



Charter school system shutting down; schools will stay open

18 HOURS AGO • BY DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP

SEATTLE (AP) — Washington's charter school system took another step Tuesday toward shutting down, but the state's nine charter schools were expected to stay open at least through the end of the academic year.

The statewide Charter School Commission voted during a telephone meeting to make final preparations to lay off its staff and send its records to the state archives. Closing the agency is required under a Washington Supreme Court ruling that declared a 2012 law creating the charter schools was unconstitutional.

The high court cited issues with the way charter schools are supported with state dollars and governed by a board that is not elected by residents. The justices said last month they would not reconsider their decision.

The court was expected to start the process of shutting down the charter schools as early as Wednesday, commission Executive Director Joshua Halsey said.

The schools had continued receiving state funding pending an appeal of the court ruling, but that cash flow will likely end this month.

The schools and their supporters have sought solutions to keep their doors open through the end of the school year, with help from the commission, the nonprofit Washington State Charter Schools Association and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The most likely solution is transforming the schools into so-called Alternative Learning Experiences, according to the association that supports state charter schools. That program is used mostly for online schools hosted by school districts, but officials with the superintendent's office and the association believe it also could work as a stop-gap for charter schools.

Eight of the nine charter schools are pursuing a relationship with the Mary Walker School District in Stevens County, association spokeswoman Maggie Meyers said. The district's superintendent is Kevin Jacka, who resigned last week from the Charter School Commission.

It would allow the schools to stay open and receive state education dollars, Meyers said. She said it's the best approach being pursued, but not the only one.

Charter school supporters hope the Legislature will fix the law the court struck down during its 2016 session.

"We're all ultimately depending on lawmakers to fix this mess and do right by kids and families and uphold the will of the voters," Meyers said.

Initiative 1240 passed with 50.7 percent of the vote in 2012, making Washington the 42nd state to approve charter schools.

The Washington Education Association, party to a lawsuit leading to the Supreme Court ruling, says the Legislature has more important work to do that affects more children than those enrolled in charter schools.

"Clearly there's a lot of work that needs to be done. Let's focus on that rather than trying to fix a flawed law that focuses on a fraction of the students in the state," said Rich Wood, a spokesman for the teachers union.

Lawmakers are under pressure from the Supreme Court to fix the way the state pays for all public schools. Since August, the court has been fining the state \$100,000 a day until it can come up with a plan to meet the requirements of its school funding decision.

Those fines are being kept in a special education account and are a fraction of what lawmakers expect to add to the education budget to meet the court's requirements.

Halsey, head of the Charter School Commission, said he expects the shutdown to take a few months.

"We're in unprecedented territory," he said, noting that the state has shut down public agencies but only as a merger with another department that would take over its functions.

There is no plan for another agency to take over management of charter schools. Halsey said the commission is proud of its work and feels charter schools got off to a good start.