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Fit For Gold Cadets Graduate



Fit For Gold Cadets were recently honored by educators and civic leaders during a graduation ceremony conducted by the South Bay Workforce Investment Board at Rogers Park in Inglewood. Photo: SBWIB

Tighten the Rules for Launching Charter Schools, Panel Suggests

By Rob McCarthy

An advisory panel to Gov. Gavin Newsom has offered a compromise that could change how charter schools are approved or denied, starting next year. The governor's task force on June 6 issued a set of recommendations that include giving charter school applicants more time to complete the process to open an independently run campus.

In return, a local school board's decision to deny a charter school application would be harder to overturn. The compromise is noteworthy because of the timing of the report's release and because charter school organizations and public school districts worked together to draft the recommendations.

Currently, the State Legislature is considering several charter school reform bills. It's unclear whether any of the task force's recommendations will find their way into the bills' language. Newsom has demonstrated he's open to bringing charter schools, which receive district funding yet operate free of district control using non-union teachers, more in line with the rules and requirements the Legislature has placed on California's public schools.

The governor in early March signed into law a Senate Bill 126, which holds all schools that receive taxpayer funding to the same standards for accountability and transparency. "It's common sense. Taxpayers, parents and ultimately kids deserve to know how schools are using their tax dollars," the governor said in a signing ceremony. He hinted of more regulation coming for the charter school movement, which is opposed by teachers unions. SB 126 requires charter schools and charter management organizations to adhere to public records and open meeting laws, and conflict of interest provisions. It takes effect on Jan. 1 and supporters say the law is long overdue and addresses the concerns of

teachers, parents and local school boards that charter schools are becoming profit centers for privately managed companies. The U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has been a vocal advocate for charter schools, arguing they offer parents more choice in selecting a public school within their district that's right for a child.

Newsom in March asked the California Schools Superintendent Tony Thurmond for input into the debate over how charter schools operate. Critics of them insist that charter schools in the past have accepted the most promising students in a district, and rejected students who don't perform as well in the classroom and on achievement tests. The California Charter School Policy Task Force looked at the issues of funding and management over a two-month period and recommended at least changes that its members unanimously agreed could be adopted.

Members of the task force were asked to put aside their differences and look for common ground for the good of California's school kids. The superintendent of schools said in his report to the governor that it was the task force's hope that its suggestions to lawmakers would serve the best interests of all students in the state and make it possible for traditional public schools and charter schools to coexist and promote educational choice.

The first recommendation was to extend the timeline for a charter school application to be reviewed, approved or denied by an additional 30 days. Current law gives applications 60 days to complete the process and receive either a yea or a nay from a local school district. The panelists unanimously agreed that 60 days isn't sufficient time.

Under the current law, a school district and a charter school applicant may agree to extend the time to review and consider the qualifications of the charter school organization

making the proposal and how it plans to spend district money. The application process includes a public hearing, responding to district questions about concerns and drafting and reaching a contract between the charter school group and the district.

Both sides also agreed that the state needs to create an authority to govern charter schools. The new authority would create standards to guide local school districts, the County Board of Education and the State Board of Education -- all of which have the power to approve a charter school application. There are dozens of charters schools operating across the South Bay, yet the state lacks any standards about oversight for local school officials to follow. Without any clear guidelines, some local districts have come up with their own. "Clear standards for authorizers (local districts) to follow would standardize oversight practices in the state," the task force report says.

The task force members also lamented the lack of training available to local school superintendents and their staffs for dealing with charter schools that open using district money. Some charter schools also open outside a district's boundaries, and that scenario was addressed in the recommendations too. They called for a one-year moratorium on new virtual charter schools, which offered students coursework online instead in a classroom.

The growth of virtual charter schools has raised new concerns about the academic standards offered by the online educators and whether anyone is monitoring the curriculum and operations of these newcomers to the charter school industry. The yearlong moratorium was supported by a majority of the task force, and virtual schools that demonstrate they are providing an educational benefit wouldn't be affected by the temporary ban.

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Weekend Forecast

Friday
AM Clouds/
PM Sun
68°/61°



Saturday
Partly
Cloudy
68°/61°



Sunday
Partly
Cloudy
69°/61°

