

CASH FOR CHARTER STARTERS SCHOOL-SCOUT AID

By YOAV GONEN

April 8, 2008 -- The challenge of finding homes for the city's exploding charter-school market got a jump-start from the federal government yesterday.

Calling them "laboratories of innovation," US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings announced an \$8.3 million grant to serve as seed money for building or renovating as many as 15 charter schools in New York City and Newark.

Manhattan-based Civic Builders - a nonprofit facilities developer that has already worked on siting 10 city charter schools - was awarded the grant to help both cities tackle the arduous task of locating and erecting sites for future schools.

"This is a welcome addition to the work we're doing," said Schools Chancellor Joel Klein at the grant announcement at city Department of Education headquarters. "In the absence of space or the appropriate funding for space, we're going to continue to face challenges."

Under Mayor Bloomberg and Klein's tenure, the city has expanded the number of charter schools from 17 to 78 - including 18 set to open in the fall.

Charters are publicly funded schools that function with greater independence from local districts in exchange for meeting stricter student performance goals.

About two-thirds of the city's 60 charter schools currently share buildings with traditional public schools, Klein said. But many of those pairings have angered the traditional school communities that suddenly found themselves sharing scarce facilities.

The grant money will be treated as a kick-start to fund new school buildings - intended to create about 5,200 total seats - that will limit the need to share valuable real-estate space at existing sites.

"Our intention is to attract about \$100 million in capital," said David Umansky, CEO of Civic Builders. "The problem that we're solving is not just a capital problem but of completely relieving the burden of building facilities from charters schools' shoulders."

Officials at one of the charter schools that already got a hand from Civic Builders - the Bronx Charter School for the Arts - called the organization's \$5 million transformation of a former salami factory into a school a "critical" service.

"At that time, the [Department of Education] was not offering long-term spaces to charter schools, so we didn't really have that many options in terms of how to find a space," said Xanthe Jory, executive director at the school.

yoav.gonen@nypost.com