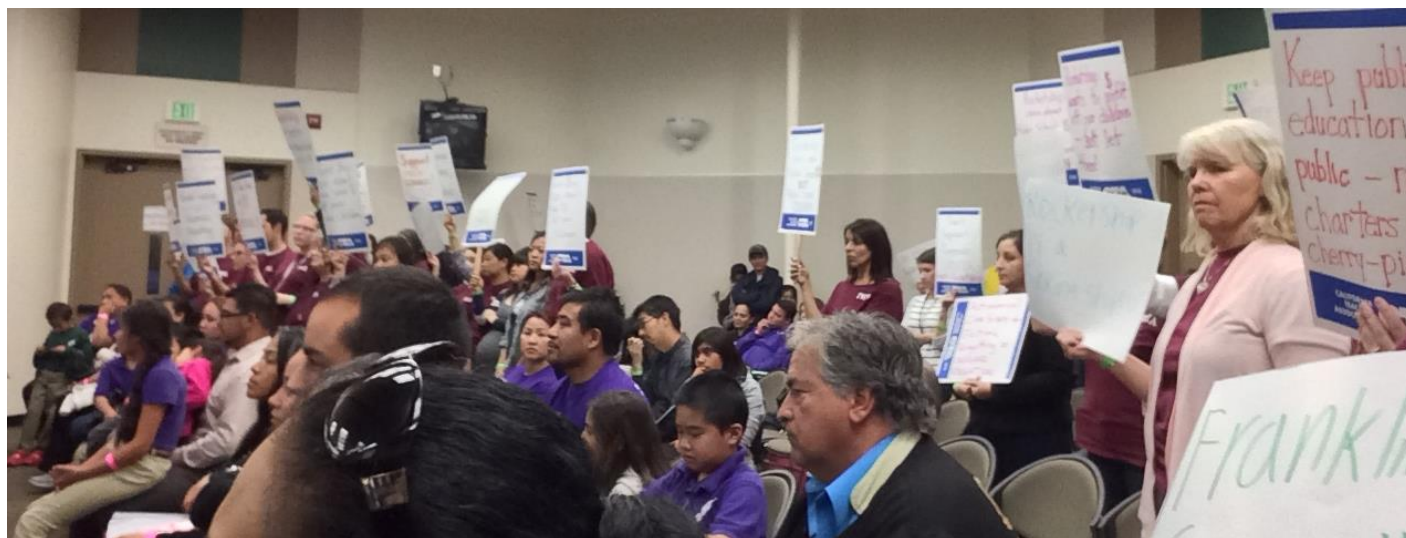


# FMSD rejects Rocketship petition for unsound education



Hundreds of teachers, school workers, parents, and students packed an April 14 school board meeting to protest a petition to open a third Rocketship charter school in the Franklin-McKinley School District.

Hundreds of teachers, classified school workers, parents, and students turned out for the Franklin-McKinley School District (FMSD) Board meeting on April 14. The issue at hand: whether to approve a petition for a third Rocketship charter school to enter the district.

Supporters on both sides of the issue spoke to the school board about their concerns.

Rocketship parents and students argued that parents should have a choice over where to send their students. They praised the high level of parent involvement at their schools, and the positive experiences they feel are being provided for their students.

Supporters of FMSD's traditional public schools claimed that Rocketship's educational program was unsound due to heavy reliance on uncredentialed teachers, computerized instruction, and a narrowed curriculum that excludes science, social studies, and the arts. They also argued that Rocketship was weakening the democratic rights of parents by placing schools under the control of a private corporation, not an elected school board.

At the conclusion of public commentary, FMSD's Educational Services Department presented their analysis of the Rocketship petition to the board.

Ed Services found several major faults with the Rocketship petition. Only 11 out of the 273 signatures on the Rocketship petition could be verified. Ed Code requires charter school petitions to contain valid signatures numbering at least one-half of the charter school's projected first year enrollment.

The school board questioned Rocketship CEO Preston Smith, who had claimed there were 500 students on a waiting list to enroll in Rocketship schools. Board President Rudy Rodriguez asked why none of the families on Rocketship's waiting list were able to speak to the board during the public commentary, and only 11 were able to sign the petition.

This question was never answered.

Ed Services discovered that many of those who signed the petition were parents whose children already attended a Rocketship school, and who stated they had no meaningful interest in enrolling their child in a new Rocketship school.

Ed Services commented that the steady decline in pupil outcomes for the existing schools in the charter chain demonstrated that Rocketship would be unlikely to meet the achievement goals set forth in their petition.

The analysis concluded that Rocketship's educational program is unsound because Rocketship relies heavily on uncredentialed instructors, lacks dedicated science and social science classes, and does not contain specific instructional strategies for low-achieving students and English language learners. The Rocketship petition also failed to mention the district's substantial Asian population and identify outreach means designed to reach or serve this demographic.

