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Brick set to found new school: PVPA leader plans charter in Holyoke

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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SOUTH HADLEY - Bob Brick, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School, said the school he co-founded 15 years ago is flourishing, and now it's time for him to do something new.

"It's been an amazing ride," Brick, who will leave his post June 30, said in his office Tuesday. "My time here has been the most wonderful time in my life."

Brick and four others came up with a new project in November: the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School. Inspired by the teachings and writing of the famed Brazilian educator and author of "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School - a working name at this time - is to be a charter school in Holyoke centered around a social justice curriculum.

Meanwhile, Brick will not actually leave the school for another year. He said he will remain with PVPA in a new full-time, paid administrative position, taking part in the long-range planning process, evaluations and community discussions. Next week, the PVPA board of trustees will start a discussion about filling Brick's position or following a different model.

"We've got until June 30 to decide what direction we want to go," said Paul Weinberg, of the PVPA board. "Everything is going to be open for discussion, and we're going to involve the community in that discussion."

PVPA trustees are also going to assist in the application process for the new school, Weinberg noted, which concludes at the end of summer. The decision as to whether the charter will be granted is expected in early winter.

"As a board member of a charter school, I'm always in favor of the creation of a solid charter school," Weinberg said. "Charter schools are the cutting edge of desperately needed innovation in education, and that applies to Holyoke and most other communities in our area."

Excited about future

The new school will be a "sister school" to PVPA, Brick said, with the PVPA board assisting its start-up.

"We're quite excited," said Brick, who is starting the new school with Ljuba Marsh, also a co-founder of PVPA; Rhonda Soto, a former PVPA parent and teacher; Ingrid Askew, a founding PVPA board member; and Janet Sheppard, Brick's wife, who is a lawyer and former city solicitor in Northampton.



Bob Brick

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Sponsored by the Holyoke agency Enlace de Familia, the proposed charter school is in its preliminary stages, Brick said, with the first step - the prospectus section of the application - due in August to the Department of Education and Secondary Education. Over the next five months, Brick and his colleagues will reach out to community groups and parents in Holyoke, as well as to local colleges and universities that could be affiliates.

Brick, who has taught social justice at PVPA, noted that Holyoke is the lowest-performing school district in Massachusetts and has one of the lowest graduation rates.

"This community deserves a real high school alternative that promises students academic success and a social justice curriculum which will produce graduates that will take what they have learned and bring it back to their own community for positive change," Brick wrote in a letter to the PVPA community explaining his decision.

Students in the hallway outside his office Tuesday said they were pleased to know Brick, whom they described as a skilled public speaker, a cheerful person with a positive outlook and well-dressed with a cool walkie-talkie.

"Bob's completely amazing," said Hillary Chase, a senior from Orange who took Brick's 1960s history class. "He does a lot for the community here at PVPA."

She added he is an approachable educator, yet he pushes students to their limits.

"I don't like debating, but he helped me gain confidence," Chase said, over the sound of drums. "I don't need to feel intimidated with him."

Brick said the genesis for PVPA was an idea scribbled on a beverage napkin at Amherst Chinese restaurant 15 years ago. The group of artists and educators who started the school had a mission to provide western Massachusetts with a challenging academic curriculum wedded to an in-depth performing arts program. Today, 400 students from more than 60 towns attend PVPA.

Brick said the school's growth is his proudest accomplishment.

"People have described me as the #heart and soul of PVPA'. I suspect that is because I have invested so much of my heart and soul in making sure that PVPA is a success," Brick wrote in a letter to the community. "As this transition begins, I have no less commitment to this success. And I promise you a good deal of my heart and soul will remain here with you."

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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A review of the latest data

A review of the latest data on the website of the Massachusetts Department of Education suggests that Bob Brick is in error in his assertion that Holyoke is the "lowest performing school district in the state with one of the lowest graduation rates." In fact Holyoke's improvement in drop rates is cited and the high school does not appear on the list of the most troubled schools. In addition overall improvement in graduation rates for Latino students is noted. The data on the website makes clear that students with disabilities and those without English proficiency struggle to complete their education. A good start for those desiring to secure already limited state funds for themselves to launch a school that will negatively impact the budget for Holyoke's existing schools, would seem to be well informed and to speak accurately in public about the current situation. In addition, while PVPA certainly has found a body of students who appreciate its particular take on education, it has never been known to have shown an interest in, or an aptitude for, educating those with learning disabilities or those who struggle with English proficiency.

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