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Two public schools seeking charter status

Paul Jr. High, Hearst Elementary want independence from city school system

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resigned charter*

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Two traditional D.C. public schools seeking independence from the city's troubled school system recently filed applications to become public charter schools. Paul Junior High School in Brightwood and Phoebe Hearst Elementary School in Tenleytown could open as charter schools next fall if the D.C. Public Charter School Board approves their applications.

In seeking charter status, Paul and Hearst would be the first traditional schools to defect from the administration currently headed by Superintendent Arlene Ackerman. The quest for charter status comes not only from dissatisfaction with the status quo, but fear that existing successful schools may actually be threatened by Ackerman's reform plans, said attorney Mary Levy, counsel to D.C. parent advocacy group Parents United.

"It's a vote of no confidence in the system," Levy said.

The Paul application, the school leadership's third attempt to gain charter status, follows years of frustration among parents and teachers with slow response from the central administrators and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, parents say.

Hearst parents say a year of clashes with the Ackerman administration over staffing and other concerns drove them to file the charter application out of fear for the school's survival.

As charter schools, Hearst and Paul would continue to operate with public funds but would be largely independent of the city school system. For example, charter schools can set their own calendars, create their own curriculum and hire uncertified or non-unionized teachers. The schools are not guaranteed the right to remain in their current buildings should they convert to charters.

But besides their quests for independence, the two schools appear to have little in common. Paul, at 5800 Eighth St. NW, serves about 700 students in grades 7-9. Hearst, at 3950 37th St. NW, is one of the smallest schools in the District with about 165 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Parents and teachers at Paul long have felt it's time to "go solo," said Paul parent Audrienna Womack

"Paul is a great school, but overall the system has not gotten better. I don't see parents or even teachers having any voice," she said. "By the time we find things out, it's after the fact...and all these political things, like the school board.... we just want to be free to get on with the business of teaching and learning."

A few years ago, Paul was one of several D.C. schools that became so unsafe it had to be closed in the middle of the school year for repairs and students sent temporarily to other schools. That would not have happened, parents say, if the local community and school staff had control over the building.

Administrators at Paul have sought charters for the past two years but came up just short of the required number of parent signatures both times. Signatures from two-thirds of school parents are required for charter conversion.

Paul principal Cecile Middleton did not return calls for comment.

The Hearst charter application, filed by parent activists Ann Herr and Andrea Carlson on the day of the July deadline, followed clashes with Ackerman over the principal, whom parents wanted removed. Ackerman eventually removed the principal but also transferred two of the school's most popular teachers against their will and without explanation. Eighty-five percent of the students' parents signed a petition protesting the transfers, Herr said, but Ackerman did not relent. The remaining teachers were warned by central administration they too would be transferred if they discussed the personnel actions among themselves or with parents, Herr said. By the end of the school year, none of the school's teachers were planning to return. Parents feared that Hearst Elementary School as they knew it was doomed.

"We felt very threatened," said Herr, president of the school's Parent-Teacher Association. "The future looked very uncertain. We filed the charter application because we felt we had to make sure the school survived one way or another."

Parents also were upset that the academic plan, carefully put together by Hearst's Local School Restructuring Team (LSRT), was rejected at the last minute because it called for replacing principal Shirley Hopkinson with an assistant principal who would report to a supervising principal at another school. Herr said that arrangement was suggested by the principal herself. The idea of small schools sharing principals in order to save money was also publicly suggested by Deputy Superintendent Elois Brooks on several occasions. But the Hearst plan was rejected anyway.

The episode left many parents shaken.

"Being small is a clear benefit to us," Herr said. "But there is genuine concern over whether that attitude is shared by Arlene Ackerman. Some of her comments imply that small schools are inefficient and we can't afford them. I can't really trust the Ackerman administration."

Herr and Carlson say the situation at Hearst has improved in recent months. At least one teacher is planning to return and the two women said they have great confidence in new principal Betty Shamwell. Still, they are not abandoning the charter idea.

"At the moment, things look promising, but life in DCPS is unpredictable," said Carlson, chairman of the school's LSRT. "Our relationship with central administration has gone from neglect to what looks like express destruction."

Parents and teacher at Duke Ellington School of the Arts considered converting to a charter school last year, but dropped the idea after reaching a settlement with school administration that granted the school "independent" status.

"Any school in the DCPS system that is different has big problems," Levy said. "The rules here are often applied rigidly without thought to whether that's appropriate for the school. It can have devastating consequences."

Ackerman did not return calls for comment, but school watchdogs speculated she isn't likely to regard the charter applications as friendly moves.

"The administration regards charter schools as the enemy," Levy said.

The charter school board is expected to issue a preliminary decision Sept. 7 on the Hearst and Paul applications, along with 16 others.

In the meantime, parents, teachers and principals across the city, as well as top school administrators, have their eyes on the two renegade schools.

"Hearst and Paul may be pioneers," Womack said. "Whether they get their charters or not, they are going to set people thinking. There may be (people at) other schools who would consider the same thing. Perhaps they are afraid of the repercussions or they are just not bold enough. Retaliation does happen in this city."

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