



County board OKs math, science charter school

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The city will have a new charter school in fall 2008.

The county Board of Education approved the math- and science- focused Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy at a Monday meeting.

The academy will be near San Bernardino International Airport - the former Norton Air Force Base.

The school was proposed by the Lewis Center for Educational Research, which runs the 10-year-old Academy for Academic Excellence charter in Apple Valley.

Charters are tuition-free and funded by the state, based on enrollment.

On a 4-1 vote, the board approved giving the Norton charter a five-year term - roughly one year for planning and four for operating. Board President Tom Rabone dissented, saying he supported the charter but believed the board should abide by its policy of granting three-year terms to charters.

Among changes to the Lewis Center's initial proposal was a year's delay in opening the school. The extra time will help staff work on securing money to expand facilities for the K-12 school.

"This has been one of the best processes, educationally, that we've ever been through," said Rick Piercy, president and CEO of the Lewis Center. "It really required our staff to dig deep and examine what we're all about."

The charter was the first of its kind approved by the county.

About 90 percent or more of California's charters are approved by school districts, said Greg Geeting, a consultant with the charters division of the California Department of Education.

The board approved the Norton charter under the premise that the school's target student population could not be served as well through a district-approved charter. Geeting said only 12 other charters statewide have been granted under this rationale.

Piercy argued that because charter organizers wanted to serve students countywide, applying to operate under a single district wouldn't make sense. He noted that a district-approved charter must give preference to in-district students, a provision that doesn't exist at the county level.

Given the unique nature of Monday's proposal, county Superintendent of Schools Herbert Fischer asked board members to keep in mind that their decision would serve as a precedent in future situations.

San Bernardino City Unified School District officials have said the charter could negatively impact their district, which is funded based on enrollment. The charter could also affect the district's ability to secure public funding for facilities, Deputy Superintendent Judy White said at Monday's meeting.

Judi Penman, president and CEO of the San Bernardino Area Chamber of Commerce and a board member of San Bernardino City Unified, said she was excited that the Norton school is coming. The Lewis Center's Apple Valley school has a long waiting list, and a similar charter could help improve San Bernardino's image, Penman said.

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