

Alum Rock district considers ways to help underachieving students

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For the second time in almost two months, the Alum Rock Union School District board held a public hearing Wednesday on a proposed charter school, exposing a divide in the community on the issue of how best to help underachieving students.

When the board rejected the ACE Public School Network proposal in July, it raised concerns about the charter's financial viability, the proposed curriculum and the lack of a school site.

ACE is proposing to take incoming fifth-graders who are testing below grade level, preparing them for high school, and putting them onto a college track.

While test scores for students in the district have risen steadily since 2003, the district's most challenged students - English learners, low-income students, Latinos - have lagged behind, said Greg Lippman, executive director of ACE and founding principal of another charter school, Downtown College Prep. He resubmitted the proposal early last month.

Lippman said he decided not to appeal the district's decision to the county education board because he preferred "to collaborate with the district." He resubmitted his charter proposal, he said, addressing every concern raised by board members.

"The district is the most intimately connected with the community," Lippman said. "It has the deepest roots in the community.

"The school is strengthened by the partnership with the district," he said.

During a public comment period at the hearing, opponents and supporters aired their views.

"The district does not need a charter," said Norma Rodriguez, principal at Dorsa Elementary. She disputed claims by ACE supporters that some fourth- and fifth-graders at her school were reading below grade level.

Teacher Diane Colson called the claims "misinformation," an effort, she said, by ACE supporters to gather community and parental support for the charter.

"We took it personally," she said.

Dorsa, where ACE conducted a summer school for fourth- and fifth-graders who read below grade levels, has an academic performance index ranked among the lowest in the state.

"I support the charter school," said parent Alberto Soto, "because I believe we need to get help for our children wherever we can get it."

The board is expected to decide on the resubmitted ACE charter proposal during a special meeting on Sept. 13.

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