

Charter school pits city against state *School Board's cap on spending for the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy draws fire from state education officials.

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Author: GINA MACRIS Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

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A standoff has developed between the Providence School Board and the state Department of Education over the amount of money the city's school district is obliged to turn over to the first charter school in the state.

From the beginning, the School Board has been unfriendly toward the charter proposal of the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy.

Now that the state Board of Regents has granted the charter and the academy has begun its first academic year, the School Board is balking at giving the school all the money the state says it has coming under the law.

Late last month, the board passed a resolution "capping" the city's contribution at about \$900,000, which is some \$170,000 less than the amount the academy said it is due according to a formula spelled out in legislation authorizing charter schools.

The Department of Education responded with a letter reminding School Board Chairman Roosevelt Benton that the formula is backed up with the force of law.

"Under these circumstances, unless the Providence School Board rectifies this situation, the commissioner is prepared to withhold and pay to the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy Charter School funds allocated to Providence under the state aid formula."

So wrote Todd Flaherty, deputy commissioner of education, on behalf of Commissioner Peter McWalters.

Flaherty said he was "surprised" when the School Board put the \$900,000 ceiling on the city's allocation to the academy, since he thought the overall issue of funding was still under discussion.

He said officials of the Department of Education met with Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella and his staff as well as the directors of the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy late in July to begin talking about the amount of money the charter school would get this year.

"We had agreed that by late August or early September, in working with our department folks, that we would arrive at a figure," Flaherty said.

It was also understood that some of the lump sum the academy received would be used to pay back the central school administration for certain services, such as lunches or transportation, he said.

That meant the school district's net allocation wouldn't be known until the process of determining the paybacks

had been completed.

"We agreed it would be very difficult to produce a number," Flaherty said. "We'd be able to look at it together. Since it is new and uncharted water, everybody would be patient and work with one another," he said.

"All of a sudden, there's a number," Flaherty said, alluding to the \$900,000 ceiling set by the School Board resolution.

"It was the surprise that caught people off guard," he said, explaining why he thought it necessary to write a letter reminding the School Board that the commissioner of education will uphold the law.

The School Board resolution setting the \$900,000 ceiling was introduced by Robert S. Bucci, who from the very beginning has criticized the academy's efforts to gain independence as a public charter school.

Bucci said that the school district can only give the academy more money at the expense of other youngsters in the system, who already have lost all locally funded field trips this year as a result of budget cuts.

Bucci called Flaherty's letter "distressing." Bucci said he intends to introduce a resolution at tonight's School Board meeting inviting Commissioner McWalters and Frederick Lippitt, chairman of the Board of Regents, to answer questions about the way the charter school legislation is supposed to work on a day-to-day basis.

In "capping" the School Department's allocation to the Academy, the Board was concerned with "the issues of equity and fairness," Bucci said.

He contends that the academy will get more on a per-pupil basis than other schools in the district if the School Board is forced to increase its allocation.

But Flaherty said that without knowing the paybacks for transportation, lunches and other goods and services the academy might buy from the school district, it's impossible to say what the net allocation might be.

"I am very well aware that the number ultimately should be neither a disincentive nor an incentive" to a school seeking a charter, Flaherty said.

"We'll be a careful watchdog of value; not only value but the law."

In a telephone interview last week, Bucci spoke of the paybacks solely in terms of any initiative the School Board might take, not as a topic that has been under discussion among the superintendent, the academy and the Department of Education.

"If we went through the exercise of charging back each and every service, we would probably exceed the \$170,000" the academy seeks, Bucci said.

"We have avoided doing that because we've been unclear about what the guidelines are," he said.

"When we turn to the Department of Education, we don't get any guidance. The reality has outpaced the law,"

Bucci said.

Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella said "this is a difficult one for me," since he recommended approval of the proposal from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy and the School Board voted against it.

While he still supports the program, Zarrella said, "I must admit that it's difficult for me, having cut what I have cut from the budget, to give the charter school more money than they would have gotten had they not been a charter school."

Zarrella confirmed that his office and the Department of Education had not yet concluded their talks about the portion of the allocation the academy would pay back to the central administration when the School Board passed its resolution capping the amount at \$900,000.

Why the fuss about the overall allocation when the amount of paybacks had not yet been determined?

"You put your finger on the \$64,000 question," Zarrella said.

The discussions with the Department of Education were at a point where there was "more disagreement than agreement on key issues," Zarrella said.

"The Board has a particular viewpoint on all of this . . . they feel very strongly about it . . . and that's why Bucci introduced the resolution" setting the \$900,000 limit, Zarrella said.

Bucci could not be reached for comment late last week.

Earlier in the week, however, he said he found it "interesting" that Commissioner McWalters is "concerned" about the appointment of acting assistant principals who have no administrative certification but raises no objection that the head of the academy also has no administrative credentials.

Steve Nardelli, legislative liaison for the Department of Education, said that, as a charter school, the academy is functioning autonomously with management decisions concentrated in the central administration of the school district.

Rhode Island law doesn't require every school to have a principal, Nardelli said.

The temporary head of the school, Robert Pilkington, said he is certified to teach secondary English and hopes to return to the classroom as soon as the academy's board of directors completes its search for a permanent chief executive.

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