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5 city schools under the gun

Board to vote on giving charters 2 years to improve

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Five of Baltimore's original charter schools would have two years to produce good test scores or risk going out of business, under recommendations that the city school board is slated to vote on tonight.

The board is set to fully renew the contracts of six charter schools, but for five others, school system staff is recommending only temporary contract extensions. Most of those schools have low test scores. And in at least one case, officials are concerned about a school's management practices.

If board members don't approve the recommendation for two-year contract extensions, it's possible they could decide to go further and revoke a charter. They could also bump a temporary extension into a full five-year renewal if they see promise in a school.

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently in exchange for accountability for results. Tonight's vote will be a test of how that accountability is working in Baltimore.

System officials are particularly concerned about academic performance at Collington Square and City Springs charter schools, both of which have been run for years by the nonprofit Baltimore Curriculum Project. The schools have made progress over time, but their test scores remain low. Parents have turned out at recent board meetings to support keeping the current leadership, noting improved safety and an overall positive climate.

The city's first charter schools opened in August 2005, with contracts good for three academic years that will expire in June. Some of the schools were new, while others - including Collington Square and City Springs - converted to charters.

To apply for contract renewal, the schools went through a rigorous review process evaluating test scores, financial solvency, governance structure and ability to make reforms as needed. Such a process is likely to become more common across the city, as schools chief Andres Alonso moves to give principals at regular public schools more autonomy in exchange for increased accountability.

"If you evaluated many of our other public schools in this way, I don't know how many would still be open," said Bobbi Macdonald, president of the board governing City Neighbors Charter.

City Neighbors is among the six schools recommended for the longest possible contract renewal, five years. The others are KIPP Ujima Village Academy, Crossroads School, Midtown Academy, Hampstead Hill Academy and Empowerment Academy. A seventh, Patterson Park Public Charter, requested a

decision early, and the school board renewed its contract in December.

Five schools - Collington, City Springs, Northwood-Appold Community Academy, Inner Harbor East Academy for Young Scholars and Southwest Baltimore Charter - came up short in the review.

All those schools except Southwest have failed at least once to make "adequate yearly progress," the state benchmark gauging a school's performance on annual tests. In Southwest's case, the school does not yet have state test scores on which to be evaluated. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires testing starting in third grade. Southwest opened in 2005 with kindergarten and first-grade classes, adding a grade each year, so this is the first year it has a third-grade class to test.

"To be penalized for a lack of information seems unfair," said the school's executive director, Erika Brockman. Since Southwest did well in other areas evaluated, its operators are asking the school board to give it a full renewal if its third-graders meet benchmarks on the tests this spring.

Northwood-Appold, known as NACA, has only one year of test data, and it fell slightly short of making adequate progress. The school's leaders challenged the test results, charging that they were erroneous.

NACA has solicited the support of several elected officials and community leaders, who have written letters urging the school board to give the school a full five-year contract renewal.

Laura Weeldreyer, the system administrator overseeing charter schools, said renewal decisions weren't made exclusively on test scores, but "test scores matter. That's the world that we live in."

For Inner Harbor East Academy, system administrators' concerns extend beyond academics. The school, which is run by Sojourner-Douglass College and East Baltimore Community Corp., has had three principals in three years. During its first year of operation, an after-school program closed midyear, and several parents who needed after-school child care transferred their children out as a result.

During the charters' first years operating, some of them have been embroiled in a funding battle with the system. The state's highest court has ordered the city school board to give Baltimore's charters as much money per child as it spends on students in its regular schools, rather than a mix of cash and services, such as food and special education. Within the past week, the system has mailed checks to charter operators giving them the equivalent of an extra \$700 for each child enrolled.

"If you're going to hold these schools accountable for their academic achievements, you need to give them the funding that they're supposed to have," said Christopher Maher, director of the charter advocacy group Supporting Public Schools of Choice.

Although charter schools didn't officially exist in the city until 2005, the Baltimore Curriculum Project has been working with Collington since 1998 and City Springs since 1996. In 1998, 10 percent of Collington students passed the state test in reading, and 5 percent passed in math. Last year, on a different state test, 44 percent passed in reading and 22 percent passed in math.

Starting from such a low place, the schools should be judged on their progress, not whether students met the bar of adequate yearly progress, said Alison Perkins-Cohen, executive director of the project. "If you have kids starting well, well below that bar, they can make huge growth but never reach that bar," she said, "and the progress doesn't show at all."

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