

# CHARTER SCHOOL EXPERIMENT BEGINS

BY HELEN PETERSON DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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As classes got underway yesterday at the city's first charter school, Sisulu Children's Academy, parents of eager students said they hope the experiment will be a boost for education.

"I like the fact that the classes are smaller and she can get the attention she deserves," said Patrice Gamble as she dropped off her first-grader, Courtney Williams, 6, at the school on W. 115th St. in Harlem.

"It will be fun. School is fun all the time," said Courtney, dressed in a navy blue and white uniform and unaware of the school's historic significance.

Sisulu is one of three new schools approved by the State University of New York and the Board of Regents. The John A. Reisenbach Charter School, also in Harlem, will open Sept. 13, and New Covenant in Albany will open Sept. 16.

New York was the 34th state to pass a law allowing for the creation of charter schools. The schools are free of many of the union, civil service and budgetary restrictions that govern public schools. They are funded with tax dollars that would have gone to public schools.

Students were selected for Sisulu by lottery, and some make a long trip to class.

Patrina Kitt, of the South Bronx, said a 40-minute subway ride each day is worth the trip.

"It seems like they are all about education," she said, adding she thinks the school will give her kids, Jessica, 6, and Gene, 7, a better chance.

"I think it will be okay, I really do," Kitt said, crossing her fingers.

Sisulu is run by a private company, Victory Schools, and is eligible for about \$ 6,000 a year in taxpayer funds per child.

The school has 247 students in 11 classes, ranging from kindergarten to second grade. Each has a teacher and an aide. The school hopes to add an additional grade each year.

Assembly Minority Leader John Faso (R-Kinderhook), who sponsored the charter school legislation in 1995, said the schools mark the beginning of a new era.

"They offer accountability and results. If they don't meet goals, they go out of business," Faso said. He predicted competition from the charter schools would improve public schools.

"We have failed to provide for all of our children. This is an attempt to rectify that," said Principal Berthe Faustin, who spent 14 years in the city's public schools as a teacher and assistant principal.

Obot Okoko of 145th St. said she would have enrolled her daughter, Inemesit Essien, 6, in a private school if she hadn't been selected in the lottery.

"The parents are going to be involved in everything. They are our children. We don't want to leave them for the teachers to raise," Okoko said.

Victory founder Steven Klinsky said charter schools offer parents a choice.

"We hope to create a really great public school here," he said.