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Charter school still lacks clearances

Manny Cruz | The Guam Daily Post 6 hrs ago



WORKING SESSION: Guam Department of Education Superintendent Jon Fernandez speaks to The Guam Daily Post during a working session of the Guam Academy Charter Schools Council on Wednesday. "My concern is: We need to find out about what's happening — and not at the last minute," Fernandez said. David Castro/The Guam Daily Post

"These kids need to get their school year started, but, at the same time, we have to hold the charter school to the same standards as any other school."

- Vincent Leon Guerrero, special assistant to the governor

Guahan Academy Charter School still lacked health and safety clearances from two agencies and won't be able to reopen today after being told to vacate its middle and high school campus almost a week ago.

According to Vincent Leon Guerrero, a special assistant to the governor, the charter school, as of press time, was lacking clearances from the Department of Public Health and Social Services and the Department of Public Works.

GACS administrators at a work session yesterday said they were lacking clearances only from the fire department. Private contractor Phoenix Pacific worked Wednesday to bring the campus up to Guam Fire Department standards.

Board liaison Marilyn Manibusan anticipated the work would be completed, to allow the charter school to resume classes.

Middle and high school classes started on Sept. 5, without an occupancy permit by the Department of Public Works, a day before the school was told to vacate by the fire department.

"These kids need to get their school year started, but at the same time, we have to hold the charter school to the same standards as any other school," Leon Guerrero said. "Every GovGuam agency is trying to accommodate them."

Guam Department of Education Superintendent Jon Fernandez was hopeful, but less optimistic, about the school opening this week while the status of GACS' inspections and permits remained up in the air.

"My concern is: We need to inform the parents about what's happening — and not at the last minute. Once they get some clarity about when they're opening, we want to make sure that's communicated to the general public," Fernandez said.

GACS council members also responded to concerns about the number of students enrolled this school year exceeding a 740-student cap established in in the proposed fiscal 2018 budget bill.

“As far as we’re concerned, the cap was only for the amount of money per enrollee, not the amount of students we could enroll,” Manibusan stated. “We submitted our budget eight months ago and no one ever called on us to defend it.”

Last month, over 1,000 students were enrolled in GACS. But after the setbacks the Tiyan school has faced, that number has decreased to 983.

The school had planned to receive funding for 1,015 students; and the reimbursements also would have covered various projects, according to GACS Chairwoman Fe Valencia-Ovalles.

Fernandez said the school could open even though it exceeds the 740-student cap, noting that, as a charter school, it can receive additional funds from sources other than GovGuam. Funds for the charter school are derived from Guam DOE.

“They clearly have been depending on funding to support 1,015 students, not just to operate as a school, but for renovations and expansions. It seems like they’ve also entered into financing agreements that also depend on that level of financing. My main concern is that the budget passed by the Legislature falls short of what they’ve anticipated and pledged to support other financial agreements,” Fernandez said. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to get them more funding. So, at the end of the day they’re going to have to operate with what they have.”

School may need to disenroll 240 students

In order to operate within budget, that may including disenrolling over 240 students to meet the student cap.

“If that’s what’s going to happen, then they’ll need to let us know by Oct. 1, so we can work with DOE administrators to provide a smooth transition for these kids and their families,” Fernandez said.

But the school also can receive donations, accept grants and enter into loan agreements.

Manibusan said the charter school already has detailed nine makeup days out of what was 11 missed instructional days.

An update posted to the charter school's Facebook page later yesterday stated classes would resume on Sept. 18.