

ACEL charter school in downtown Fresno to close

By Barbara Anderson and Rory Appleton



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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Trustees at ACEL, a charter high school in downtown Fresno, voted Thursday to close the school, citing financial pressures.



The school's three board members came to the decision during an emergency meeting held at 3:30 p.m. The meeting, originally scheduled for 5:30 p.m., reached a fever pitch by 6 p.m. when parents and students hurled accusations and concerned questions at principal Stephen Morris and board members.



Rumblings of financial trouble surfaced earlier this week after word spread that the board had cut the school's lunch program and slashed several staff positions to keep a \$300,000 debt from ballooning.

At that time, Morris downplayed rumors of a closure, saying the charter was not up for renewal until 2017. On Thursday, the decision to close the school left students and parents reeling.

"You have seniors who are absolutely devastated, and rightly so," said Dayatra Lee, parent of an ACEL senior.

Lee said her daughter, Victoria Lee, 18, has college offers but now will have to scramble to find another charter school or independent study to complete the year. “The way the credits are structured, there’s no way she can go back to a Fresno Unified school,” Lee said.

Board member John Minkler explained to the riled-up crowd Thursday night that the loan company used by the school for years had decided to cancel a loan that ACEL needed to cover a \$207,000 deficit.

The deficit was realized after the board met with Jody Thulin. Minkler said Thulin is a professor at the University of Southern California who frequently works with charter schools on funding plans. She took over in January after the board fired its previous financial adviser, who Minkler said had assured the board that they were “on track to break even.” This former adviser had taken over for another adviser who was fired in June.

Minkler said he and Morris scrambled all day Wednesday to try to negotiate with the loan company or find new donors but were unsuccessful.

A handful of students at the meeting accused Morris of misappropriating funds, but Minkler said the board had received no written complaints or evidence of that in his seven years as a member.

Many of the parents in attendance said they were not notified of the school’s dire financial straits.

Alex Beiderman, whose son is a sophomore at ACEL, rose to defend the board, saying that it had regularly discussed these financial problems at past board meetings. (Correction: The original version of this story incorrectly reported that Beiderman is a former ACEL board member; Beiderman said Friday that he is a former board member at another Fresno charter school, Valley Arts and Sciences Academy.)

Minkler agreed with Beiderman, adding that only 10 parents attended the emergency meeting on Feb. 25 and that typically only one or two attend the monthly meetings held every third Thursday.

Theresa Davis, a former board member who was employed as a security officer on campus, resigned last week after opposing the food service and employee cuts. On Thursday, Davis said she resigned because she had no board training on the budget and “didn’t feel comfortable making votes” on items she did not understand.

Davis, who has three children at ACEL, was not in the audience for the board decision to close the school, but said: “I’m just appalled — appalled and sickened it has come to this.”

The charter school, located in the old train station near Tulare and H streets, has 117 students. The school stressed learning through projects and community involvement, such as a recent partnership with the Fresno Grizzlies to build a garden in Chukchansi Park.

Concerns about finances and the school’s future this past summer prompted Fresno Unified officials, who approved the school’s charter, to keep a closer watch on it this school year.

Fresno Unified School District spokesman Jed Chernabaeff said the district was told of the closure about 5:30 p.m. Thursday. Miguel Arias, a district representative, will be at ACEL on Friday to help the school and parents with the transition process.

Chernabaeff said the district oversees ACEL and “requested its financial condition be addressed.”

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