

Letter may spur district to drop Metro School support

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Worthington school board members reacted to a letter from the state attorney general by nearly pulling the plug on Metro School participation.

The board discussed Ohio Attorney General Marc Dann's letter to state schools Superinten-

dent Susan Zelman at the end of a regular board meeting Monday, Sept. 10.

Dann told Zelman in a letter dated Sept. 5 that it was his opinion school districts don't have the authority to charge parents tuition to the Metro School, an alternative public high school on Kenny Road that focuses on math, science, engineering and technology.

The school is open to all Franklin County

■ Ohio Attorney General Marc Dann says districts have no authority to charge tuition to students who attend the alternative school; Worthington schools do so for six students.

residents. Four Worthington students are starting their second year in the Metro School and two students began the program this year.

Superintendent Melissa Conrath said the

district's attorneys had told board members they could approve participation but could re-

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quire parents to pay tuition at the Metro School, because it is not a vocational program. The district is required to pay for vocational programs. They approved participation for a student to attend a vocational program at Fort Hayes during the meeting.

"We have a legal opinion that says we can charge tuition, but we've been trumped by the attorney general," Conrath said. "I feel that at least for the four students who started last year, we cannot just yank them out of the program. We should continue their participation at least this year."

"I don't feel any obligation to these students," said board member David Bressman. "We agreed to participation in this program only because it didn't cost our district a dime. I would make a motion tonight to withdraw our support from the Metro School."

Board members agreed last year that district students could participate in the

school, but the district would not pay even a portion of the tuition, which was \$5,800 annually last year and is around \$6,200 this year.

Conrath said the consortium that created the Metro School stated the tuition could be set by the Metro School itself.

"The district will have no control over the cost of this program escalating," she said.

Two other districts, Dublin and Grandview Heights, also require parents to pay Metro School tuition, although Dublin pays half of the tuition and Grandview pays \$1,500 for each student.

"We were quite clear when we agreed to Metro School participation that we thought we could provide much of the same content that is taught at the Metro School at our own high schools," Board President Bob Horton said.

"We could not have been clearer on this last year," said board member Marc Schare. "This is not just state dollars at stake - this is local tax dollars, paid by the neighbors of

the kids picked for the Metro School. We are not allowed to charge the parents tuition, but we're allowed to charge their neighbors."

Board member Charlie Wilson agreed with Horton, but wanted to wait on a motion that could end participation in the program.

"For us to make a motion to end participation at this time for those six kids would not give them or their parents the opportunity to address the board on this subject," he said.

Bressman worried about the potential cost of Dann's opinion.

"If Marc Dann is right, we may either have to give the tuition money back, or parents could sue us for the money," he said. "We are taking a roll of the dice for a few kids, and may be accepting a future six-figure obligation. We have a responsibility to fund vocational programs, but the Metro School is beyond what I want to fund for public education."

Board Vice President Jennifer Best also wanted to wait

on the motion.

"I'm OK with no more participation in the future, but what happens to these kids if we pass this motion tonight?" she said.

Director of Teaching and Learning Jennifer Wene asked board members for an opportunity to communicate their concerns to the Metro School.

"We have signed contracts by all six of these parents," she said. "I would caution the board to move a little more slowly so that we can have some communication with the Metro School and the parents."

Conrath told the board she could "explore a resolution" within the next few days, then ask for a special meeting.

"We have to look at the obligation we have to these students and the contracts we signed," she said.

"We were upfront with these folks about paying tuition," Bressman said. "The fact the attorney general made his opinion known when he did is the problem, and the parents should be talking to him. I'm willing to wait on the motion, but if there is not a decision that we are held harmless on this tuition, then I want to make the motion in two weeks."

The next board meeting is set for 7:30 p.m. Sept. 24 at the Worthington Education Center, 200 E. Wilson Bridge Road.

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