

Charter school adds hundreds of students, despite budget cap

Haidee V Eugenio and Steve Limtiaco, Pacific Daily News Published 11:24 a.m. ChT Sept. 1, 2017 | Updated 5:22 p.m. ChT Sept. 1, 2017



(Photo: Haidee Eugenio/PDN)

The student population at the island's largest charter school — Guahan Academy Charter School — has increased significantly since last school year, from 740 students to 1,015, school officials reported during Thursday's meeting of the Guam Academy Charter Schools Council.

But the fiscal 2018 budget bill, approved by lawmakers this week, gives Guahan Academy only enough funding to support the same number of students as last school year — 740. That means the school cannot be paid for the additional 275 students who enrolled for the new school year unless the budget is changed.

Carlo Branch, chief of staff for legislative budget committee chairman Speaker Benjamin Cruz, said there always have been caps on enrollment for charter schools, so the 2018 cap, which is the same as the cap in the 2017 budget, should not come as an unfair surprise.

Since the money for charter schools comes from the Department of Education's overall budget, enrollment caps are important so DOE knows what the total financial impact will be, Branch said. The budget allows charter schools to be compensated \$6,500 for each student enrolled.

Branch said he and Sen. Régine Biscoe Lee, D-Tamuning, met with charter school officials Friday morning to discuss the issue, but said no commitments were made. Branch noted that the governor has until Sept. 11 to act on the budget bill, so the question of funding for next fiscal year still is up in the air.

(story continues below)

Guahan Academy board Chairwoman Fe Valencia-Ovalles said the cap is unfair because lawmakers were given the charter school's proposed budget, noting increased enrollment, in January of this year. It had been approved by the council and transmitted by DOE, she said. Nothing was mentioned about a cap until a couple of days ago, she said.

"Everything is misquoted, like we did it on our own," she said.

Valencia-Ovalles said the plan at this time is to show lawmakers and the administration a mistake has been made.

"I'm begging our Legislature and the governor's office to hear us and look at all our documents," she said.

She said it also doesn't make sense, financially, to remove children from the charter school and move them to the public schools because the charter school educates each student at a lower cost. She said the school teaches students, feeds them and gives them textbooks at a cost of \$6,500 per student, compared to the \$7,000 or \$8,000 per student in the public schools.

Kicking 275 students out of the charter school would only increase the budget shortfall for the public schools, she said.

Branch said charter school officials during Friday's meeting said they submitted a higher enrollment request to the charter school council, which approved it. But Branch said lawmakers, through the budget law, ultimately determine maximum charter school enrollment, and not the council.

"If they enrolled students for this school year beyond the amount authorized by law, then they enrolled those amounts outside of the law," Branch said.

Guahan Academy's middle and high schools classes are scheduled to begin Sept. 5, about a week after the original date of Aug. 30, because of water problems at the campus. Elementary school classes started on time, and the charter school's first pre-kindergarten classes started Aug. 31.

Branch said tough choices had to be made with respect to funding government operations, and most agencies will receive the same funding as last year. DOE asked for more, but lawmakers had to say no, Branch said.

"We don't want to say no to charter schools, but we don't want to say no to DOE either," Branch said.

The budget bill also caps enrollment for the other active charter school, the iLearn Academy Charter School, at 500 students.

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New schools proposed

During Thursday's council meeting, council members discussed opening two more charter schools on Guam — the "Science is Fun and Awesome Learning Academy," at Tiyan, and the "Career Tech High Academy," in Agat.

The council has 45 days from receipt of application to begin public hearings, and then another 60 days after that to either approve or deny the applications for the new schools.

The council, which has oversight of all charter schools on Guam, received the two applications during the reconstituted council's first meeting Thursday.

If and when approved, the new charter schools would open for school year 2018-2019, council members said.

Former Gov. Felix Camacho and pastor Steve McManus, both present at the council meeting, are leading the group applying for the new Career Tech High Academy.

Anthony J. Sunga, founder and director of the Science is Fun and Awesome Learning Academy, said it would be a middle school, located beside the Guam Department of Education offices at Tiyan.

They expect to have 350 students during the first year, 500 during the second year, and then 800 the third year.

"SIFA, Science is Fun and Awesome, really stems from Carl Sagan's words, we do science, and in that process, we learn and improve our lives. The word science is not a subject, it's actually an action word. So that's the basis of our school, is we're going to be doing action and my model for our entire school is intelligence inspired," Sunga said.

Guahan Academy

The council, led by newly elected chairwoman Amanda Blas, also asked the island's first charter school, Guahan Academy Charter School, about its delayed class opening for school year 2017-2018.

Guahan Academy's middle and high schools will begin classes on Sept. 5, about a week after the original date of Aug. 30. Elementary school students began classes on time. The charter school's first pre-kindergarten classes started August 31.

Guahan Academy board chairwoman Fe Valencia-Ovalles and board treasurer Victor Perez told the council that the delay was caused by low water pressure that also shut down Tiyan High School and other facilities in the area.

They said the delay was also partly because of additional preparations to relocate the middle and high schools to a new location also at Tiyan, the site of the former Revenue and Taxation Building and warehouse, Perez and Valencia-Ovalles said.

Superintendent Jon Fernandez, an automatic member of the council, along with Blas, asked Guahan Academy officials about the charter school's increased student enrollment this school year, its instructional days, and status of its plan to build a new campus in Barrigada.

Guahan Academy officials said the planned construction of a new campus in Barrigada has been halted because the cost of construction has skyrocketed about 1,000 times, given the rejection of foreign labor under H-2B visa program petitions. They said they continue to raise funds for the new campus.

Guahan Academy's website says they have 178 instructional days, but Valencia-Ovalles said the school will submit the number to the council later, along with other information to show the school's performance and compliance.

Guahan Academy's student population has grown to more than 1,000, from 740 last school year, which the school officials said was authorized by the previous council.

Guam general fund subsidy to charter schools is \$6,500 per student, council officials said.

Valencia-Ovalles said the increased student population speaks of the school's academic performance. She told council members that Guahan Academy students' assessment results went "beyond the national average."

The charter school, however, has yet to release its latest student assessment results. Guam DOE also has yet to release the results of its latest public school student assessments. One other existing charter school is iLearn Academy Charter School.

The council will hold a series of work sessions to familiarize themselves with laws, policies and procedures, and will be seeking formal opinion from the Office of the Attorney General on issues such as clarification on the counting of charter schools, and whether the two new applications' previous filings under a previous council that did not have a quorum are now considered moot.

Ansito Walter, another council member along with Yuka Oguma and Francis Toves, said the council should help charter schools succeed.

"If they succeed, we succeed," Walter said.

Reporter Haidee Eugenio covers Guam's Catholic church issues, education and more. Follow her on Twitter [@haidee_eugenio](https://twitter.com/haidee_eugenio) (https://twitter.com/haidee_eugenio). Follow Pacific Daily News on Facebook/GuamPDN (<http://www.facebook.com/guampdn/>) and Instagram [@guampdn](http://instagram.com/GuamPDN) (<http://instagram.com/GuamPDN>).

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