



James Irwin seeks to open unique trade school, has backing of Colorado Springs businessmen

By [Debbie Kelley](#)

October 21, 2013

Charter school powerhouse James Irwin wants to open an entrepreneurial trade school for middle and high school students interested in learning construction and manufacturing skills - and have them ready enough to work in the field right after graduating from high school.

If approved, the James Irwin Trade Academy would open next fall. The school has found a building it wants to buy in southeast Colorado Springs, said Debbie Swanson, director of development for James Irwin Charter Schools.

Swanson declined to identify the building but said it would need to be renovated to create workshops.

While the curriculum would provide an alternative to students who may not want to go to college after graduation, it would not be an alternative school for at-risk students, Swanson said.

The same standards for academic performance and character development required at its two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school also would apply to the trade school, she said.

Since opening with a high school in the fall of 2000, James Irwin schools have become known for performing well on standardized testing. U.S. News and World Report now ranks Irwin Charter High School as the 15th top high school in Colorado, out of 458 high schools.

A Harrison School District 2 committee has reviewed the application for James Irwin as a charter management organization to create the trade academy within its boundaries and has provided feedback and comments, according to district spokeswoman Christine Lyle.

James Irwin has until Nov. 15 to return the application to the district with the issues addressed, she said.

In addition to teaching technical skills in machining, welding, plumbing, carpentry, electrical and construction design, the proposed trade school intends to intertwine character and work ethic into every class.

That means students will be taught the value of honesty, integrity, taking pride in work and how successful entrepreneurialism does not necessarily take a lot of money, Swanson said.

"This isn't about meeting the needs of kids not interested in college who are falling out of the school system but meeting the needs of a U.S. workforce that's losing skilled trades people by the hundreds of thousands," she said. "Manufacturers are crying for skilled trades people, so we would be able to help the kids as well as the local economy."

The curriculum would be tailored to fit job openings from local employers. Local businessman Joe Woodford finds that appealing.

"It would offer a lot of opportunity for kids and give them a chance to work and learn and get into various jobs we have around town," he said. "That's a very important part of education."

Woodford, founder of Woodford Manufacturing Co., which produces specialty plumbing products, donated money to help the school get started.

"One of the problems we have is finding skilled people, and this type of school will really help over the years," he said, "I'm interested in helping them develop the entrepreneurial aspect. I think it will be a real success. It's a good thing to come along."

Woodford also created in 1995 the Woodford Foundation for Limited Government, which primarily funds conservative think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Independence Institute. He declined to say how much he donated to the school.

Another Colorado Springs businessman, Iliia Petkov, founder of the engineering design and machining company IP Automation, has donated machinery.

The school initially would open with 260 students in grades 6-10 and expand to 11th and 12th grade and 385 students, Swanson said.

"We expect to draw students from around the region," Swanson said. "Our other schools already draw from Denver and Pueblo, and we see this school being no different."