Chapel School to take over Trafton Academy

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The Chapel School will become the new owner of the Trafton Academy facilities on June 2, a Chapel spokesman said Friday.

Trafton Academy faculty and parents learned this week that a new sales agreement with owner Rick Chambers has been arranged. The new closing date is June 2, said Johnny Miller, a member of Chapel's board of directors.

"We are ecstatic about what we'll be able to provide in south Baton Rouge," Miller said. "When we were located in north Baton Rouge, we experienced a 37 percent growth of south Baton Rouge people."

An earlier sales agreement between Chambers and the Chapel School had fallen through, according to a letter that parents received.

Chapel has more than 400 students registered for next year in grades kindergarten through 12, Miller said.

According to the new agreement, Chapel will become official owners of the school on June 2, assuming all school operating expenses, Miller said. However, until then, Chapel is not responsible for operating costs of the school, including their remaining teacher wages for the summer, Miller said.

Chapel's decision concerning the teachers' wages has raised questions on both sides as to who is responsible for the remaining wages. The teachers reportedly have a 15-month agreement with Chambers.

"All of the obligations of this school year rest with Rick Chambers," said Ken Hornsby, a Chapel board president.

Hornsby said that he did not yet want to divulge the cost of the school.

Attempts to reach Chambers on Friday were unsuccessful. Messages were left on his answering machine at his office, and a call to a home listing in Sunshine went unanswered.

The original purchase agreement, announced in February, called for Chapel to assume up to $250,000 of Trafton's financial obligations, Miller said. The amount was to be used to pay any expenses deemed necessary, he said.

However, closer examination showed that Trafton had $600,000 in unpaid obligations, Miller said.

"We just couldn't meet those obligations," Miller said. "I don't believe Rick Chambers nor the parents were really aware of the situation."

At that point, a new agreement was negotiated, Miller said.

Miller said that he wanted to obtain the Trafton property because of its location and because "Trafton was headed down the road to failure."

"The prior administration had dug such a deep hole that Trafton couldn't get out of it," Miller said.

"We wanted to go ahead and try to obtain the property and give parents plenty of time to decide whether they want to go into the Chapel system or make the decision to go somewhere else."

Some Chapel parents took issue with comments made by a former Trafton parent, Kevin Rhodes, who said he had doubts whether the sale would go through because the two schools are not compatible.

Parents from both Chapel and Trafton said they wanted to back the new administration. But some Trafton parents, upset with the sale, have taken their children out of Trafton.

Rhodes said on Friday that his major concern is with the teachers and who will pay their remaining salaries.

"My main concern is a smooth transition," Rhodes said. "I want to see the matter of paying the teachers solved in an equitable manner."

Robert Gustafson Jr., an educator with the Westminster School in Atlanta, has been hired as headmaster for Chapel next year.

Chapel officials said that none of the new faculty positions have been filled yet.

Chapel officials said that most of the returning Trafton parents have children in the higher grades — at least 60 percent, Hornsby said.