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Springdale school district gets \$2.1 million for charter schools

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A small school district north of Spokane is getting \$2.1 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in part to hire four consultants to help it absorb and preserve six of Washington state's nine charter schools.

The Washington Supreme Court ruled charter schools could not use state funds to operate. In response, the charter schools struck an agreement with the Mary Walker School District in Springdale to fold into the district under a program that allows districts to operate schools outside their boundaries.

"This is obviously a bit of a different project because it involves former charter schools," said Kevin Jacka, superintendent of the Mary Walker School District.

Jacka, who served on the Washington State Charter School Commission until resigning Dec. 2, said the money will help fund the oversight of the charter schools. He said the four consultants will help the district oversee state-mandated school requirements such as special education.

Jacka said the charter schools would retain most of their autonomy even though they will be governed by the district.

"From our standpoint, we have to provide oversight because Mary Walker School District is the responsible district," he said.

Spokane Education Association President Jenny Rose wasn't surprised at the grant.

"The Gates Foundation is actually why we have charter schools in the state of Washington," she said. "They have poured big bucks into this."

According to the Public Disclosure Commission, Bill Gates gave about \$3 million to the charter school initiative that passed in 2012.

Rose believes that allowing charters schools to become Alternative Learning Experience programs corrupts the original intent of the ALE program. ALEs allow for off-campus instruction, with the schools reporting student progress to the district. A school district receives state money for students enrolled in an ALE program.

Although Rose doesn't agree with charter schools, she said she was happy Spokane Public Schools chose to be a charter authorizer. The two charter schools operating in Spokane, Pride Prep and Spokane International Academy, were approved by the Spokane district.

"I highly respected the way our school district went about this," Rose said. "My hope is that they are going to become part of Spokane Public Schools and that they will be under the rules and regulations of Spokane Public Schools."

The Gates foundation has awarded grant money to the Mary Walker School District before – \$250,000 in September and \$50,000 in 2013.

As of May 2015, the Mary Walker School District had 500 students in kindergarten through high school. Its budget was \$6.8 million last year.

Jacka said six charter schools have signed contracts with the Mary Walker district to become ALE programs.

The arrangement is designed as a temporary solution.

The charter school initiative passed with 50.7 percent approval in 2012, making Washington the 42nd state to approve charter schools. On Sept. 4, just weeks after the schools opened, the Washington Supreme Court ruled that charter schools, privately run and publicly funded, are unconstitutional and cannot receive public money.

The Washington state Attorney General asked the court to reconsider that ruling, but on Nov. 19 the court upheld most of it. However, justices removed a footnote ruling that charter schools were unconstitutional because they didn't have elected boards, which potentially could have affected other programs such as Running Start.