

Hundreds Protest LA Board Vote On School Choice

CHRISTINA HOAG, Associated Press Writer

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hundreds of teachers and parents chanted slogans and waved placards in front of the Los Angeles school district headquarters Tuesday as the school board prepared to vote on whether to transfer operation of several underperforming schools to private groups.

The vote will affect 30 schools and is part of a larger plan to turn over about a third of the campuses in the nation's second-largest school district to private operators.

The plan has widely been seen as an acknowledgment that traditional educational policy has not worked at the district, which is plagued by a 33 percent dropout rate and chronically declining enrollment. The district already boasts the highest number of charter schools of any school district in the country. About 150 of its 800 schools are run by nonprofit educational groups.

Superintendent Ramon Cortines is slated to present to the board his recommendations out of 85 organizations that applied to run the 30 campuses. They include established charter school nonprofits, as well as teacher-parent-administrator coalitions who submitted their own proposals.

His recommendations were made after each school that is up for grabs — including 12 chronically underperforming campuses and 18 new ones — held nonbinding community "advisory" votes on the applicants and a district panel reviewed each proposal.

Cortines has said that he will recommend the operators with the most sound educational plan.

Proposals submitted by local teachers union United Teachers Los Angeles swept almost all the advisory votes, but the union is upset that the superintendent is apparently not planning to recommend several of its winning proposals.

"The superintendent appeared to bow to political forces," a statement from UTLA said. "We want school board members to review all the teacher/parent plans the superintendent did not recommend."

Others are criticizing the way the advisory ballots were conducted, which allowed students, parents of current and future students, teachers and staff to vote in separate categories. If a teacher was also a parent, he or she could vote twice. Unspecified people could also vote as "community" members.

"It was a mess. I don't think it was fair," said parent Debra Holt, who wants charter school group Inner City Educational Fund to take over her child's school not the teachers. "Parents have not had enough information."

Some said UTLA intimidated teachers, saying that salaried jobs and benefits would be cut if charter school groups took over.

"They'll lose membership because charter schools typically are not unionized," said retired LAUSD teacher Larry Sand, who heads teacher group California Teacher Empowerment Network. "These are schools that are failing. It's time for new blood."

Cortines said that with the district officially sanctioning charter school groups, administrators gain more control over how private organizations run the schools.

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