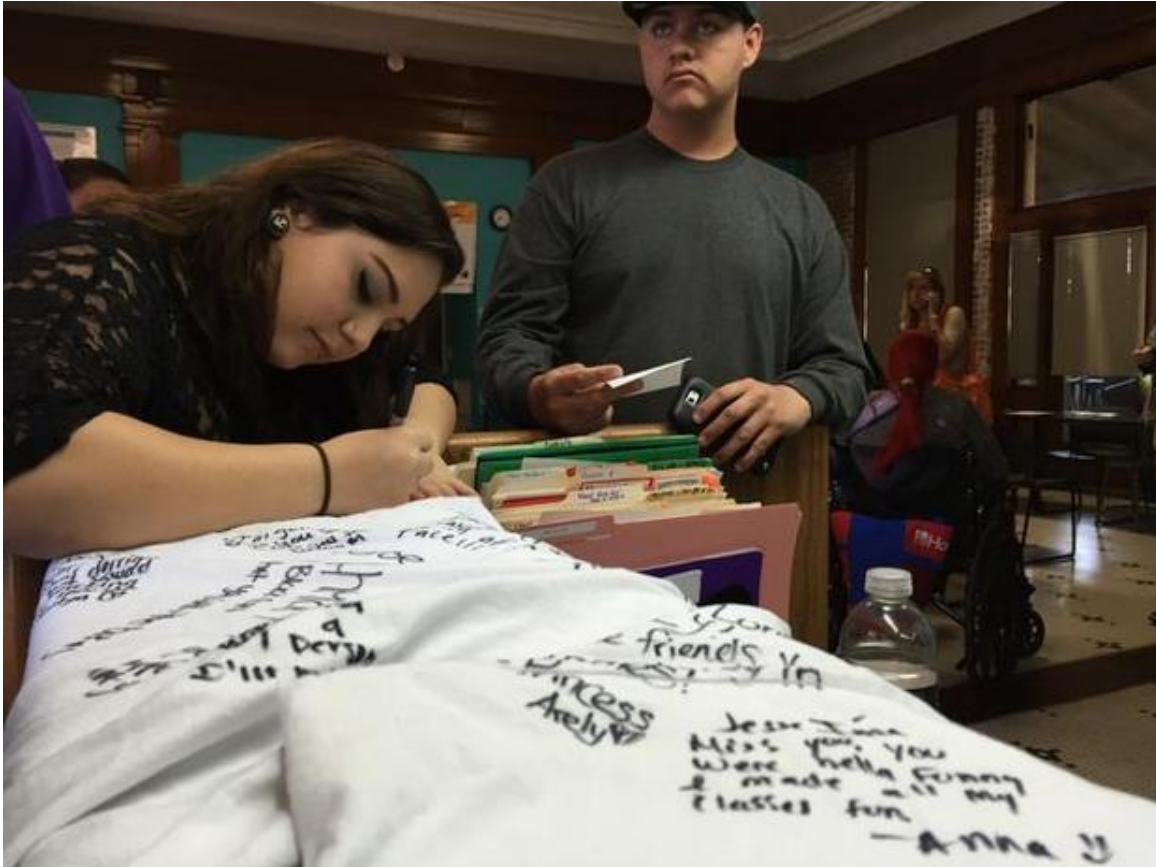


After ACEL Charter School abruptly closes, families want answers

By Hannah Furfaro



ACEL Charter School students line up to sign a keepsake T-shirt for high school senior Jesse Delossantos, right, on Friday morning. Students and families filled the school entryway seeking answers about the school's abrupt closure. HANNAH FURFARO — THE FRESNO BEE

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Black-marker signatures from his best friends loop from front to back and up the sleeves of 17-year-old Jesse Delossantos' white T-shirt. Smiley faces and scrawled messages like "I'm happy to have met you" also decorate his keepsake.

It's Friday morning and Delossantos and his buddies are crowded inside their high school foyer, signing shirts, taking group photos and embracing in hugs as they say goodbye.

It's a routine that should have happened two months from now, when Delossantos and his fellow seniors expected to celebrate prom, then graduation, as ACEL Charter's Class of 2015.

Their caps and gowns have been purchased, but these students won't graduate from ACEL. An untimely vote cast Thursday night by board members has shuttered the school, forcing its 117 students to end the year elsewhere,



maybe at their neighborhood high school, in independent study or at another charter.

“I don’t know if this is my last time seeing my classmates that I’ve been going to school with for four years,” Delossantos said. “We got notified we’re in debt. Two weeks after that, we’re getting shut down.”

The vote to close ACEL charter came after several days of student protests and concern about the school’s tumbling financial situation. Last week, the board agreed to cut the school’s lunch program and several staff positions, moves administrators said at the time would keep ACEL’s debt from swelling to an estimated \$500,000.

The school recently hired a new financial adviser with expertise in school finance, Orange County-based Jody Thulin, to get its books in order. In an interview on Friday, Thulin declined to talk specifics but said the debt wasn’t due to dishonest practices at the school — such as embezzlement or misappropriating money, as some students had alleged at Thursday’s community meeting.

There are “a variety of reasons why they’re in the position they’re in. It was just a bunch of balls in the air and they all collided in the wrong way,” she said.

News this week that the school’s loan company decided to cancel money intended to cover part of its debt sparked the decision to close immediately, administrators said after an emergency board meeting held Thursday afternoon.

Early Friday morning, dozens of upset parents and students crowded into the school, located inside the old train station near Tulare and H streets.

“We didn’t even get a phone call that this was happening,” said Joellen Rogers, grandmother of an ACEL senior. “Shame on you,” she directed at principal Stephen Morris, who was there to take questions.

“I’ll take that shame,” he responded.

Many pressed school administrators for answers: Where’s my son’s transcript? Where can he transfer?

“Where’d all the money go?”

That one came from mother Carmen Cruz. Her son, Martin Herrera, Jr., was a freshman. Cruz said she attended a board meeting in the fall when members discussed ACEL’s deepening debt. At the time, “they kind of made us think they would fix it,” she said.

That didn’t happen, and now Cruz doesn’t know where she’ll send her son.

She’s worried Martin’s graduation requirements at ACEL differ from where he’ll go next. Will he have to take summer classes or attend adult school to catch up? She has no clue.

Each family had its own checklist of questions for school administrators at the makeshift morning meeting.

School officials from outside ACEL, who showed up to help the families transition, took turns answering what they could.

Administrators from Fresno Unified School District, School of Unlimited Learning charter, Carter G. Woodson charter, Clovis Online School and Crescent View charter met with families inside the hall, taking down names and phone numbers and offering families a spot at their schools by Monday.

“It’s very unfortunate, it’s not the end of the world ... but parents need to find a place to enroll,” said SOUL charter principal Mark Wilson.

Other agencies, including the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission, are reaching out to older students who may need to make up credits to graduate. Fresno EOC spokeswoman Sareen Bedoyan said in an interview that

YouthBuild Charter School in southwest Fresno can help students ages 18 to 24 get a diploma.

Several administrators tried to quell worries that ACEL credits won't transfer or seniors won't graduate on time at their new schools.

For the seniors, spending their remaining two months at the same place was all that seemed to matter.

"We've all agreed we want to go to the same school together," said senior Kaela Montez. "And even if we're separated, we plan to have our own grad night and our own prom with each other."

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