

# Round Rock industrial park to become charter school

## Meridian World School to educate 700 in fall

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Meridian World School co-founders Eileen Kuhn (left) and Karalei Nunn will start with grades K-8, but they'll add a grade — and more space — each year.

A public charter school has signed a lease for 55,000 square feet of former industrial and flex space at the AmorRon A complex on I-35 in Round Rock.

The Meridian World School will open this fall to 700 new students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The school plans to add a grade each year, expanding over five years into 90,000 square feet of the 104,000-square-foot building owned by **ING Clarion Partners**.

Financial terms of the deal weren't released. Loop Net, however, listed the building's most recent asking rent at \$7.20 per square foot.

**Brashear Properties** Ltd.'s **Evelyn Ward**, now with Transwestern Houston, represented the school in the deal. She said the building on 11 acres that once housed a technology company has been empty for six years.

In Austin, two other charter schools signed significant leases for commercial flex space in 2010 — one at the Southpark Industrial development and the other at 1420 Wells Branch Parkway. Both were affiliated with The Harmony Science Academy, and both were for 50,000 to 55,000 square feet.

Charter school advocates have long touted using industrial and flex shell structures as an efficient and affordable means to creating a working school building. And some say using industrial space might be one way to accommodate the growing popularity of charter school education in Texas.

In 2010, 119,597 students were enrolled in charter schools at 463 campuses across the state. Another 56,000 students were on charter school waiting lists, according to the Texas Charter School Association.

Meanwhile, 88 percent of the state's charter schools were looking to expand last year, said **David Dunn**, executive director of the Texas Charter School Association, an advocacy group.

Although industrial and flex space offers a means to meeting charter schools' needs for space, it comes with challenges, as Meridian Co-Founder Karalei Nunn discovered.

Meridian's lease at AmorRon took three years to find. Its search started just as the financial markets were collapsing.

Despite the fact that industrial vacancy rates have approached 30 percent in many Austin submarkets, a result of speculative overbuilding, Nunn said, "A lot of flex property owners were not interested in talking to us because of renovation requirements and potential conflicts with their other uses."

The new school will house students for upwards of eight hours each day, which gives rise to requirements such as a kitchen and exercise areas.

Nevertheless, such reticence puzzled Nunn, an architect by training.

"As things change, businesses move out that aren't coming back," she said. "Why wouldn't [landlords] choose a good repurposing of their facilities?"

**Rhonda Toming**, senior vice president at **Oxford Realty**, has seen flex buildings converted to all types of uses during her many years in Austin commercial real estate.

Considering some vacancy rates, conversions to elementary, middle or high schools might be smart in some cases.

"I really like the idea. From the school system down to the taxpayer, it makes good sense," she said.

Another challenge for public charter schools is that they don't get state funding for physical facilities and instead seek private grants and other sources, said **Josie Duckett**, vice president of public and government affairs at the Texas Charter Schools Association.

When it comes to finding space, charter school leaders are forced to think in thrifty and creative terms, Duckett said.

"I've seen them in vacant office space, strip malls, former churches and even old converted schools," she said.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**