Institute for Justice joins charter school fight

By KRISTEN KING

Advocate staff writer

The Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Justice has agreed to represent local parents in a legal battle to open a charter school at Bon Marche Mall, the group announced Tuesday.

The institute has helped families in other parts of the country win groundbreaking decisions in favor of taxpayer-funded school vouchers, but this will be its first foray into the charter school arena.

The group wants to intervene in the 43-year-old school desegregation case on behalf of parents who want their children to attend the charter. The charter has been approved by the local School Board but its opening has been blocked by the plaintiffs in the desegregation case.

Clint Bolick, vice president and litigation director for the institute, said the case “potentially has nationwide ramifications for charter schools.”

“We've researched the issue and found 19 charter school states have desegregation decrees in one or more school districts, and so the issue of the interplay between desegregation and charter schools will have a broad impact,” he said.

Although it has surfaced elsewhere, Louisiana is where it's playing out most prominently right now, and we would hate to see educational opportunities for minority schoolchildren squelched by court decrees that are supposed to represent their interests,” Bolick said.

The school, to be called the United Charter, originally tried to open last fall. Bolick said the school now is shooting to open in fall 2000.

Jim Geiser, a founder of the nonprofit group Children's Charter that wants to start the school, said Children's Charter is the amount of money it would siphon from regular public schools.

Geiser said that's why he's “excited and hopeful” about the institute's involvement.

"Finally, parents are able to have the best attorneys in the field and be represented in the same way that the government has had attorneys with unlimited budgets able to represent desegregation," he said.

The Institute for Justice, founded in 1991, is a self-described libertarian public interest law firm and has worked around the country in several arenas, including education.

It has been involved in school choice litigation in Wisconsin, Ohio, Arizona, Vermont and Maine and worked with Florida Gov. Jeb Bush to enact the nation's first statewide voucher program.

Bolick said Tuesday that the institute's education lawyers are tied up on other cases and it plans to hire Douglas Herbert, a civil rights attorney based in Washington, D.C., to take over the United Charter case in Baton Rouge.