester [Bill] Allen, a wealthy Detroit-area businessman who has spent more than 30

years running day care centers, private and charter schools and a private career college. "Often in a new school people come with certain expectations, be they staff or be they parents, and you have to work at it."

Allen abruptly ended the interview when contacted recently at a

home he owns in Lithonia. The school's principal, Catherine Robertson, did not respond to several requests for an interview.

The DeKalb County school system, which authorized the Academy of Lithonia, is investigating whether the school is providing the entrepreneurial program — including instruction in business management — it promised.

A team from the district's instructional

department visited the school about two weeks ago. A final report will be available in about a week, but the draft of the audit indicates they found:

➤ Little evidence — beyond bulletin boards — that the curriculum really has an entrepreneurial focus.

➤ Limited teaching materials, such as maps, art supplies or math manipulatives, and few books for students.

➤ No classroom equipment, such as computers, overhead projectors, CD or tape players or musical instruments.

"There appeared to be confusion among the teaching staff as to what curriculum they were using," the report states.

In one instance, the auditors observed a teacher giving the same science lesson on clouds to second-, third-, fifth- and sixth-graders. The students were given the same assignment, regardless of their grade level.

After the report is final, Mullins said, he will meet with other DeKalb school administrators before determining what step to take next.

Mullins said he also questions whether the academy's local governing board has been functioning as it should. The board includes Allen's college-age son and a niece. The school's director is his niece by marriage.

Parents can't see charter

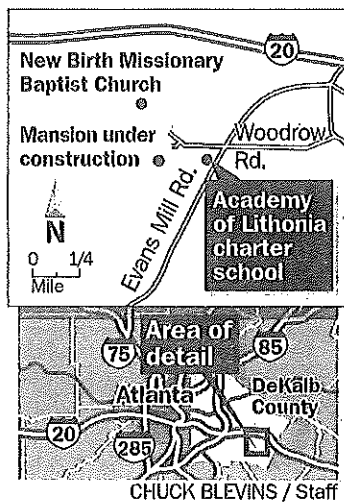
The DeKalb school board awarded a one-year, renewable charter in Sept. 2000 to Detroit-based non-profit Academy of America, which turned the school over to its for-profit sibling, Charter School Administration Services. The company runs at least 17 other charter schools in Michigan, Ohio, Texas, Missouri and Arizona.

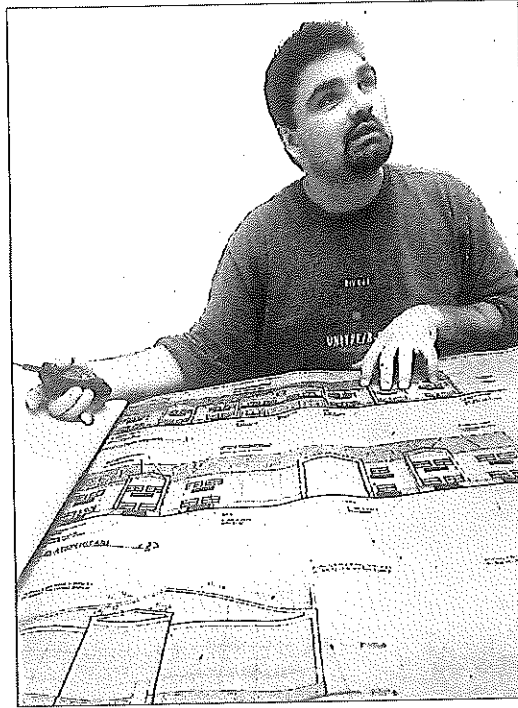
This is not the first time one of the firm's schools has had trouble. In 1999, the Academy of Austin abruptly closed its doors. Students showed up for classes one morning to find the doors locked.

Charter schools receive state and local taxpayer money, but are freed of many rules and regulations governing traditional public schools so they can provide innovative programs and offer a competitive choice for students.

There are 46 approved charters in Georgia, of which 40 have opened.

A growing number, like the Academy of Lithonia, are operated by for-profit management companies — an arrangement that education officials are eyeing carefully. State charter school coordinator Beverly Schrenger





RENEE HANNANS / Staff

Richard Walls, national project manager of Academy of America's management company, looks over blueprints of the proposed new building for the school.

said she is seeing them try to micromanage schools and skirt the parents.

Former parents at the Academy said they asked to see the school's charter, but were never given access to it.

The DeKalb school system has not audited the academy's finances yet. The school receives state funding between \$2,317 and \$3,727 per student, depending on grade level, and \$2,451 in local dollars. The school hoped to have 250 students in kindergarten through sixth grades, but records show it had about 195 early in the school year and about 145 now.

In November, the school system cut the academy's budget from \$1.3 million to \$977,000 to reflect a drop in enrollment through early October.

Former kindergarten teacher Loretta Ramsey said the school appeared to be claiming it had more students than were actually attending classes. She said her class roll was constantly changing and included several students she never met.

"I would put them as 'unknown' and then . . . [someone in the office] would put them as 'absent,'" said Ramsey, who quit in mid-September.

Many of the academy's students, nearly all African-American, were the sons and daughters of successful professionals who had previously opted to send their children to schools as far as 20 miles away. Now, they thought, their kids could go to a top-notch school close to home.

"They were going to be taught how to become business leaders, how to become successful, build their character, strive even hard-

er, hold them to a higher standard," said Gail Wright, who served with Willoughby as co-presidents of the PTO. "My children were totally sold down the river."

What makes it worse, both said, is that they believe Allen, who is black, preyed on the neighborhood because of its successful parents.

"He realized he was coming to the second wealthiest black area of the United States," Willoughby said.

Parents never imagined the school would suffer from a lack of resources. After all, Allen has been building an opulent mansion to live in nearby. The white, plantation-style house with a striking red roof can be seen through the trees lining the ballfield the Academy's students use for P.E. classes.

"One has nothing to do with the other," Allen said. "They're totally separate items."

Parents say they were promised a new classroom addition, a state-of-the-art library and science lab and computers for every child.

None of it has so far materialized. Parents say they even had to donate toilet paper and copying paper — a charge Allen calls "totally erroneous."

Falling behind academically

Richard Walls, the management company's national project manager, said the new addition to the school has been held up by the county because of planned road expansions in the area.

"As soon as everything is approved, I have people ready to go start on it," said Walls, who is also overseeing construction of the mansion. He said the new classroom wing would take about five months to build and include 22 classrooms, including a physics lab, two computer labs and a large music room.

Former parents and students said the staff turnover made their heads spin. Some classes have had five or more teachers, they say.

"One day we'd come in and there's another teacher," said fourth-grader Kourtney Wright, who had three teachers before she left the school in October.

Some parents have decided, reluctantly, to leave their children at the school. Kim Adair, who has three children there, said she believes they are now so far behind academically that they would fail if she moved them into another school. She plans to put them in an intensive summer tutoring program.

"The other parents I've talked to whose children are still there are pretty much in the same boat," Adair said. "They don't want to disturb their children."

Parents who have left said they were heartbroken by the decision.

"What I failed to do — and I have been kicking myself — was to investigate further on something new coming into our area," said Deborah Segue, a parent who also worked in the after-school program. "I won't experiment with my child ever again."