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State offers mediation for Charter School

Fulton County Board of Education must agree

by Candy Waylock

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An olive branch of sorts has been extended to the Fulton County School System by the Georgia Department of Education as it works to find a solution to keep the Fulton Science Academy (FSA) Middle School open next year.

The GDOE received a request for mediation from FSA following the denial of its charter renewal by Fulton Schools last month.

"The Department is willing to move forward with this mediation if both parties are willing to mediate," noted a letter from GDOE dated Jan. 9 to Fulton Schools Superintendent Robert Avossa.

Fulton Schools has until Jan. 19 to inform the state of its decision to mediate, however no response had been provided as of press time on Jan. 17.

Last month, the Fulton School Board denied the FSA petition to extend its charter for an additional 10-year period. The high-performing middle school has been open for 10 years, but now faces closure at the end of the school year.

Fulton Schools denied the charter from FSA based on two requests in the charter application: the 10-year length of the charter and a "blanket" waiver from all provisions of the state law (Title 20) pertaining to public school education.

Fulton Schools said it would only agree to a 3-year charter length to keep it on the same renewal schedule as its two sister schools; and required a list of specific waivers which FSA was seeking. Although FSA communicated it was willing to negotiate these terms, an amended charter was not delivered to the school board in time for the vote.

The options for keeping the charter middle school open next year appear limited. FSA can file an amended petition to Fulton Schools. However it would enter the regular charter petition cycle in March with the other charter petitions. Even if approved, the school could not open until August 2013.

Any appeal to the state would require FSA to submit the identical petition that was denied by the local school system. Thus, the state would be considering the 10-year charter with a full waiver from Title 20 provisions.

"No changes can be made to the denied petition," Louis Erste, Charter Schools Division director for Georgia, confirmed.

Whether the state would agree to a 10-year charter is questionable. The state is currently considering a charter petition from the Fulton County School System to become a charter system next year. During the negotiation period, Fulton School initially sought an 8-year charter; but amended it to five years when informed the state would not agree to any charter beyond five years.

If FSA chooses to amend its charter renewal application, Erste explained a new petition must be filed in March for an August 2013 school opening – identical to the local time frame.

In the meantime, Fulton School officials are working on a transition plan for students at FSA who will be affected by the school's closure in May. However, FSA officials are in the midst of a fundraising campaign to keep the school operational until a new charter is received.