FMSD's student population is approximately 62% Latino, 30% Asian, 53% EL, and 80% qualify for Free and Reduced Meals.

As a result of the analysis, Ed Services recommended that the board adopt one of two options: deny the petition, or approve the petition on the condition that Rocketship agreed to the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding (M.O.U).

The M.O.U. stated that Rocketship could not petition to open another charter school in FMSD for five years. Rocketship would have to work with the district to adjust its proposed program according to the number of verifiable signatures on its petition. Rocketship would be required to maintain the High-Quality Schools Compact with the district, as well as amend its petition to address the decline in performance with specific student subgroups and assure that all students are under the direct supervision and control of credentialed teachers at all times in the learning process. Finally, Rocketship must notify

the district within 24 hours of any change in student enrollment throughout the school year.

The terms of the M.O.U. were unacceptable to Rocketship management.

CEO Preston Smith stated that Rocketship would be willing to negotiate the terms of the M.O.U. but that Rocketship would not accept them as is.



Preston Smith  
Rocketship CEO

When the board replied that the M.O.U. was based on the district's analysis of the Rocketship petition and was not intended as a negotiation piece, Smith complained that the district was not "practicing good faith." Smith told the board that if approval was contingent on Rocketship's acceptance of "11th hour terms" they should just vote to reject the petition.

FMSD Board President Rudy Rodriguez said, "I don't see anything on that M.O.U. based on the findings [from Ed Services] ... that asks Rocketship anything more than we ask of our other schools."



Rudy Rodriguez  
FMSD Board  
President

Rodriguez then asked why Rocketship would tell the board to reject their petition when they could simply rescind it.

Rodriguez said, "We want to make sure that if we bring in any more charter schools in our district, it has nothing to do with 11th hour findings or not practicing good faith, it's taking care of our students. That's what's most important."

Board Member John Linder read an email sent by David Kuizenga, Vice President of Bay Area Rocketship schools, to FMSD Superintendent Dr. John Porter and Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services Dr. Stella Kemp. The email stated that Rocketship was indeed aware of, and willing to accept, the recommendations of the Ed Services report and the terms of the M.O.U.

In the email, Kuizenga stated, "Based on our conversations and my understanding of the changes since the initial staff recommendation was posted last week, we are willing to accept the conditions."

Kuizenga responded that he had indeed sent that email, but his understanding was that the M.O.U. terms were to be negotiated, and that Rocketship was being treated unfairly by FMSD for not being allowed to do so.



David Kuizenga  
Rocketship Bay  
Area Vice President

A motion was made by the board to vote to reject the Rocketship petition, which passed 4-1. The lone dissenting vote came from FMSD board member Omar Torres, who stated, "I'm incredibly disappointed that we're going to deny this petition. I wholeheartedly believe in parent engagement and Rocketship parents have it."

Torres did not address the shortcomings of Rocketship's petition as outlined in the Ed Services report.

Torres also failed to mention the ongoing criticism against Rocketship for pressuring parents to fulfill 30 hours of service per year. Public schools cannot legally require parents to perform unpaid labor because it is equivalent to charging tuition.



Omar Torres  
FMSD Board  
Member

Rocketship credits "parent hours" to those who attend important school board meetings and city council sessions, especially if they bring other adults along with them or speak during public commentary. Rocketship parents also receive hourly credit for recruiting new students to Rocketship schools.

Torres, who was elected to the board in November, has had a longstanding friendship with Adán Lupercio, the Bay Area Policy Manager of Rocketship. Torres was also active as a community organizer where he worked with Mateo Sheedy Rocketship in the Guadalupe-Washington neighborhood near downtown San Jose.



Adán Lupercio  
Rocketship Bay Area  
Policy Manager

Rocketship has 180 days to appeal to the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE), but they must submit the same petition submitted to FMSD without changes.

Recently, Franklin-McKinley, along with Alum Rock, Mount Pleasant, and Evergreen school districts settled a lawsuit against the SCCOE, which had violated state law by mass approving 20 Rocketship schools in 2011, allowing Rocketship to bypass the petition process of local school districts within the county.

As part of the settlement, Rocketship agreed to drop 13 of the 20 charters. One charter had already been dropped, but six charters will remain intact because they impact school districts who chose not to file suit against Rocketship and the SCCOE.

Recently elected San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo had urged the FMSD school board to approve the Rocketship petition in a letter dated April 8. He stated, "The success of our city hinges on the broad opportunities we provide for our children."



Sam Liccardo  
San Jose Mayor

Liccardo is married to Jessica Garcia-Kohl, who worked as Rocketship's Bay Area Director of Community Development from 2012-2014.

All nine current Rocketship schools in San Jose currently exist on the Eastside, the low-income area of an otherwise very wealthy Silicon Valley. East San Jose residents voted predominantly for Liccardo's opponent, Dave Cortese, in the 2014 election.