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DISTRICT

Ackerman plan mimics charter school programs

By Susan Ferrechio
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Parents and students looking for charter school-style programs and challenging classes shouldn't have to leave the public school system, D.C. Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman said.

Mrs. Ackerman, looking to reverse the trend of students fleeing to charter programs, plans to create public-school versions of a charter school.

Charter school proponents are balking at the idea, and they have garnered the support of the D.C. Council, which will attempt to change the law in their favor today.

Mrs. Ackerman's proposal would be tested at Paul Junior High in Northwest. That school has been planning to become the first D.C. public school to convert to charter status next year. But Mrs. Ackerman hopes to pre-empt the switch by creating her own charter-style school in the building

that now houses Paul, one of the school system's most successful programs.

Mrs. Ackerman said she is merely following the spirit of the 1996 charter school law, which was created with the belief that competition from the publicly funded, privately run charter schools would stimulate better programs in the regular system.

But charter school officials say Mrs. Ackerman is trying to undermine their program and steal Paul

Junior High's 715 students by copying their charter school idea and denying them use of the building at Eighth and Oglethorpe streets NW, which serves mostly students who live near the school.

"The whole purpose of the charter school law is to make the school system attractive enough that people want to go," Mrs. Ackerman said. "Competition does work both ways."

Last month, she sent notices about her proposed science and

technology program for Paul to parents in the neighborhood and in the communities around elementary schools that feed it in an attempt to lure them from the proposed charter school into her own program.

The notice included a questionnaire asking parents which school they would rather have their child attend — the proposed charter school or "the new District of Columbia Public School's Technology and Arts Program located at Paul

Junior High."

Mrs. Ackerman said her proposal was prompted by complaints from neighborhood parents who wanted to enroll their children in Paul Junior High — not the charter school version of the program.

Paul officials, who got the support of 501 parents and 70 percent of the faculty before converting, said they are surprised and miffed by the move. So far, Mrs. Ackerman

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man has refused to lease them the building, which was given a provisional charter by the D.C. Public Charter School Board in September.

In order to be eligible for full charter school status and the federal funds to run it, the school must secure a building by January.

Paul Charter School founder Cecile Middleton said she will fight to hang onto the students — and the building.

If Mrs. Ackerman plans to compete, Mrs. Middleton said, "She won't mind my being competitive."

Mrs. Middleton may have the backing of the D.C. Council to help her win the fight and use of the historic building.

D.C. Council member Charlene Drew Jarvis today will introduce emergency legislation aimed at rewording the city's charter school law.

She said the new law would compel the public school system to give preference to a public school that converts to a charter program when leasing the building it had been occupying. A charter school also would be granted the right of first refusal to lease the building.

"It was the intention of the council as evidenced by a number of provisions of the law to allow a conversion school to lease the property," said Mrs. Jarvis, Ward 4 Democrat. "What Mrs. Ackerman has recommended is not consistent with the law."

Council member Kevin P. Chavous, chairman of the council's education committee, said he will vote for the change, although he supports Mrs. Ackerman's competitive spirit.

"I understand that there is a real balancing act that needs to take place but we also want to make sure that the neighborhood school is preserved as much as possible," said Mr. Chavous, Ward 8 Democrat. "The council has to give better clarity to the law so that it gives preference to parental choice."

Council member Kathleen Patterson, Ward 3 Democrat, said she will support the measure, which would be in effect for 90 days if it

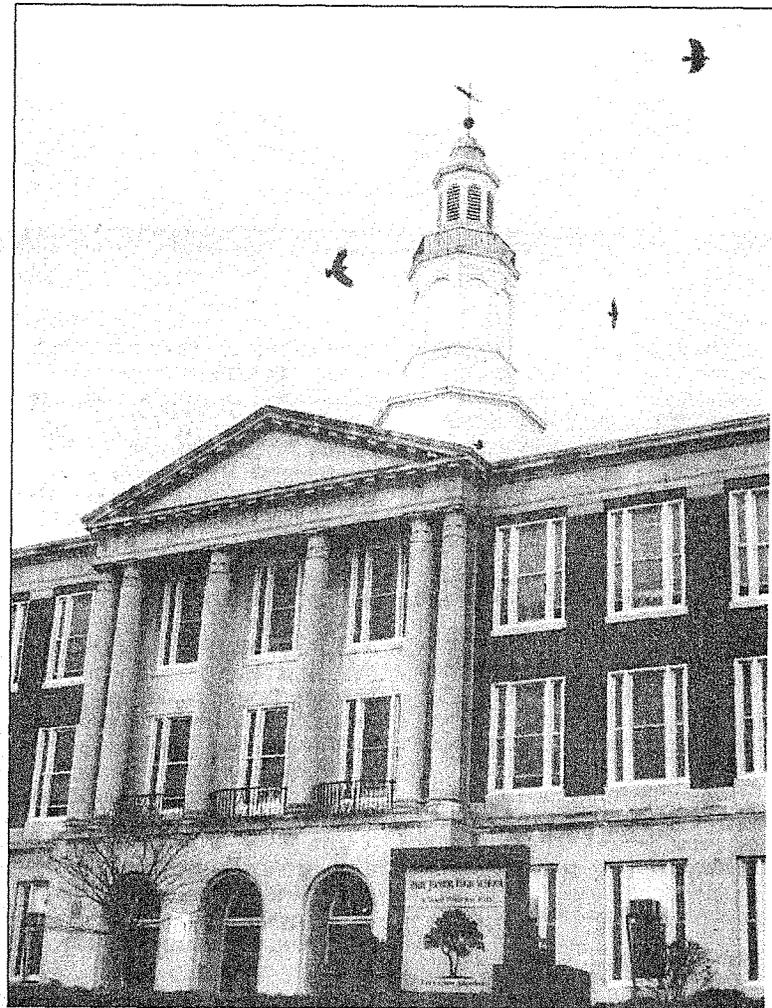


Photo by Kenneth Lambert/The Washington Times

D.C. Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman's plan would remove Paul Junior High's incentive for switching to a charter school.

is approved by nine council members and signed by Mayor Anthony A. Williams. A permanent measure also will be introduced.

"This is necessary because the school system apparently doesn't understand the legislative intent," Mrs. Patterson said. "It is my guess that the leadership of the D.C. Public School system is not particularly supportive of the charter school movement."

Mrs. Middleton has been trying for three years to convert Paul to a charter school. Her proposal calls for an arts, humanities and science program to operate in the building beginning next September.

It would include an extended-

day program and a partnership with the Kennedy Center. Paul administrators sought to convert the school because they believed the regular school system's bureaucracy kept them from succeeding.

Mrs. Ackerman said she is receiving responses from parents who filled out the questionnaire and plans to release the results in January. She said she may propose that the regular public school program share the building with the charter school.

"Why penalize the parents that don't want to be part of the charter school?" Mrs. Ackerman said. "My job is to look at this in a holistic way. These are all of our children."