

School Board OKs charter school plan *A charter school proposal by the nonprofit agency TIMES2 wins approval, but a similar proposal by the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy is tabled.

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The School Board last night voted to approve the creation of a \$1.2 million charter school for sixth-graders, but tabled a proposal that would allow an existing high school to gain autonomy by becoming a charter school.

Both charter schools are designed to provide opportunity for disadvantaged students. Both received conditional approval from the Policy Committee of the state Board of Regents last week; final approval is still pending.

The board approved creation of a charter school for about 200 sixth-graders, scheduled to open in the fall of 1998.

That proposal was submitted by TIMES2 (called "Times Squared") a private, non-profit agency with many corporate sponsors. TIMES2 coordinates volunteer tutoring, mentors, and enrichment activities for public school students from minority backgrounds interested in careers in science, engineering and technology. Last year, the program, which currently reaches teens from Providence to Newport, won presidential accolades for its innovation.

Aisha Abdullah-Odaise cast the School Board's lone dissenting vote against the proposal, primarily because of its \$1.2 million price tag.

"It just doesn't seem fair that the School Department should have to take on the cost, unless we get an increase in state aid," Abdullah-Odaise said.

The school, which eventually would expand to include grades 6 through 12, would be located in office buildings at Union and Weybosset Streets downtown and would network with nearby universities.

The proposal that was tabled came from the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy.

Since its start nearly three years ago, the Textron Chamber of Commerce Academy, which serves 180 high school students who were identified as being at risk of dropping out, has worked with the business community and dedicated teachers to effectively engage and educate students.

The goal of the new charter school is to continue with "the same mission, (and) to serve the same population, but under a different administrative structure," Supt. Arthur M. Zarrella said, in recommending the proposal. The charter school concept would put control of the budget, evaluation of teachers and educational decisions in the hands of a governing board, with a chief executive officer and several educational officers implementing policy. The board would be made up equally of parents, teachers and business community members.

The Textron Chamber school, located at 130 Broadway, was recognized for its efforts and innovative approach in finding mentors and after-school jobs for students in an article in *Business Week* magazine.

Those achievements are what one School Board member cited in urging his colleagues to reject the academy's application for charter school status.

"I've heard of selling the family jewels, but this would be like giving them away," Robert S. Bucci said. After all the resources the School Department has put into the school, the board should not allow "corporate raiders to come in and take this program," he added.

While Zarrella tried to assure the board that the school would not abandon its mission to address the needs of at-risk students or those who have recently dropped out of the Providence school system, members expressed concerns.

Abdullah-Odiase raised questions about accountability, whether school administrators would be allowed to continue referring students to the school and the acceptance of special education students.

Juan Lopez wanted to know if the school had provisions for students who spoke limited English.

Since the discussion was among board members and school officials, audience members were not allowed to speak or answer questions.

School Board chairman Roosevelt Benton ended the discussion by asking for a motion that would table the discussion until board members could have their questions answered or fears addressed.

Later, Arthur Robbins - a general partner in the Providence Marriott, an official with the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce and a staunch supporter of the Textron Chamber Academy since its inception - pleaded with the board to let him and Gary Davis, a founding teacher and co-creator of the charter school plan answer questions about the proposal.

Benton denied the request and said the board could meet with him to discuss it at a later time.

"As for Mr. Bucci's statement about the crown jewels being taken away, I resent that statement," Robbins said, as he left the meeting. "It's not being taken away; it's being intensified."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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