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Decision on school called fair

News-Press staff report

The trustees of the Santa Maria High School District conducted a fair process in deciding to close Central City High School, a special panel has ruled.

"The (panel) voted unanimously that the board acted within its jurisdictional powers and not in an arbitrary way," said Bill Cirone, county superintendent of schools. Cirone led a special hearing Thursday that examined whether the board's decision-making was proper.

The Central City High classes for 200 Independent Study students from Santa Maria and Righetti high schools formerly took place in rented office space on West Main Street.

A proposal to create a "charter school" that would have let Central keep about \$700,000 in annual state attendance money for its Independent Study students was denied recently by the school board, which had doubts that Central could offer as good an education as the district's three existing high school campuses.

Central's classes ended June 18, and the district shut down the campus about two weeks later in the wake of an audit that showed padded attendance figures.

Central proponents contended the audit irregularities were minor, and that the board did not act appropriately. Supporters want to have the charter school petition reinstated.

Besides Cirone, the commission

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was composed of three school board members and three teachers from county school districts outside the Santa Maria High School District. The panel did not have the power to reverse the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District trustees' decision on Central.

The commission's purpose was to comment on whether the district acted appropriately or arbitrarily, and possibly send the matter back to Santa Maria high school trustees for another hear-

ing.

Cirone said the finding about the charter is binding, although proponents may write and submit a new charter application to the trustees.

However, the Central closure decision "is a school board decision," Cirone said. "They can reconsider it at any time."

School board members have contended they acted appropriately, and that Central students will not be abandoned. Board members have indicated Central students will either be put into regular classes at Santa Maria or Righetti high schools, or assigned to a new Independent Study program in a wing of the Santa Maria High campus.