

Charter Schools

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Peabody moves to become a charter school

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Peabody School wants to make some changes and it wants to become a charter school to accomplish them.

The San Roque elementary school is the second group in the Santa Barbara School District to seek the opportunity to free itself from the reins of public-school bureaucracy.

Under the state Charter Schools Act, a public school may become a quasi-private institution within the existing system. Charter schools are released from most state education codes and regulations, thereby giving them the flex-

ibility to create innovative ways to improve student learning.

Bitten by the restructuring bug, Peabody was primed to improve the way it is teaching students, organizers said. But the school did not get a state grant that would have allowed it to reorganize.

When the state approved the charter school legislation, "there was some teachers who thought maybe this is for us," said Peabody parent Brian Barnwell.

The school resurrected its restructuring plans and molded it into a proposal that will go before the district Board of Education tonight. State law requires a charter school to be sponsored by a school district.

Principal Pat Morales said three key areas stand out in the proposal: a governing council that would include teachers, staff, parents and community members; a longer school day; and regular staff development time.

Increasing parent involvement is a key component to Peabody Charter School and it would start at the top with the governing council.

"Parents feel they have more of a say," Morales said. Though many parents already participate in school activities, "this opens things up more."

The charter also would require parents to volunteer three hours a month at the school and attend

school parent-teacher conferences.

"There's some parents who are marginal to those things," Barnwell said.

The longer school day would give teachers 45 more minutes to teach students. Much of that time would be devoted to reading.

"What Peabody wants to do is to make everyone a dynamic reader." Barnwell said. Teachers have found that some students do not read as much at home and setting aside time at school would improve learning.

The schedule now leaves little room to add a reading period, he said.

To balance the longer day,

teachers would have time every week to improve professionally, Morales said. On staff development day, school would start later.

Organizers anticipate that more state money would be used for classroom needs under charter status. Instead of being funnelled through various bureaucratic levels, the money would go directly to the school, Morales said.

The governing council would oversee all school operations except those the school would contract with the district, Morales said.

Some of that freed money would be used to hire teacher's aides, specialists in the arts and technology.

Organizers believe Peabody's proposal would have as much chance at winning district approval as the Santa Barbara Charter proposal submitted by a grassroots group. Parents from that group hope to start a new school.

"I don't think we have a lesser chance," Barnwell said. "We might have a leg up" because Peabody is an existing school.

The charter act allows 10 charter schools within a school district.

Whatever the outcome, the staff would forge ahead with its ideas, Morales said. "We'll do as much as we can."