

La Academia Dolores Huerta hopes to move to Church on the Rock building

LAS CRUCES >> La Academia Dolores Huerta students nicknamed the schoolyard the "Meat Grinder" for the scrapes and scratches that result if they fall during physical education class.

Students file through the crowded teacher's lounge to get to the art room. Down the hall is the small cafeteria, where tables are pushed to the side as a makeshift barrier for ballet folklórico lessons.

Then there's their social studies classroom, where space is limited, so the class projects they do are too, students said.

"The space is so small and she (the teacher) really likes doing projects that help us to learn, (but) we can't," eighth-grader Melanie Hernandez, 13, said.

Principal Octavio



Math teacher Rosana Ramos goes over problems at dual-language charter school La Academia Dolores Huerta. The school is looking to move to a larger building on Solano Drive. (Niki Rhynes — For the Sun-

News)

Casillas is seeking to move the charter middle school to a new, bigger location on Solano Drive and apply for its authorization, required to operate as a public school, from the state rather than Las Cruces Public Schools.

"It is my No. 1 goal to get kids out of that building because we need space to grow," Casillas told the LCPS school board last month.

Current home

The dual-language school -- named for the New Mexico-born labor and civil rights leader who co-founded the National Farmworkers Association -- serves 150 students this year, raised to increase funding to afford a new building.

The current site was once home to Motor Vehicle Division offices and a counseling center, Casillas said, sitting in his office, the smell of cafeteria food drifting down the hall. The school has been looking to move since it opened 10 years ago, he said.

"As you can see, this building is pretty old and it doesn't provide the education opportunities that our students need to be academically ready for high school and college," he said.

A bigger building will mean an opportunity for more students to attend the school, taking a chunk out of the waitlist, and more classrooms to house more teachers, keeping student-teacher ratios low, Casillas said.

"I think this is a great school," Melanie said, sitting in the cafeteria-turned-dance room. "We need more space for more kids."

The smaller student-to-teacher ratio is what Melanie likes about La Academia.

In the bigger, comprehensive schools, "they pay attention to the ones who are advanced or trouble and not the ones in the middle," she said. "I was going to be just in the middle

because I'm not advanced or a troublemaker."

Ideal site



La Academia Dolores Huerta hopes to relocate to 1405 S. Solano Drive, formerly Church on the Rock. (Niki Rhynes — For the Sun-News)

State law requires charter schools to be in publicly owned buildings by July 2015.

La Academia had the chance to be part of the joint charter school facility planned for the Court Youth Center, but parents didn't want their middle school kids around high schoolers, Casillas said. J. Paul Taylor Academy and Alma d'arte Charter High School will now make up the facility.

Casillas has his eyes on the home of Church on the Rock on Solano Drive.

The school would go from 10 classrooms to 16, from 9,700 square feet and less than an acre of land to 25,000 square feet and 3.5 acres.

"Kids need a place to run and they need a place to get away from the troubles of life," Casillas told the school board last month. "... And that facility would provide a place for them to wear themselves out."

In La Academia were to move in, a large dirt lot surrounding the building would become a basketball court, fields and parking space.

"It's just an amazing place," Casillas said.

The search for a new building has been difficult, he said.

"Investors are not educators, so they're looking to make money," said Casillas, a lawyer and former language arts teacher. "But in education, charter schools don't have a lot of money."

Money from the state and federal governments isn't enough to find a new building, he said.

A conundrum

A company called Learning Spaces helped Casillas find Church on the Rock.

If all goes as planned, renovations will begin on the church next month, including adding walls for classrooms and air conditioning units.

But all might not go as planned.

La Academia needs to raise its enrollment cap to 300 students over the next few years to afford the new building. The contract the school would sign to secure the building requires the rise.

Yet La Academia's current charter caps enrollment at 200 students, so the rise would put the school out of compliance with its charter.

Casillas asked the school board to amend the charter last month and allow for the increase.

But, with the school's application for state authorization already in the works, LCPS

Superintendent Stan Rounds said he had "tremendous reservations if LCPS can legally act on this."

"We need to determine if it's appropriate for LCPS to take action on New Mexico," he said. "... We support La Academia. The issues are technical issues."

So the school is stuck: It can't sign a contract securing the building without ensuring enrollment will rise, but it can't raise enrollment without the amendment.

LCPS is the school's authorizer until July 1 of next year, so Casillas said he believes the district has the power to approve the amendment. The state wouldn't be able to make that change until July 1, he said, adding he expects the school and LCPS to find a solution.

"It's just a matter of us sitting down and talking about details," he said.

State authorization

Charter schools in New Mexico can apply for authorization from local school districts or the state's Public Education Commission.

State authorization would let La Academia seek more grant funding, Casillas said.

"Every department in LCPS has just been wonderful," he told the board last month.

"We're not leaving because we want to sever the relationship. We want to be independent because we want to be a very important additive to the district."

The board did not decide on the issue at that meeting.

The school board will likely reconsider the issue again Tuesday, two days before La Academia goes before the Public Education Commission for authorization.

Meanwhile, Casillas is looking for extra money to fund the move to the new building.

"I've been playing the lottery, and I haven't won," he said with a slight smile. "I don't think that's going to work."

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La Academia Dolores Huerta

What: Bilingual charter school for grades 6-8

Where: 1480 N Main St.

Call: 575-526-2984

Web: academianm.org

Other Las Cruces charter schools:

Alma d'Arte Charter High, grades 9-12

J. Paul Taylor Academy, grades K-7

Las Montañas Charter High School, grades 9-12

New America School-Las Cruces, grades 9-12

A 1A Monday should have said La Academia Dolores Huerta Charter School is in early leasing discussions with the Church on Rock congregation to move into its Solano Drive building. The church is still active and currently occupying the location.