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Villaraigosa backs charter school bids, rips Cortines

The mayor says L.A. Unified didn't give charters a fair chance in an earlier bid for control of new and low-performing campuses.

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The mayor of Los Angeles sided publicly with local charter schools Thursday in their latest bid to take over new and low-performing campuses, while sharply criticizing the L.A. schools superintendent, his onetime deputy.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa spoke one week before a deadline for applicants to submit bids for nine new campuses and eight low-performing ones in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

In the first round of the groundbreaking competition, groups of teachers in February defied early expectations to claim the vast majority of campuses. Charters, which are independently run and exempt from some rules that govern traditional schools, emerged with only four successful bids.

Villaraigosa castigated L.A. Unified for giving schools to groups from the very campuses that were up for bid because of poor performance. This time, he said, an organization's track record should be paramount.

"You can write a great plan, but if you don't have a history ... of proven results, that plan is just a piece of paper," Villaraigosa said.

The teacher groups, which had only weeks to put together proposals, received logistical support both from the district and United Teachers Los Angeles, the teachers union. The union then rallied local support behind teacher-led plans to dominate nonbinding community balloting over rival plans.

Villaraigosa said outside groups never had a fair shot at access to resources and parents.

In February, the mayor lobbied vigorously only for bids submitted by the nonprofit group that runs schools on his behalf, district officials told The Times. In its final decision, the school board majority he helped to elect gave him most of what he wanted, but favored even fewer charters than Supt. Ramon C. Cortines.

At the mayor's side Thursday were representatives from charter groups knocked out in the earlier round: one from ICEF Public Schools and three with ties to Green Dot Public Schools. Shane Martin, dean of the Loyola Marymount University School of Education, chairs the Green Dot board; Ben Austin heads a charter-allied parents organization spun off from Green Dot; and Steve Barr started Green Dot and headed it for years.

For schools with inadequate reform plans — and no competing outside bids — Villaraigosa called for reconstitution, a process in which all members of the staff are replaced or must reapply for their jobs.

Cortines called reconstitution a last resort rather than a default option. This year, he required staff at Fremont High School in South Los Angeles to reinterview, but he said such efforts fail unless handled with persistence and care. The example of Fremont, he said, was enough to move other schools into reform mode.

The teachers union has vigorously opposed the Fremont initiative, calling it unfair and unsupported by research.

Villaraigosa accused Cortines, a former deputy mayor and top education advisor, of dismissing his suggestions and straying from their shared reform fervor.

"Frankly, that's unacceptable," the mayor said. "We've got to stop biting around the edges.... We've got to be transformative."

Cortines said he found the mayor's suggestions, which Villaraigosa outlined in a June 9 letter, helpful, but added, "I don't think we would have given the mayor additional schools based on a track record."

"I looked at this process as an incentive to motivate and challenge and raise the bar for teachers and parents and administrators in this district, and they stepped up to the plate," Cortines said.

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