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The charter school test case that didn't happen

If they hadn't been mostly shut out of bids to run a slew of new L.A. Unified campuses, the groups might have demonstrated how they handle students with challenging needs.

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Los Angeles school officials lost a chance this week to test whether the booming charter movement can take on all the problems of the district's traditional, and often troubled, schools.

On Tuesday, the Board of Education denied proposals from three major charter organizations that had sought to run newly built neighborhood schools, which would have included substantial numbers of limited-English speakers, special education students, foster children and low-income families.

That is exactly the population that charter schools have been criticized for not sufficiently reaching.

Charters are independently managed and exempt from some rules that govern traditional schools. They're also schools of choice -- campuses that parents seek and select. And researchers have found that charters enroll fewer students with more challenging, and often more expensive, needs.

Over the last six months, charters have competed to run 18 new campuses as well as 12 low-performing ones under a Los Angeles Unified School District reform plan adopted in August by the Board of Education.

And in this instance, charters agreed to operate by more inclusive rules in exchange for access to state-of-the-art, multimillion-dollar campuses.

"This would have been an opportunity to have [charters] rise to the challenge as we in the district do every day in serving these populations at an equal level," said board member Yolie Flores, who brought the school-control proposal to the board in August.

In the end, the board turned down all but four charter bids, opting instead primarily for internal, teacher-led proposals. Even though the district has struggled most with improving secondary education, no charter received a high school and only one, Magnolia Science Academy, will run a middle school -- on a campus it will share with a separate teacher-run school.

The teachers union fought hard to limit the charters. Every new charter would have effectively reduced the union's membership -- potentially corresponding to more L.A. Unified layoffs during the current district budget crisis. And a growing nonunion charter workforce gradually reduces union clout not only on pay and benefits issues, but also on matters such as class size and the direction of future reforms.

The union's pressure on board members got a boost from Maria Elena Durazo, who heads the L.A. County Federation of Labor and who personally called on board members the day before the vote.

Although Supt. Ramon C. Cortines favored mostly internal proposals, he had also recommended giving schools to Green Dot Public Schools, the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools and ICEF Public Schools, which all came away empty-handed. All are charter management groups with a track record in the city.

Flores, the author of the reform strategy, had argued that Cortines' recommendations should be followed without exception.

Charter critics, however, focused on the fact that 11.2% of district students are disabled, compared with 7.4% at local charters. A third of students at traditional schools are learning to speak English, while the figure is 22% at charters, according to district data.

Charters should not be allowed to run new schools, paid for by taxpayers, that were intended for all children, said A. J. Duffy, president of United Teachers Los Angeles.

Charter advocates lobbied hard. And they argued that the district's higher special education population stems from the neglect of many students' academic and social needs. The result, they said, is behavioral issues that are later misidentified as disabilities. They also fault the quality of the district's services to special education students.

Charters lost their bids for a variety of reasons.

Cortines had wanted ICEF to share a new middle school with a teacher-led program. But board member Marguerite Poindexter LaMotte said the campus wasn't built for two operators. And besides, she said, the district had hired a principal and worked on its own version of the school well before the school-control competition intruded.

(One of her grandsons attends an ICEF school, but she has been a consistent charter critic and an ally of the teachers union.)

Green Dot and the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools lost out at the new Torres high school complex east of downtown. Board President Monica Garcia cited the need to respect the long-term efforts of teachers and community groups who put forward competing plans.

Functioning as a neighborhood school remains beyond the experience of nearly all charters except Green Dot, which broke ground by taking over low-performing Locke High in July 2008. It has struggled with the challenge of managing a typical urban population.

"People are moving in and out of homeless shelters and housing projects in the neighborhood," said Green Dot Chief Executive Marco Petruzzi. "Fifteen to 20 kids show up almost weekly."

And at Locke, Green Dot has had to serve more disabled students than the typical charter. "It's the right thing to do and also presented us with a learning challenge in dealing with higher-severity cases," Petruzzi said. "And it creates budget pressures that are very large."

There could be a trade-off for pushing charters into the cold: The charters can still play by the old rules.

Already, L.A. Unified has over 160 charters, more than any other district. Valid charter petitions can't be denied, and 20 are in the pipeline. And those would operate under the ground rules that critics find objectionable.

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