

PROVIDENCE

Principal switches gears on charter plan

Opposition derailed proposal for King, so Derrick Ciesla wants to open new school

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PROVIDENCE — A new charter school proposal has emerged from the ashes of the former one involving Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School on the East Side.

MLK principal Derrick Ciesla is applying to open a new charter school that would operate under the umbrella of the Providence school district but have more flexibility over such matters as the length of the school day and the curriculum.

Ciesla switched gears after half of his faculty voted against converting King into a district charter school. The original charter proposal had stirred up concern from parents and members of the School Board and City Council, who worried that King would lose its capacity to serve students from the East Side.

If approved by the state Board of Regents, the Providence Renaissance Academy would open in August with about 250 students in pre-kindergarten through second grade and grow to include 546 children through fifth grade. The school would be led by Ciesla and his cur-

rent assistant principal, Kristen Lussier.

Like independent charters, the school would have its own board of directors and per-pupil tuition from the district would follow the student. The academy would be responsible for fundraising to pay for such things as a longer school day or possibly a new building.

The new proposal, however, may ruffle as many feathers as the original application. School Board members expressed concern Monday night about the impact of the new charter on King. Would the charter school siphon critical faculty and staff away from King, one of the district's highest-performing schools?

Ciesla tried to allay those fears Tuesday. The Renaissance Academy, if approved, would be a free-standing school open to students from throughout the district. It may not even be located on the East Side. Teachers would be hired through an interview process already established by the district.

"This is not about King," Ciesla said. "I want to give the citizens of Providence another choice. Right now, our faculty wasn't ready for this. It doesn't mean that people in the district aren't ready for something new."

According to Ciesla, there is over-

whelming support from parents for another high-performing school with the nimbleness and flexibility of a charter school. And he thinks that a number of teachers will be enthusiastic.

City Councilman Samuel Zurier recently questioned the financial impact of opening district charters, which Supt. Susan Lusi began championing last summer.

But Ciesla said the district is about to experience a huge influx of new students at a time when the city has recently closed several elementary schools.

"With schools at capacity," he said, "this will alleviate some of the district's needs."

Ciesla also tried to counter the perception that King currently draws most of its children from the East Side, noting that about 400 students are bused to the Camp Street school.

But what will happen to King once its leaders, Ciesla and Lussier, leave to open another school?

"The district does a fabulous job of creating leaders," Ciesla said. "This is about school climate and culture. It's bigger than one person."

But the district has historically struggled to grow its own leaders and Lusi has recently recruited prin-

cipals from outside the district to lead state-mandated school reforms.

Meanwhile, King's PTO president, Corey D.B. Walker, said he remains opposed to charter schools, although he hasn't seen Ciesla's latest proposal. He said there is "no quick fix" to the challenges facing urban education and said that drawing resources away from the public schools is not a step in the right direction.

Corey also worries that the energy expended on drafting a charter application in time for Saturday's state-mandated deadline has diverted attention from addressing King's existing academic needs.

"I like having conversations about the future of MLK," Corey said. "But to have this amount of energy spent by the school and the district administration, that's a misdirection of energy."

Corey is convinced that the King community can work something out with Ciesla.

"We need to have a community conversation about why we got to this point," he said. "I don't think [Ciesla] is going anywhere. His commitment to King is admirable."

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