

November 10, 2009

Charter school's Blytheville add-on wins OK

State board rejects three other plans, defers vote on LR

By Cynthia Howell

LITTLE ROCK — The Arkansas Board of Education on Monday unanimously approved plans for expanding the existing KIPP charter school system into Blytheville.

During a seven-hour meeting that stretched into the evening, the board rejected charter schools for Fayetteville, Springdale and West Memphis, saying the schools weren't unique enough.

Board members deferred action until December on a Little Rock charter school to resolve concerns about the effect another charter school could have on the Pulaski County school desegregation case. When the board reconvenes at 9 a.m. today, it will consider applications for other charter schools in Little Rock, Gillett and McNeil.

The Knowledge Is Power Program Blytheville College Preparatory School will be the first expansion of the KIPP school system in the state outside Helena-West Helena, where KIPP has grown into a full kindergarten-through-12th-grade program.

KIPP Delta Inc. already has a state charter to operate its Helena-West Helena schools and sought only a state license - not a new charter - for the Blytheville campus. Because of the state board's approval, the Blytheville campus does not count toward the maximum 24 open-enrollment charter schools that can be established in the state. Eighteen open-enrollment charter schools now operate.

Blytheville was selected as home to a new KIPP school after KIPP Delta Inc. officials announced plans last spring to expand. KIPP officials asked community leaders in Blytheville, Pine Bluff and West Memphis to submit proposals. KIPP chose Blytheville.

The Blytheville campus will open in 2010-11 on South Franklin Street with fifth grade only but will expand over time to eighth grade and to as many as 360 pupils.

Four students from the Helena-West Helena campus addressed the state board, praising KIPP schools.



Photo by Karen E. Segrave
Scott Shirley, executive director of the Knowledge is Power Program Delta Public Schools, hugs student Jameshia Banks after she and Domonique Bragg (left) and other students of the program's school in Helena-West Helena spoke before the Arkansas Board of Education on Monday in support of a new charter school in Blytheville. The board approved the school.

KIPP school senior Domonique Bragg told the board that she was able to participate in a summer medical research project at Vanderbilt University. She has applied to Vanderbilt, Brown and Yale universities.

Jukurious Davis, an eighth-grader, told how he received a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Fellowship that offers assistance in high school and provides college tuition. "I'll forever be grateful to KIPP for these opportunities," Jukurious said.

The state board approved expanding KIPP into Blytheville on a 7-0 vote.

The state board's debate on whether to grant a charter to Little Rock Urban Collegiate Public Charter School for Young Men focused not on the merits of the proposed school - but the impact it could have on the ongoing Pulaski County school desegregation case. The proposed school at 4601 S. University Ave. would serve nearly 700 boys in grades kindergarten through eighth.

Chris Heller, an attorney for the Little Rock School District, told the state board that it was obligated by the state charter school law to evaluate the impact of charter schools on desegregation. "I don't think you have any analysis to support the idea that continuing to add unconditional open-enrollment charter schools is not having a desegregation impact on the districts," he said. "This is starting to look like all the other things that got the state into trouble."

Little Rock sued the state in 1982 and the other two Pulaski County school districts, blaming them for racial segregation.

The federal courts agreed in 1984. The parties, including the state, reached a financial settlement agreement in 1989.

Scott Smith, a lawyer and executive director of the Arkansas School Resource Center that advocates for charter schools; Assistant Attorney General Scott Richardson; and Department of Education attorney Tripp Walter also addressed the state board Monday.

They weighed in on whether or not the state board has authority to set conditions on a charter school, such as require it to provide school bus transportation so that more students from low-income families could attend.

Board Chairman Naccaman Williams of Springdale questioned whether the Little Rock district has taken steps to address the needs of black male students - as the charter proposes to do - and to attract and retain students in the district in general.

Alice Mahony, a board member from El Dorado, made the motion to defer a vote until the board can get a better understanding of the state obligations and whether any constraints can be applied to the charter school plan.

The board voted 7-0 against the proposed West Memphis charter school proposed by Gerald Kiner, a minister and social-studies teacher at the Memphis public schools. The Guap Academy College Preparatory School was designed to target 100 students who are over-age for their grade level. Kiner told the board he was motivated to propose the school because of the hopelessness he sees in the faces of his church members who are from West Memphis.

Jon Collins, principal of West Memphis High, said the charter school would offer nothing more than what is available now in his school district, which offers extended-day and summer programs as well as college and career counseling. "We do a lot of good on a daily basis," Collins said.

The board expressed concerns that the organization - Humanitarian Outreach Development Group - could not live up to the provisions of the application. The board also questioned whether the proposed charter was unique or innovative enough. There were also questions about the insurance requirements in the lease between Kiner and the church.

The board also denied both charter plans for the Dove School of Excellence in Springdale and the Prism Education Center in Fayetteville in 5-2 votes.

"There is no way that this school could provide anything close to what the Fayetteville School District is currently providing and striving to provide," board member Brenda Gullett of Fayetteville, said in voting against the Prism Center, which proposed to serve low-achieving, high poverty students on Fayetteville's western edge.

Misty Newcomb, chief organizer for the school, told the state board that while the Fayetteville district does very well with students from middle and high income families, the district does not do as well with students who are from low income families or are under-achieving.

She attributed the achievement gap in part to the fact that students from low-income families tend to experience a learning loss over the summer months while children from higher income families make academic gains because of camps, travel and other enrichment provided by their families.

The Prism Center planned longer school hours, including free after-school programs up to 6 p.m. The school also planned to provide transportation to as many as 50 percent of its 650 students in kindergarten through eighth grades through a cooperative agreement with a local bus service.

Linda Auman, chief academic officer for the Fayetteville School District, listed for the board the different educational programs, the student data tracking system, the well-trained teachers and the innovative technology that are used in the district to increase student achievement. The district also addresses the summer learning loss with its own Summer Leap program for some of its youngest elementary pupils.

Kaan Camuz, superintendent of four Dove charter schools in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, spoke on behalf of the Sky Foundation, which proposed the establishment of the Dove school in Springdale to serve 650 students in grades kindergarten through 12th grades. Camuz said the school would largely target Hispanic students, who he said tend to score well below other student groups in the Springdale district. The school planned to offer a program that would have emphasized science, math and technology to provide students with the skills needed to participate in the global economy.

Board member Ben Mays of Clinton questioned the need for a Turkish language course at the school. The Dove schools in Oklahoma, which have several teachers from Turkey, teach Turkish as an elective and offer a summer trip for students to Turkey, Camuz said. He said the Springdale school would offer Turkish and Spanish language courses.

A team of Springdale School District representatives led by Superintendent Jim Rollins described for the state board the efforts the district goes to serve all of its students, including Hispanic students. That effort includes the employment of more than 700 people who are certified or have extensive training in teaching students who are not native English speakers.

Board members voting for the Dove and Prism schools were Sherry Burrow and Jim Cooper. Those opposed were Gullett, Mays, Sam Ledbetter, Mahony and Toyce Newton.