

Charters 'the enemy'?

Politics, not policy, govern LAUSD decisions on schools

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After more than two hours of debate, the Los Angeles Unified School District board voted to renew the charter for Discovery Prep in Pacoima for a year.

Then, a short time later, frustrated, tired and confused, the board negated its vote and postponed a new decision until later.

Charter renewal for Woodland Hills' Ivy Academia was next on the agenda and got a one-year extension after 20 minutes of discussion.

The trouble is Ivy - LAUSD's highest-performing independent charter school - lost out on a \$1.2 million state grant that required a longer extension.

Those are just examples of issues facing LAUSD as it deals with the booming charter school movement.

The school board lacks a coherent policy toward charters so its actions are often arbitrary even as the debate on education reform becomes increasingly politicized.

"Right now, it's all about interpersonal politics and straight-out politics and not student achievement," said Caprice Young, head of the state's Charter Schools Association.

"It's not about kids and achievement. It's a public embarrassment."

Superintendent David Brewer III believes a key step would be to work with Sacramento to get state achievement test scores - which influence the board's decisions - in March rather than in August.

The current tight timeline doesn't give officials the most up-to-date information and fails to give schools enough time to appeal decisions. It also doesn't give parents time to take part in lotteries for spots in other charter schools or magnet schools.

"This is broken," Brewer said. "We're trying to make a life-changing decision for a charter school and all of their students and family members, based on a system that, frankly speaking, cannot support the decision.

"We've got to get a different process so we can be fair to the board and, more importantly, to the schools. This is not right."

Greg McNair, the district's chief administrator for charter schools, said each of the district's recommendations consistently follow state standards, but the board needs to be more consistent in acting on the recommendations.

Taking politics out

If the school board begins taking a more predictable stance on charters based on the standards, it would send the message that political pressure will not sway decisions.

"My division doesn't have a problem coming up with a recommendation," McNair said. "I do think, however, that with all of the input, it's sometimes difficult for board members to focus in on the issues that are being presented because there's so much noise around closing schools - even bad schools."

The district's charter policy is still under development and is expected to be adopted by the fall.

But rumblings reached a roar in March when - against the charter staff's recommendation and to the surprise of charter leaders - the school board renewed Academia Semillas Del Pueblo's charter petition for five years.

The El Sereno school is in the lowest 10 percent in the state on achievement test scores and has an API of 585. The target score is 800.

Semillas organized more than 1,000 parents, students and community members to walk from Plaza Olvera to LAUSD headquarters to attend the board meeting.

But Brewer said such displays should not influence the board.

"When you start to get into how people feel, that's when you start to get the little bit of confusion in terms of making your decisions," Brewer said. "When you stick with the facts, some of these schools should not be renewed. You have public money, and there are certain state standards that have to be met."

McNair hopes to eliminate ambiguity with a comprehensive charter school policy and streamline the process by providing a clear roadmap of what information his office will use to determine renewals and denials.

With only 10 staff members in his office working on charter cases, he believes the policy will help as they grapple with a growing workload.

These days, that workload is extending to the board: For the first time since approving its first charter school in 1993, the board spends

the bulk of its biweekly meetings considering charter renewals.

LAUSD, with 103 charter schools - expected to surpass 150 in two years - went from three requests for renewal last year to 19 this year. About 35 are expected next year.

Twenty of 22 renewals considered so far have been granted.

Informed charters

McNair said LAUSD is just starting to learn how to impose a rigorous oversight and renewal process, even though it's been 14 years since it approved its first charter.

But he said it's also incumbent on charter schools to assume responsibility for knowing the law, whether they're eligible for renewal and how to draft adequate charter petitions.

Charter leaders also need to speak up to increase accountability of charters and voice their opposition to a renewal if they believe the school should be closed.

In Semillas' case, the Charter Schools Association remained silent.

Still, charter leaders believe the board's recent challenges to renewals stem from a pervasive fear that charters are increasingly drawing students - and funds - away from traditional public schools.

"The district's response to competition is to try to kill the enemy, not to compete with the schools," Young said. "Instead of thinking of charters as partners, they think about charters as the enemy, which is not fair and accurate."

Before the Ivy vote, the last "egregious" action by the board happened in March, minutes before the school board renewed Academia Semillas' charter, Young said.

In that case, the board refused to grant eight charters in Watts to highly successful Green Dot Public Schools - despite warnings by LAUSD attorneys that their decision would violate state law.

Young said the board must reconsider both the Green Dot and Ivy votes.

Ivy's founder and president Tatyana Berkovich said that after receiving outstanding reviews from the charter division, the school was informed by e-mail the night before the board meeting that the division would be reversing its approval recommendation.

Berkovich said that left officials with little time to respond. Facing a tired group of seven board members holding the school's fate in their hands, Ivy officials said they didn't have time to state their case.

"The renewal process seems to lack credibility because renewal decisions were not based on the process spelled out in the LAUSD charter school division policy manual," she said.

Meanwhile, Pacoima's Discovery Prep is facing a decision Tuesday and hoping for at least a one-year renewal.

Even though most of Discovery's graduates are going to two- and four-year colleges, they still scored poorly on recent state tests.

Discovery executive director Matthew Macarah said the board's philosophy is that charter schools need to be just like the traditional district schools - defeating the concept of each charter having its own stated mission.

"Who is a charter school accountable to? It's getting further away from parents and students," he said. "The district wants them to be accountable to L.A. Unified."

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