

ACEL charter families, staff question school's future

By Hannah
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Fresno Station, the historic former railroad depot in downtown Fresno that's been converted to office space, has been the home of ACEL charter high school since 2011. THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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A Fresno charter school that's in the red by nearly \$300,000 is taking desperate steps — including cutting the school's lunch program and slashing several staff positions — to keep its debt from ballooning, moves that have alarmed families and staff and sparked worries about the school's future.

Students, former employees and board members gathered outside [ACEL charter high school](#) in downtown Fresno on Monday morning, protesting deep budget cuts made at a special board meeting last week including a vote to combine several office positions into one and cut two part-time security officers.

Trustee Theresa Davis, who opposed the cuts and was employed as one of the security officers, said last week's decision caused her to resign that night. Board president Ruben Fernandez resigned a few days later, ACEL Principal Stephen Morris said in an interview Monday. Fernandez declined to comment.

"If we had not made the changes we would have had a projected deficit of almost \$500,000. (The board) wanted to keep the cuts away from the education program as much as possible," Morris said.



The alternative high school is located in the old train station near Tulare and H streets. The 117 students who go there learn through projects and community involvement, like a recent partnership with the Fresno Grizzlies to build a garden in Chukchansi Park.

But it has come under hard times in recent years. Enrollment has declined and its negative balance inched past \$200,000 last summer, causing Fresno Unified officials who approved the school's charter to keep a closer watch on it this school year.

Morris said misinformation from a company that provided ACEL with financial projections is also to blame.

"We were told our finances were OK when in fact we were in debt," Morris said. "We finally found a responsible financial consultant who went through our books. We needed to make some serious cuts in order to balance our budget this year."

Former employees say the financial mismanagement should instead be blamed on school officials.

"The director was turning in thousands of dollars in reimbursements. For a school that doesn't have any money it seems like the administration was spending a lot," said Christina Soto, former registrar who was laid off last week.

The turmoil is leaving parents and students concerned about the school's future.

Several students rallied outside the school early Monday morning, calling on school officials for more transparency about how ACEL spends its cash.

Public charter schools are primarily funded through the California Department of Education based on student enrollment. Student body president Victoria Lee said ACEL has also received "plenty of grants to help support us and we don't know where that money is going."

"A lot of students are really frustrated with the school right now," the 18-year-old senior said in an interview, noting many are upset and surprised the school's lunch program was part of the cuts. Nearly 70% of ACEL students live in poverty and rely on the program for their mid-day meal. "They gave us two days' warning which I feel is really bad for students," she said.

Public schools are typically reimbursed for the meals they serve to low-income students, so long as school officials follow health and safety requirements.

Morris said ACEL was notified in the fall that it was out of compliance with health and administrative rules around the same time meal reimbursement checks stopped coming in. ACEL has worked to correct its practices, but is still short \$60,000 in reimbursements, Morris said.

Parents have bigger concerns — like whether the school will be forced to close before their children graduate.

Victoria's mother Dayatra Lee worries ACEL could shutter its doors if Fresno Unified officials vote to revoke the school's charter.

"You have a whole graduating senior class in a pickle," Lee said. "Where do parents send their kids to finish out their high school education? A lot of these kids have college offers."

Morris is working to quell rumors about the school closing — the school's charter isn't up for renewal until 2017, he said.

In a recent meeting with Fresno Unified officials, Morris said, "They did not say to me, 'We're closing the school,' or coming after ACEL."

Fresno Unified board president Cal Johnson said on Monday he was not aware of any plans to close the school.

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