

Editorial: ACE charter deserves a chance in Alum Rock

County educators should approve

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After spending another 18 months and thousands of dollars on a futile effort, the proponents of a charter middle school in the Alum Rock Union Elementary School District are headed back to the Santa Clara County Office of Education on appeal.

What a waste of time and effort - and what shortsightedness Alum Rock trustees showed this month in rejecting the charter, thereby denying the lowest-performing middle school students in the district a choice and a reasonable prospect for success.

The ACE Public School Network's proposed charter has been bouncing back and forth between the district and the county since 2005. In April 2006, Alum Rock trustees rejected the first version of the charter proposal. That decision was appealed to county trustees, who basically pleaded with the charter sponsors to go back to Alum Rock and try to work through their differences.

ACE's board made a good-faith effort. It hired a new executive director, Greg Lippman, a former teacher for students learning English and co-founder of Downtown College Prep, San Jose Unified's successful charter high school. Lippman extensively reworked the charter, changing it from K-8 to a 400-student middle school and designing it for children who enter fifth grade "far below basic" on the state standardized tests. These are students, in the words of one brutally honest teacher, "with no discernible academic skills; gross language deficiencies; no sense of how to be a student; typical, predictable, and boring resistance to the learning process." In other words, kids on the tragic trajectory to drop out.

Through remediation, Saturday sessions, tutorials and small classes, ACE would aim to bring its students to grade level and on the path to college by ninth grade. It's an ambitious goal. The district doubts that it's possible. It criticized ACE's supposedly unsound education plan and found fault wherever it could.

But last summer, Lippman hosted a summer school, on ACE's tab, for 80 struggling students at Dorsa Elementary. The reading progress in just six weeks appeared impressive. The district doubted the data.

Alum Rock already has an exceptional charter middle school in KIPP Heartwood. Test scores of its largely low-income students rank among the highest in the Bay Area. But lately, Alum Rock administrators and trustees have become dismissive of charters, which they see as competitors, not partners.

ACE will soon submit its charter to the staff of the County Office of Education, which has treated charter proposals objectively and constructively. We trust the county trustees will give ACE the fair shake it deserves.

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