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Matteson charter school opens despite opposition

Thursday, August 19, 2010

August 19, 2010 (MATTESON, Ill.) (WLS) -- Thursday was the first day of classes at a new charter school in the south suburbs.

The Southland College Prep is located in Matteson and will serve students from the town, as well as from nearby Country Club Hills, University Park, Crete and Richton Park.

But as the school opens, it faces some opposition.

The first day of class finally arrived for students attending Chicagoland's newest charter school, despite the efforts by some to stop it.

"There has to be a change in the way we educate our children. High schools are failing," said Dr. Blondean Davis, Southland school CEO.

Southland College Preparatory charter school, located at 3718 W. 213th Street, is the first of its kind and is the only free charter high school in the south suburbs. It is the brainchild of former Chicago Public Schools administrator and the current superintendent of the Matteson Elementary School District 162 -- Dr. Blondean Davis-- who says eighth graders in her district inspired what has become a yearlong fight to establish a college preparatory high school in the Rich Township High School District 227. That's where she says there have been problems with declining test scores and other problems.

But officials in District 227 -- who declined an on-camera interview with ABC7-- argue the charter school will bankrupt them in a few years. They have filed a lawsuit. Tuesday, they were denied a temporary restraining order to delay Southland's opening. Opponents argue they will lose millions of dollars in state funding as students who would normally attend the district's three high schools go to Southland.

"The issue is not budget. The issue is change and probably power dynamics," Davis told ABC7.

Thirty-six boys and 89 girls make up Southland's freshman class. They wear uniforms, like their teachers, and attend school until 5 p.m.

Jada Carr, 15, was one of the 125 incoming students selected by lottery from a pool of 185 applicants.

"It's a college prep school. So, they're more focused on a education and college and trying to get you into universities," Carr said.

"It's my responsibility to get you the materials you need," teacher Dr. Melanie Sprengel told her class Thursday.

Sprengel and other teachers were hand-picked, as well, while parents -- and perhaps a community-- look forward to giving children the education they say they deserve.

"I want them to have options. I want them to be in a better situation than I was. I want them to be better than me," said Carl Cogar, Southland parent.

Southland charter school is occupying temporary space at a local elementary school for the next few weeks or so until students move into their new school building located in nearby Richton Park and currently being renovated.

Each year, the school plans to add 125 students until they reach a maximum enrollment of 500. School officials say their goal is not only for their students to attend college but to graduate college.

Meanwhile, the district's lawsuit against the charter school and the state board of education is pending.

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