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ACE Charter approved by Santa Clara County board

TWICE DENIED BY ALUM ROCK, SCHOOL SET TO OPEN IN FALL

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The Santa Clara County Board of Education on Monday night unanimously approved on appeal a charter school for underachieving middle-school students, a proposal rejected twice this year by the Alum Rock school district.

A group of about a dozen Alum Rock officials decried the charter petition as deficient and asked the board to reject it. But what they got instead, in a tense moment during the board's meeting, was a public rebuke from some county school trustees for failing to consider all of its options - including another charter - to help poor Latino students reading below grade level.

ACE Charter, expected to open next fall, will join a growing number of charter schools in Santa Clara County. Like ACE, many of the new schools were born after frustrated parents and community residents expressed unhappiness with the performance of neighborhood schools.

"I'm just incredibly pleased," said Greg Lippman, executive director of ACE and founding principal of another charter, Downtown College Prep, a high school charter in the San Jose Unified School District. "We hope to make a school that all of the Alum Rock district will be proud of."

The proposed charter will be run by ACE Public School Network, a San Jose non-profit that has become a divisive wedge between district officials and a group of families and supporters of the charter.

Norma Martinez, Alum Rock's school superintendent, called the ACE proposal deficient.

"What you would be saying is it would be OK to have a below mediocre program for our poorest students," Martinez said. "Our students deserve more than this charter petition."

But county trustee Leon Beauchman told Martinez: "There is a kind of defensiveness here, and that's unfortunate because there's some good work being done in the district."

Added fellow trustee Jane Howard: "I know Alum Rock is doing a good job. But it's not about doing a good job. It's about other means of addressing educational concerns."

At a public hearing early this month, Alum Rock officials said the ACE proposal did not meet state standards because it had an insufficient budget, an unsound curriculum and lacked parental support. District officials said Alum Rock has made significant progress in helping underachieving students make improvements in their academic performance. Alum Rock officials concluded that ACE was "unlikely to successfully implement the program."

But trustees Beauchman and Howard and supporters of ACE said that it would take many kinds of solutions to address the achievement gap of poor, Latino students.

After being rebuffed by the district this year, ACE appealed its case to the county school board. With

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the approval, the new charter will be overseen by the board.

The approval comes with conditions. ACE must address a number of concerns about the sufficiency of the curriculum submitted. Lippman has until April 1 to make the changes, working with the county Office of Education staff, before the board will sign an agreement authorizing the charter.

John Yeh, a San Francisco attorney representing Alum Rock, said after the meeting that "the district is considering all its legal options." He declined to elaborate.

In reviewing the new charter, the county education staff said ACE "adequately addressed" many of the issues raised by Alum Rock officials - or at least were willing to work with the district.

The staff also said that under state charter rules, ACE "should be given preference for approval" because of its target demographic - mostly Latino middle-school students who are learning English and are below grade levels in their proficiencies in math and reading.

The county staff cited a successful ACE summer school for such students at Alum Rock's Dorsa Elementary School.

"I really appreciate the county's analysis because it takes into account what ACE is about and our track record," Lippman said. "It speaks to their confidence that we'll be able to implement this program successfully. That was wonderful."

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