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Charter school to open in fall

State board gives go-ahead for first institution of its kind in Hayward

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Inside Bay Area

HAYWARD — The first charter school in Hayward history will open in the fall, a public institution its proponents say will be a school of everyone's dreams.

The man behind the new high school emerged triumphantly from a Thursday morning meeting in Sacramento after making a successful pitch to the state board of education.

"We're looking for pioneers — both students and teachers — who want to create the high school of their dreams," Mark Kushner, founder and chief executive officer of Leadership Public Schools, said over the telephone.

Kushner, who serves as chairman of the state board's advisory commission on charter schools, also learned at the meeting that his nonprofit organization was awarded well more than \$1 million in federal grant money for his projects — \$405,000 of which will go toward the Leadership Public School-Hayward.

Not everyone shared Kushner's glee. Last May, the Hayward Board of Education rejected his proposal to open a high school, and the Alameda County Board of Education later also denied the proposal.

Hayward school board President Sarah Gonzales said Thursday that Leadership Public Schools had presented a polished, but weak, plan with underwhelming detail about its curriculum and leadership focus.

"I was really excited about the idea of a leadership high school," Gonzales said. "But when I started investigating it, it seemed like it was all fluff."

San Francisco-based Leadership Public Schools has opened at least two schools in the Bay Area since it was established in 2002. And on Thursday, the state board unanimously gave it the necessary approval to open schools in Oakland and Hayward this fall.

A class of 125 students — to be selected by a lottery of applicants — will make up the freshman class of the Leadership Public School-Hayward, which has yet to find a home. It will be led by Principal Brian Greenberg, a Harvard graduate and the principal at a charter school in Richmond who said he is looking to hire "seven of the best teachers in the world."

Greenberg says the school's small learning environment will allow the principal and teachers to know each of the students well — and steer them toward college.

"You can really tailor your programs to the individual needs of the students," he said.

About 250 prospective students already have expressed interest in enrolling, Kushner said. Even before the charter was approved, his organization began putting out the word on its Web site, www.leadps.org, and elsewhere.

More than 630 charter schools have opened statewide since their inception in 1992, with about a 15 percent increase each year. But only about 500 were operating in the fall of 2004, according to the California Charter Schools Association.

Charter schools, which do not charge tuition, are funded by the state but run independently. They set out their goals in a contract with the board of education at the local school district, the county or the state.

In Hayward's case, since the state board issued the charter, the Hayward school board will have little or no control over matters of budget and curriculum.

"Because they didn't approve us, we report to the state and not the school board," Kushner said.

Hayward schools, which have seen a steady decline in enrollment, will lose hundreds more students as a result of the charter. The freshman class alone at the new school will drain the district of \$625,000, according to the district business office estimates. But school officials say the financial impact had no bearing on their rejection of Leadership Public Schools' proposal.

Gonzales said the board is not "anti-charter." In fact, she said, the trustees have been researching two other charter organizations — Aspire Public Schools and Envision Schools — which, she said, seem to have more to offer.

The board president said she visited at least two of the schools Kushner started, and that she was disappointed in what she saw.

"They have yet to produce a single quality school," she said of the organization.

Hayward interim Superintendent Janis Duran said she shares the school board's concerns about the charter school's standards and testing. But now that the decision has been made, she said, they will have to work together — starting with finding a site for the school.

"That was then," she said. "This is now."