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## Synergy School petition gets green light

By JULIE DRAKE Valley Press Staff Writer  
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LANCASTER — The Antelope Valley Union High School District's Board of Education approved a petition for the proposed Synergy School of Arts & Technology charter school at Thursday night's meeting.

The Board voted 4-1, with Trustee Donita Winn dissenting, to approve the charter.

She noted she did not see the final petition until it was presented in closed session.

"At at our last Board meeting, it was indicated that this charter would help address the needs of disadvantaged students," Winn said. "I feel that the high school district does just that."

Winn said she has volunteered at all but two of the elementary districts in the Valley. She called the addition of an elementary program a slap in the face to the elementary districts.

"I do not feel that the charter petition can improve or even duplicate what I feel our staff and teachers do for students as far a providing educational as well as social emotional support," she said.

Sukhi Ahluwalia, an attorney with Atkinson, Andelson, Loya, Ruud & Romo, the District's legal counsel, said they reviewed the petition with District staff and found that it meets the requirements of the Charter Schools Act and that it presents a sound educational program and is likely to be successfully implemented. She recommended approval for a three-year charter term from July 1 to June 30, 2026.

Trustee Jill McGrady wished the petitioners good luck.

"This one we are being told meets the threshold, that it will be successful," she said.

Board Vice President Carla Corona also praised the program.

"I firmly believe in the power of arts education," she said, adding that she is excited to have a program such as Synergy in the Valley.

Board President Charles Hughes called approval of the charter petition a "no brainer" because "it's the law."

He added parents and students should also have the choice.

Lancaster School District Board Clerk Duane Winn objected to the proposed charter school.

"The charter school that you want to approve does nothing more, does nothing, that our schools don't already do," he said.



Speaker Eugene Hernandez also objected to the proposed charter school due to the loss of revenue the District will experience from students who would enroll in the charter program.

"I have faith in God that you will do the right thing," said speaker Dornetha Jacobs, a former teacher for the District, who also addressed the Board.

Frank Navarro, a senior director for advocacy with the California Charter School Association, commended District staff for their assistance with the petition.

"We agree that the petition meets all the legal requirements and we are pleased that the District recognizes the importance of providing families and students with diverse options to meet their unique needs," he said.

Antelope Valley native Alesha Skelton said local schools lack performing arts education.

“Equity programs that would help the marginalized poor white and people of brown and Black color in this area was also lacking,” she said, adding that Synergy is a positive step toward successfully serving marginalized students and their families.

The charter school will serve transitional kindergarten through 12th-grade students. The new school is projected to open this fall and will begin serving transitional kindergarten through fifth-grade students; however, school officials have not yet signed a lease on a site, though they are close.

“We’re seriously looking at two locations at this time,” lead petitioner Derrick Spiva said during the public hearing.

The first site is in Palmdale near Palmdale High School at a church operated by Pastor Corey Saxton, who spoke in favor of the proposed school. They are also looking at a school site at Desert Vineyard Church on Avenue I and Challenger Way.

The charter school anticipates serving 210 students in transitional kindergarten through sixth grade in its first year. The program would add seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th grades in its second year, then 11th grade in its third year and so on. The total enrollment is projected to be 780 students at full growth. The school will offer learners state standards-based learning programs with a curriculum built around music, drama, VR/AR learning and production development, gaming science and development and dance and other performing and fine arts.

Spiva thanked Ahluwalia and the District for its assistance with the petition. A similar petition submitted last year was denied. The charter school was previously affiliated with the iLEAD California; it will now work with Maker Learning Network.

Dawn Evenson, former founder and CEO for iLEAD California, is now executive director of education for the Maker Learning Network, which will work with Synergy to make the school a reality.

“We will meet and exceed all of the conditions that you set for us,” she said. “And remember, this is about choice, not competition.”

The approval comes with eight conditions the petitioners must meet.

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