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Doctor's dream realized in S. Bronx

New charter school will offer training for posts in growing health care industry

By [Hilary Potkewitz](#)

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At a time when most schools are winding down in preparation for summer break, one school in the South Bronx is just gearing up.

The Dr. Richard Izquierdo Health and Science Charter School in Melrose was approved by the state's Board of Regents earlier this year and is busy getting ready to welcome its first class of incoming students in September.

Approximately 100 sixth-graders will enroll in the school, temporarily housed at 800 Home St. It will be the only school of its kind in New York City to offer a technical and career education tailored specifically for the health care industry.

In the borough with the highest unemployment rate and lowest high school graduation rate in the city, the school has big ambitions.

"If we are going to make progress in this borough, what better way than to have a charter school where we teach our young men and women how to live a healthy lifestyle and get training to go into the health care industry?" says Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. "We don't see enough of this theme of science and math in our public schools."

Plans for growth

The school is starting small, but it will add one class each year until it serves grades 6 through 12. At some point, it will also move to larger, permanent quarters in the South Bronx. By 2018, the school will begin graduating students with Emergency Medical Technician certifications.

"It's great that they'll get their EMT and have an automatic job when they get out," says John Robert, district manager of Community Board 2, who is lobbying to find the school a permanent location in his district. "Hopefully, they'll go on to become doctors."

The facility is the brainchild of Dr. Richard Izquierdo, now 80, who grew up in the neighborhood and returned after medical school in the 1960s to start a clinic in the hospital-starved community.

He founded his first family health clinic, the San Juan Health Center in Hunts Point, in 1967. He's expanded services over the years to the point where it has become a network of clinics and school-based health centers under the Urban Health Plan umbrella. The nonprofit now serves more than 33,000 patients in the South Bronx-Hunts Point area and is headed by his daughter, Paloma Izquierdo-Hernandez.

Dr. Izquierdo likes to cite data from a recent study by the Council on Graduate Medical Education, which shows that although blacks and Hispanics make up 25% of the U.S. population, they make up only 8% of doctors.

The Health and Science Charter School is the latest iteration of his master plan to get more local youths into the medical field. The school is affiliated with UHP, which will give students access to the network's professionals for training and clinical experience.

“Even before there was such a thing as charter schools, Dr. Izquierdo has wanted to do something like this,” says Mr. Diaz, who adds that Dr. Izquierdo was his pediatrician when he was growing up. “He’s wanted to set up some kind of educational facility to train kids to become physicians active in the health of their communities.”

The charter school curriculum includes an emphasis on science and math. It will also offer English, Latin and history, as well as dance and martial arts. As the school grows, sports teams will be added.

New opportunity

“It’ll be in the incubator stage at first, but at least it’s an opportunity that didn’t exist before,” says Mr. Robert.

In the neighborhood, Dr. Izquierdo enjoys virtual celebrity status. In addition to caring for the borough president as a child, he was also pediatrician to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and former Surgeon General Dr. Richard Carmona.