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School Closures May Open Way For New Charters

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The Department of Education is pledging to help solve a charter school space crunch, pointing to an aggressive campaign to close a slew of city-run schools in the next two years.

A new accountability plan slated to begin in September will place about 70 schools under consideration for closure in 2008, creating potentially dozens of abandoned school buildings for charter schools to take over. Chancellor Joel Klein's Office of New Schools is touting the possibility to charter operators desperate to find new facilities as their schools grow.

"It could open up lots of space, and the hope is that it would," David Umansky, the chief executive officer of a nonprofit charter school facilities developer, Civic Builders, said. Charter schools are public schools operated by private managers. Though the city has given space to about two-thirds of its charter schools, state law guarantees the schools no public facilities.

Some schools have found permanent homes. For example, a salami factory and a former parking garage were renovated into schools. The remainder camp temporarily in church basements, storefronts, and city-run schools with extra space, Mr. Umansky said. As many as 26 and at least eight schools now housed in Department of Education buildings will have to move in the next several years as they grow, a spokeswoman, Melody Meyer, said.

Demand for space will only intensify as a new state law opening the door for 50 additional city charter schools kicks in.

Since 2002, only one charter school has found a home in a building of a closed city school, Ms. Meyer said. Mayor Bloomberg's new accountability plan, which will grade all schools beginning in September, forcing consequences on the schools that get the lowest letter grades, could substantially expand that number.

About 5% of schools will receive the lowest grade, an F, making them susceptible to consequences ranging from leadership change to closure. Final

decisions will also take into account a report by an outside reviewer and input from parents and school officials, the chief executive of the department's Office of New Schools, Garth Harries, said.

Some closures are certain. "We are very clear that we will close a significant number of schools," he said.

Closed schools could remain traditional city-run schools or become charter schools. "Replication of a high-performing charter school would absolutely be on the list — high on the list — of things we would want to use as a replacement," Mr. Harries said.

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Mr. Umansky said he would welcome the new spaces, but he cautioned operators not to expect too much. "Unless their school closure efforts yield great results, we expect that they're not going to be able to deliver space for all the charter schools that are coming online," he said.

A major problem, he said, will be politics. In the past, communities have greeted school closures with rallies.

"If parents are notified in advance it'll be a lot smoother," the president of a Community Education Council, James Dandridge, said. "But when parents aren't notified in advance, chaos reigns."

Mr. Dandridge organized a rally this June after the Department of Education announced it was closing a middle school in his District 18. More than 100 rising sixth-graders had hoped to enter the school this September, he said. In May, they learned they would not be able to, and he said their parents are still waiting to hear about an alternative.

He said some might welcome a charter school replacement. "If you get in, I guess you like it," he said. "But what about the parents that are going to be turned away?"