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## **Appeals court rules in favor of Southland Charter School**

BY CASEY TONER

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Last Modified: Dec 30, 2011 10:11PM

Southland College Prep Charter High School Chief Executive Officer Blondean Davis is hailing an Illinois Court of Appeals decision to allow the school to stay open as a “combination of Christmas and New Year’s.”

“It’s the best day I’ve had in my life, professionally and personally,” Davis said after the ruling was announced Friday. “We are going to tell children we will be able to finish the next school year and we are going to be able to march on to the ACT, college admissions and scholarships.”

The court affirmed a lower court’s decision that sided with the charter school in a lawsuit filed by Rich Township High School District 227.

Arguing that the opening of Southland College Prep would reduce state aid for District 227 by about \$2 million per year, the district filed a lawsuit against the charter school in June 2010, a month after the Illinois State Board of Education approved its charter.

An emergency motion to prevent the school from opening was denied just days before the school year started. District 227 officials proceeded with the lawsuit, claiming the state board should not have allowed the charter school because the lost revenue would affect student performance.

A Cook County judge ruled against the district in December 2010. District 227 appealed the decision, and the Illinois Court of Appeals heard arguments from both sides earlier this month.

In the appellate court’s decision, Judge Rudolfo Garcia wrote the majority opinion for Judges Robert Gordon and Bertina Lampkin.

“We are left with no doubt that the establishment of the charter high school is in the best interest of the students it was designed to serve and, eventually, its establishment may well serve the best interests of all District 227 students to the extent that the academic success of the charter school raises the educational bar for the other three schools,” Garcia wrote. “Nothing in the record supports District 227’s contention that the establishment of the charter school is contrary to the best interests of all the students in District 227.”

District 227 Board President Betty Owens disagreed with the finding.

“I’m very disappointed on behalf of 4,000 students we serve because of the cuts we will have to make within our budget, which will be significantly impacted by that decision,” Owens said.

She said the school board will discuss its plans regarding the suit, including whether to appeal, during the Jan. 17 board meeting at Rich Central High School.

District 227 board member David Morgan, a critic of the lawsuit, said it would be foolish to appeal the lawsuit to the Illinois Supreme Court and “waste taxpayer money fighting the state.”

“This district and school board have failed this community for more than a decade,” Morgan said. “People have a right to a choice for their children.”

The charter school, based in Richton Park and now in its second year, is an alternative to the three high schools operated by District 227: Rich Central High School in Olympia Fields, Rich South High School in Richton Park, and Rich East High School in Park Forest. Demand to get into the school exceeds the current capacity of 125 students per class year, and a lottery is held to determine which students can enroll.