

Charter school readies for Day 1

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(author)

Backers aim for strong year

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Two days after reaching a contract with the Santa Barbara School District, Santa Barbara Charter School was getting on with the business of educating students.

There were classrooms to ready, equipment to collect and a multitude of other tasks to perform before the school's Sept. 15 opening.

Until Wednesday night, there was no guarantee the school would even reach this point. Parents rejoiced in the victory. But they are tempered by the knowledge the school board has the ultimate say in how the school will operate.

Cindy Wheeler, Santa Barbara charter steering committee member, said parents accept the one-year contract even though it falls short of their vision.

Both sides sought legal opinions on the school board's authority over charter schools and all opinions agreed the school board would be held responsible for charter school actions, she said.

"We obviously want to be as independent as we can be," Wheeler said.

To achieve that, parents are focusing on having a successful first year.

"Once they see we know what we're doing, I think there'll be less hassle," she said.

Santa Barbara Charter's case is typical of fledgeling charter schools throughout California. Because the charter law is so new and untested, it gives little guidance on the relationship between school boards and the schools.

The result is a philosophical tug-of-war between the school, which seeks the independence that charter status offers, and the sponsoring school board, which seeks to ensure that children are educated well.

Enacted this year, the Charter Schools Act opened the door for public schools to break away from public school bureaucracy and education codes. Its purpose is to give schools the freedom to im-

See CHARTER, Page A 9

demonstrate that a charter school could be independent in such an arrangement, he said.

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prove student learning as they see fit.

State education department consultant Dave Patterson said the state does not monitor the progress of charter schools. Generally, the experiences have been mixed, with some charter schools having difficulties in starting up and others not.

"Some boards are very nervous," he said. "It's not an unusual thing with something new and untried."

The law was written to give schools flexibility, he said. That flexibility also means bearing the responsibility to create the desired relationship with school boards.

Wheeler said many of the conditions the Santa Barbara school board requested dealt with liability. Among them, board members have the final say on contracts and hirings, budgets must be developed with district officials, and the district will administer any fund-raising money until the charter group becomes a non-profit organization.

The charter's curriculum plan was left untouched, she said.

Conditions on Peabody Charter School's tentative contract fall along similar lines.

Like Santa Barbara Charter parents, Peabody parents had hoped to have more freedom, said David McDermott of Peabody Charter. Because parents want to get the school going, they agreed.

The school board expects to meet at 7 p.m. Sept. 1 to review Peabody's final contract. Board member Grace Florez said the board will more than likely approve it.

"There is no question (that) it's going to go through," she said.

Peabody parents were stunned Wednesday when they did not receive final approval with Santa Barbara Charter. Florez explained that the board needed time to review the final draft, which they had received only that evening.

Principal Pat Morales said the school will work to get more financial control in the next phase. Regardless of the contract restrictions, the school will be able to implement curriculum changes such as adding a 15-minute reading time, she said.

Florez said she did not believe the board's conditions were restrictive. In fact, having the district handle the finances will free the charter schools to work on other issues, she said.

Dennis Mah, principal of Sacramento City Unified School District's Bowling Elementary School, said the 750-student charter school avoided philosophical conflicts with its school board by remaining administratively tied to the district.

For example, the district administers the school's money and covers the school's insurance needs. They agreed to this to prevent a deficit in the district's budget and demonstrate that a charter school could be independent in such an arrangement, he said.