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Former Volusia educator leads academy

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SOUTH DAYTONA -- A veteran Volusia school administrator has been tapped to direct a new charter high school scheduled to open in August.

Sam Smith, who retired in 1997 as principal of Ortona Elementary, will direct the Richard Milburn Academy that will be housed in a renovated store at Sunshine Park Mall.

"They say you can't keep teenagers away from the mall, so this is where we're putting them," Smith joked.

The school is designed to serve up to 150 students in grades nine through 12 who have not been successful in a traditional high school.

It will be operated by a Massachusetts firm that launched its first charter school in Texas in 1998. Milburn now operates nine charter schools in that state and five in Florida.

Charter schools are public schools operated by private groups under contracts with their local school boards. They receive state funding but are free from many of the regulations that bind traditional schools as a way of encouraging innovation.

Organizers originally planned to open the local Milburn Academy in West Volusia but turned to the South Daytona site after an unsuccessful two-year search for a facility.

Renovations of the mall store started recently but were shut down by city building officials because the school hadn't gotten the proper permit.

Smith and Chief Building Official Glenn Pereno expect the permit to be issued shortly and the work to resume in time to have the store ready for classes in early August.

"It's looking pretty good. They're doing everything right," Pereno said.

Smith, 66, spent 21 years teaching at the former Mainland and Seabreeze junior highs before taking an administrative job in 1983. He was principal of Ortona for seven years before his retirement and has been doing education consulting work since then.

The smaller size of Milburn Academy compared with Volusia's public high schools and an educational plan for each student will help personalize the school environment, Smith said.

Milburn students will have to meet the same 24-credit graduation requirements that are in place at the county's other public high schools and will have to pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

"Everybody I've met said they know a child who has not been successful for some reason," Smith said. "We're giving these kids a fresh start."

Smith is actively recruiting teachers and students for the school. More information is available by calling the Richard Milburn Academy at (386) 304-0086.

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