

Charter proponents, denied by Alum Rock, take next step

COUNTY BOARD WILL REVIEW PROPOSAL BY ACE PUBLIC SCHOOL

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A proposed charter school for underachieving middle school students has been rejected three times by the Alum Rock school board, so proponents will again take their case to the Santa Clara County Board of Education.

Greg Lippman, executive director of ACE Public School Network, the San Jose non-profit group that proposed the charter, said he's preparing to submit an appeal in the coming weeks and is hopeful of a better outcome by the end of the year. Lippman is founding principal of Downtown College Prep, a successful charter high school for low-achieving ninth-graders in downtown San Jose.

Last week, the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District board voted 4-1 to reject the charter, citing concerns about the viability of its educational program, an adequate budget and lack of parental support. Gustavo Gonzalez was the lone trustee to vote for approval.

The ACE charter proposes to take elementary school students reading below grade levels and put them on a rigorous academic program in middle school - extended school hours, tutorials, remedial courses in English - to prepare them for high school and get them onto a college track.

ACE's first charter proposal was denied by Alum Rock trustees in 2005, and an appeal to the county board of education was unsuccessful. A second proposal, this time with the backing of Lippman, was denied by the Alum Rock board in July.

"The board members made it very clear that they don't think this is a good fit for what the district needs to do," Lippman said. "It's time to move on to the county board."

Under state charter laws, proponents of charter-school proposals rejected at the district level can appeal to county education boards.

If the county board approves a charter, the school is then overseen by the county office of education.

Lippman declined to rebut the district's list of reasons for denying the petition, saying, "I continue to believe that all of the issues raised are issues we could have worked out."

He said he disagreed with the staff conclusion that "we're unlikely to run a successful program," citing the work that ACE did in helping improve the reading proficiency of fourth-graders during a summer school at Dorsa Elementary School.

"Of course, it's disappointing," said parent Art Meza. "It seems like we can't get past this wall that's been built. It's frustrating."

Meza is a member of People Acting in Community Together, or PACT, a community group that supported the charter school proposal.

"I'm very hopeful that we'll succeed with the county board," said Susan Price-Jang, chairwoman of the ACE Public School Network. "I think and hope that the county board will see that we tried in every shape and form to work with the district."

But the ACE charter petition had "some significant issues" that led the board to deny it, said district spokeswoman Aurora Quevedo.

District staff who scrutinized the proposal questioned the soundness of the charter proposal's program for English learners, the charter's governance structure and the lack of parental input.

"The voice of parents lacking in the proposal was a very significant issue," Quevedo said.

For board President Tanya Freudenberger, that concern was a "deal breaker."

"I looked at the ACE charter inside and out," she said. "I can see the intent of the charter is wonderful, and the people involved are wonderful and capable of doing so much."

But Freudenberger said she didn't believe ACE officials did their homework.

"They should have done everything in their power to empower parents to understand what this charter would mean in the district," she said.

Freudenberger said she thinks ACE charter proposal "has a good chance" of being approved by the county if it is allowed to resolve the problems raised in the district review.

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