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## Russo wants N.Y. firm to run school

Westport Elementary put under CEO's control

February 02, 2001 | By Erika Niedowski | Erika Niedowski, SUN STAFF

The fledgling, for-profit company poised to manage Baltimore's Westport Elementary and Middle School in the fall says the company's small size will allow its administrators to give more personal attention to improving the achievement of struggling students.

"We have both a business plan and a philosophy that we really want to focus on slow growth, making quality schools," said Margaret R. Harrington, chief operating officer for New York-based Victory Schools Inc., which opened the first of its three schools in 1999. "We'd rather do small, quality interventions."

Responded city education chief Carmen V. Russo: "That's what I like about them."

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Russo has tapped Victory Schools to manage the South Baltimore school beginning next school year.

The state school board had considered taking over Westport - as it did with three Baltimore elementaries last year - but voted this week to allow Russo to assume responsibility instead.

School system officials would not allow a Sun reporter inside the school yesterday.

Victory Schools, which was founded by Wall Street financier Steven B. Klinsky, uses two curriculum models already in use at Westport. But Harrington, who used to report to Russo when both worked for the New York City school district, said that implementation of Direct Instruction and Core Knowledge differs from one school to another.

Direct Instruction is highly scripted and drill-heavy, while Core Knowledge uses a content-driven approach.

"We don't use Direct Instruction all day long," Harrington said. "We use it for reading and math. I don't know how Westport uses it. ... It isn't the program, it's how it's delivered whether or not it makes a difference in the lives of kids."

She also said that Victory Schools' curriculum includes additional components.

Chris Doherty of the Abell Foundation's Baltimore Curriculum Project, which oversees Direct Instruction at Westport and 17 other city schools, expressed surprise that the state had targeted Westport, which was placed on the state's failing school list in 1997.

While its pupils are still far behind, Westport matched the city's 3.5 percentage point gain on the state's most recent standardized exam.

"My feelings are very mixed," Doherty said. "We thought we were making progress, slowly, but Westport is a tough school."

Under Russo's plan, presented to the state school board this week, Westport would become part of a special "CEO's district" of failing schools that would report directly to her.

Late last year, state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick urged Russo to devise a plan for the system's underperforming schools as a way for the city to preserve local control.

The city school board has yet to publicly discuss Russo's plan or her decision to hire Victory Schools. The decision was made without formal bidding because of the tight timetable, Russo said.

She also considered Edison Schools - which is operating Gilmor, Montebello and Furman L. Templeton elementaries - and the

Boston-based Advantage Schools.

The state board still has outstanding a request for proposals from prospective vendors. If the city's proposal proves unsatisfactory, the state could proceed with its own privatization plans.

Sun staff writers Liz Bowie and JoAnna Daemmrich contributed to this article.

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