La. will get $336,000 grant to support charter schools

By The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Louisiana will get $336,000 in federal money to support its experiment with charter schools — independent public schools operating free of most state guidelines.

Louisiana is among 19 states with some sort of charter school law, but among only nine getting U.S. Department of Education grants to pay for planning, design and start-up costs. The grants, totaling $5 million, also will go to state education departments in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan and Texas and two individual schools in New Mexico.

"Charter schools are a powerful tool to provide communities, schools and teachers maximum flexibility to give students more opportunity to reach high standards of achievement and discipline," U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley said Friday.

In Louisiana, state education officials can let eight parishes set up demonstration sites. Nine parishes — East Baton Rouge, Caddo, DeSoto, Evangeline, Jefferson, Lafayette, Rapides, St. Tammany and Terrebonne — have asked to participate.

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The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education choose the eight Sept. 28, said Bill Miller, who coordinates the charter school program for the education department.

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Although demonstration sites will be designated, parish school boards will not be bound to grant charters, Miller said. Participating school boards will have to hold public hearings to open up the process and take proposals, he said.

After legislators approved the concept during the regular session, Louisiana became one of 19 states with some type of charter school law. Louisiana has 66 public school systems: all 64 parishes and the cities of Bogalusa and Monroe.

School boards may revoke contracts and charter schools that do not live up to their obligations and put them out of business.

Only a few parishes seriously debated charter schools, Miller said. Orleans, Avoyelles, Tangipahoa and St. John put the matter up for discussion but passed up the opportunity to participate, he said.

In Orleans Parish, a public hearing drew considerable opposition.

Supporters said charter schools would give parents and teachers a bigger voice, make them more accountable and bring innovation to failing school systems. Critics said charter schools would drain the public schools of money and re-establish "separate but equal" schooling.

Charter schools would get the same per-pupil average of state money that public schools receive.

State guidelines allow parishes one charter school for each 20,000 students in its jurisdiction. Jefferson would qualify for two, St. Tammany for one.

The grant proposal was written by Louann Bierlein, director of the Louisiana Educational Policy Research Center at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. She said the eight demonstration sites will share $1.2 million over three years.