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Nonprofit proposes new charter school

Facility would serve Hayward's most underachieving students

By Ricci Graham, STAFF WRITER

HAYWARD -- A nonprofit group that specializes in creating charter schools in struggling systems throughout California is pushing to do the same for the cash-strapped Hayward Unified School District.

Representatives with the San Francisco-based Leadership Public Schools has proposed opening a charter school that would target the most educationally and academically disadvantaged students in Hayward's 24,000-student system.

The proposed charter school would be the first in the 36-campus district and would provide an intimate learning environment for 450 students who have the greatest academic needs, along with those on the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum.

"We looked at Hayward Unified and we believe we could add value by partnering with the district to open up a high-quality small public school," Mark Kushner, CEO of Leadership Public School, said Tuesday.

"Our mission is to serve diverse and traditionally under-served students by creating an outstanding high school and preparing students to succeed in college and become community leaders."

The Hayward board of education was scheduled to hold a public hearing on the charter school petition, but Kushner said his group requested a 30-day extension. The district is expected to hold the hearing within the next 30 days. Trustees are required to decide whether to accept or reject the petition

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within 30 days of the hearing.

Hayward administrators were in budget meetings and were unavailable for comment Tuesday.

However, Vernon Thompson, the director of development for the group, said he has laid the groundwork for the proposed charter school with district officials, and he believes they are receptive to creating a charter school.

"The school district is struggling financially and looking for alternatives," Thompson said. "This is a great alternative for the school district."

If all goes smoothly, the school could open next year. "We don't know when we're planning to open," Kushner said. "Most likely, it'll be following the fall of 2005."

The petition by Leadership Public Schools would create a school that would initially serve 150 freshmen and then be expanded to accommodate 450 students. "We start with fresh-men only and build a culture," Kushner said.

Kushner said charter schools have a long, successful track record. In districts where the agency has worked to develop charter schools, test scores at those campuses have steadily improved and the college-acceptance rates have skyrocketed, he said.

The proposed campus would be prohibited from teaching religion and discriminating against students. Most importantly, it would be free -- an important factor what with the Hayward district drowning in an \$8.5 million budget deficit.

Kushner said his agency will seek a \$450,000 startup grant from the state. The grant would be paid over a three-year period, he added. The state money would be augmented by private donations and state Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds.

"The school can survive on its own at full size," Kushner said. "It's designed to be sustainable with ADA (funds) once it is at full size."

Kushner said his agency would form a partnership with the district to operate the charter school. The nonprofit group, however, would be granted some autonomy to develop the curriculum and ensure teachers receive the requisite training to work at the campus.

The proposed charter school could be placed on an existing campus or housed in an independent facility. "We're open to whatever works best for the district," Kushner said.

If the petition is accepted by trustees, Hayward would join a long list of struggling districts in the Bay Area that have partnered with Leadership Public Schools, including West Contra Costa, Oakland and East Side Union in San Jose. Kushner said he also was involved in the formation of the charter school in San Francisco Unified School District.

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