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## Charter school eyes expansion

**HEARING TONIGHT: NON-PROFIT WANTS CAMPBELL CAMPUS FOR SMALL-CLASS APPROACH TO NARROWING ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

By Maya Suryaraman  
Mercury News

Every weekday morning, 14-year-old Luis Martinez spends an hour crossing San Jose on three public transit buses to reach his charter high school on the East Side of town.

Luis, a freshman, makes the long commute because he thinks the charter will give him a better education than the large, sprawling campus just a few blocks from his apartment complex.

Leadership Public Schools, the non-profit which runs the charter Luis attends, agrees. That's why LPS is making a bid to open a new charter high school in the Campbell Union High School District, where Luis lives. Unlike large comprehensive high schools -- which typically enroll about 1,700 students -- the Campbell campus would cap its enrollment at about 450 students and would feature class sizes of 25 or less.

``There's nothing wrong with large schools for some students," said Mark Kushner, LPS's chief executive officer. ``But for those who don't have the social capital to know what it's like to prepare for college, a small school can prevent them from falling through the cracks."

Last month, the Campbell Union High School District denied LPS's charter application. Now the non-profit is hoping the Santa Clara County Office of Education will agree to be the chartering agency. Tonight, the county board holds a public hearing on the issue, and is scheduled to vote at either its March 16 or April 6 meeting.

What's at stake is the future of students such as Luis. Minority and low-income kids are not achieving at the same levels as other students, and both the state and federal governments are pushing public schools to find a solution. Across the state, small charter schools have sprung up, driven by the belief that they can make a difference.

Can they?

The Campbell Union High School District denied LPS's request for a charter on the grounds that the organization doesn't have a track record.

``We've got nothing to look at," said Rhonda Farber, superintendent of the district. ``Why would we take a chance?"

But Kushner says that since charter schools are, by their nature, start-ups, requiring a long track record is unreasonable. So far, LPS has a high school campus in Richmond that is in its second year, and its East San Jose campus, which opened last fall. A third LPS high school is scheduled to open in Oakland this fall.

The charter school movement of the past decade is seen by many reformers as a means of boosting sagging student achievement by creating start-up public schools that are free to innovate. Charters need not abide by many of the regulations that bind traditional schools. But before their launch, they do need approval from their local school districts or the county or state boards of education.

Districts that have charters in their boundaries often take a financial hit because they lose students to the charters and their state funding is on a per-student basis.

Luis, a studious, hard-working teenager, says he jumped at the chance to attend the LPS campus in East San Jose instead of San Jose's Del Mar High School, which is just a 10-minute walk from his home near Santa Clara Valley Medical Center. He said he wanted to escape peer pressure to not excel in school. He and his mother, Socorro Martinez, who works as a child care aide, also were drawn to LPS's small class sizes.

``At Del Mar, there are too many students," Martinez said. ``The teachers don't have enough time to help everyone. Mostly they get stressed out."

Kushner said LPS is able to keep its class sizes at 25 or below partly because it doesn't have to have as many administrators as traditional schools that are more heavily regulated. He also said LPS simplifies its curriculum, offering only one foreign language -- Spanish -- and a pared-down sports program.

At LPS, all students take a college-prep curriculum that satisfies the University of California's entrance requirements. Those who are struggling academically can take advantage of tutoring before and after school, as well as summer school programs, to bring them up to grade level. All students are required to take a four-year leadership class, where they learn such things as time management and teamwork skills.

Still, Campbell administrators wonder whether any of this will be a magic bullet.

``All over the state, the best minds in education are trying to solve the achievement gap," said Terry Peluso, Campbell's director of student assessment. ``It's anybody's guess what's the best way to do it."

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