

Charter schools past first test *TIMES2 and Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy win conditional state approval to open programs for disadvantaged youngsters.

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Two programs aimed at disadvantaged students - TIMES2 and the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy - have received conditional approval from the Policy Committee of the state Board of Regents to launch separate charter schools.

TIMES2, called "Times Squared," a private, non-profit agency with 31 corporate sponsors, coordinates volunteer tutoring, mentors, and enrichment activities for public school students from minority backgrounds interested in careers in science, engineering and technology.

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy, an existing high school, finds mentors and after-school jobs for students with troubled academic careers to help them stay in school and eventually enter the business world.

At a meeting last week, the Regents Policy Committee endorsed the concept of each program.

But it expressed concern that the position of principal would no longer be necessary at the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy, according to Steve Nardelli, legislative liaison for the Department of Education.

He said the Policy Committee "was quite adamant that they didn't want the charter school process to be used to eliminate any position."

The Policy Committee is asking that "the issue regarding the elimination of the director be negotiated at the local level," Nardelli said after the meeting.

The Textron school's proposal, written by teachers Robert Pilkington and Gary Davis, puts control of the budget, evaluation of teachers, and decisions on educational matters in the hands of a governing board, with a chief executive officer and several educational officers implementing policy.

Providence Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella has said the current principal of the school, Joseph Maguire, was not consulted on the charter proposal.

After the Policy Committee meeting last week, he said, "the issue of administration (is) a very serious concern of mine."

He said he told the regents that while "I wanted to support the proposal, I could not give it my final support" without resolution on the "administrative position."

Zarrella said he, Pilkington, and Davis have discussed the matter "and expect those conversations to continue."

Meanwhile, Zarrella wholeheartedly endorsed the proposal from TIMES2, especially in light of questions raised by the regents about whether the agency is eligible to apply for a school charter under existing state law.

The law says that the only entities which can apply are school teachers, groups of school personnel, or an entire public school district, according to Nardelli.

He said the Policy Committee asked for a legal opinion on the eligibility of TIMES2, which would receive an estimated \$1.2 million in public funds if its charter is ultimately approved.

Zarrella told the regents the TIMES2 plan is a "district proposal," according Nardelli.

Zarrella, interviewed after the meeting, said he described TIMES2 activities as "a school within a school" in the same way that the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy began with career education counselors advising disadvantaged students attending established, comprehensive high schools.

Ralph N. Taylor, executive director of TIMES2, who would head the new Charter School for Engineering, Math, Science and Technology, said it would open in September 1998.

The school, which initially would enroll as many as 200 sixth-grade students, would be located in office buildings at Union and Weybosset Streets downtown and take advantage of nearby facilities at Johnson & Wales University and the College of Continuing Education of the University of Rhode Island.

The school ultimately will encompass grades 6 through 12, adding one grade a year, according to the proposal.

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy would remain in its existing location, in leased quarters in a former office building at 130 Broadway, and keep the same enrollment, about 180 students in grades 9 through 12. It would receive about \$1.2 million in public funds during the next fiscal year.

With more autonomy, the school will be able to have better control over innovations intended to better meet the needs of students, according to its proposal.

The Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy is one of several public schools which unsuccessfully has sought independence within the school system through so-called "site-based management," and a charter from the state would be an alternate route to that goal, according to Pilkington, co-author of the proposal.

The failure of any school in the district to obtain autonomy through a technical assistance committee on site-based management is commonly viewed among educators as a problem with the review process rather than a flaw in any particular school.

While the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy and TIMES2 still need approval from the full Board of Regents, Nardelli said it was incorrectly reported last week that they needed the approval of the Providence School Board as well.

Nardelli also said it was incorrectly reported that the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy needed approval from the Providence Teachers Union because it is requesting a waiver on a portion of the existing collective bargaining unit. Nardelli said the union may, however, put any concerns into writing and forward them to the Board of Regents.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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