

Donor money will keep charter schools open, state association says



A student peers outside the front door of Olympus High School in Tacoma, one of three charter schools opening in Tacoma this year. David Montesino Staff photographer

By Debbie Cafazzo
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Washington charter schools, including three in Tacoma, will remain open for the entire school year — with or without public funding, the head of the state charter school association said Tuesday.

In the wake of Friday's [ruling from the Washington Supreme Court](#) that the state's charter school law is unconstitutional, CEO Tom Franta of the Washington State Charter Schools Association said his group has brokered a deal that will keep the schools open with grants and donations.

Franta would not name the donors, saying they wished to remain anonymous. But he estimated the cost of operating all nine of the state's charter schools for the entire school year at about \$14 million.

“Parents selected these schools as the best option for their kids,” Franta said, adding that his group wants to “make sure that best option stays there for them.”

Franta said the association believes that charters, though privately operated, are public schools entitled to receive payment from the state.

The court, however, said charters do not qualify as “common schools” under Washington’s Constitution and therefore cannot receive public school funding. [Reaction around the state has been strong](#), from parents to politicians.

Washington voters approved charter schools in 2012 when they passed state Initiative 1240.

The Supreme Court ruling came in a case brought by the state League of Women Voters, the Washington Education Association and others. They filed a lawsuit in King County Superior Court in July 2013.

About 400 of the state’s estimated 1,200 charter students are enrolled in Tacoma’s [three charter schools](#): SOAR Academy, Destiny Charter Middle School and Summit Olympus High School. All of them opened this year, in August.

As parents shepherded their children to the Tacoma charters Tuesday morning, some spoke about the court ruling.

“We pretty much had a good cry Friday night,” said Darlene Agemotu of Lakewood, who was escorting her kindergartener to SOAR Academy on Tacoma’s Hilltop. “It was a big step to choose this school in the first place.”

She said she hoped to hear some good news during a parent meeting Tuesday morning.

At the meeting, parents applauded when SOAR officials announced the new funding that would keep them operating at least for the current school year.

Brittany Peyrot, who has two children at SOAR, said her family bought a house close to the school so that her kids could start classes there this year. Having previously lived on the East Coast, she said, they were familiar with charters and liked what they saw.

She said SOAR has been a good choice for her kids. She talked about her shy child coming out of his shell since the start of school in mid-August and her other child who is excelling.

Thelma Jackson, who chairs SOAR's appointed board, said that if the court ruling stands, "it takes away choice for students and parents who otherwise had no choice. They will have to return to their neighborhood schools unless this is resolved."

Jackson and others urged parents to get involved in the fight to keep charters open. The state association is asking charter supporters to contact Gov. Jay Inslee to ask for a special legislative session to address the issue.

A rally for students and families is scheduled for 4:45 p.m. Thursday at Destiny Charter Middle School, 1301 E. 34th St., Tacoma.

Charter school proponents have 20 days to ask the Supreme Court to reconsider its ruling, and Franta said his group is working with its legal team to ask for reconsideration.

The Supreme Court said it was handing the case back to King County Superior Court for "an appropriate order."

"Until the gavel bangs in Superior Court, these are public schools," Franta said.

But some officials question whether charters can continue to call themselves public if they operate with private funds.

Tacoma School Board Vice President Karen Vialle and other members of the board have been critical of the charter school ballot initiative and of the state commission, which authorized three of the state's nine charters to open in Tacoma.

"For me, the crux of the (court) opinion was about accountability," Vialle said. "If you are going to be a public school, you should be on the same playing field as we are for accountability to the taxpayers."

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