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OUSD made wrong decision to close American Indian charter schools

By Andrew J. Coulson, Oakland Tribune My Word

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The Oakland school board has voted 4-3 to shutter three of the highest-performing schools in the state: the American Indian Model charter schools. The decision was based on alleged fiscal improprieties by Ben Chavis, former head of the schools and the man who raised them to educational greatness. It was the wrong decision.

I've visited the AIM schools several times, interviewed students, staff and graduates, conducted regression studies of the performance of California's charter schools, and gotten to know Chavis a little. Last December, I testified before a U.S. Senate committee on how AIM schools have created an island of calm and learning in a sea of scholastic dysfunction.

In a 2011 study, I found that AIM is the highest-performing charter school network in the state, by a wide margin. That is after controlling for student characteristics and schoolwide peer effects.

Low-income black and Hispanic AIM students actually outperform the statewide averages for wealthier whites and Asians. AIM even outperforms Lowell, one of San Francisco's most respected and academically selective high schools.

One young man who attended the original American Indian Public Charter School before Chavis' time witnessed its transformation firsthand. Before Chavis' arrival, he told me the school was filthy, failing and dangerous. With visible anguish, he described how students -- middle school students -- had sex on school grounds. That ended, and a safe, studious environment began under Chavis.

AIPCS has no metal detectors, school police, expulsions, or out-of-school suspensions. Disruptive students don't get less school, they get more: after-school detentions and Saturday classes -- both of which are used as instructional time.

The middle-school environment is strict, but by the time students reach high school, they have excellent study habits and show respect for their peers, their teachers, and themselves.

These schools aren't for everyone. No single approach ever could be.

The pre-Chavis middle-schooler mentioned above thrived under the new environment, attended the AIM high school created on the same campus and ultimately graduated from Dartmouth.

AIM's overwhelmingly low-income and minority graduates regularly attend colleges such as UC Berkeley, Stanford and MIT. The college acceptance rate is 100 percent.

Yet the board voted to close them because Chavis -- now retired -- is accused of fiscal improprieties. Not knowing the facts behind these accusations, I can only assess the big picture: Chavis raised AIM schools to a level of excellence never before seen in the city despite receiving less funding per pupil than district schools.

AIM teachers are dedicated and well paid. Graduates are not only accepted into good colleges, they are equipped to succeed there.

By contrast, OUSD spends more per pupil, has far lower test scores and college acceptance rates, more dangerous classrooms, and is steadily losing students as a result.

It would be a tragedy to deny current and future generations the opportunity to attend these schools.

Andrew J. Coulson directs the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom in Washington, D.C., and is author of the study: "The Other Lottery: Are Philanthropists Backing the Best Charter Schools?"