

Urban League Academy plans to keep school open

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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The Urban League Academy finds itself like most of the students it seeks to educate – fighting against the odds.

Nearly a month ago the Urban League Academy (ULA), a contract alternative school operated by the Minneapolis Urban League (MUL) and through the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), was dealt a harsh blow when a divided district's board voted to renew the school's contract for just one year and with several new conditions. And while the MUL board and ULA faculty and staff say they have no problem being held accountable, they fear the new measurable goals do not take into account the students' personal and academic situations. Some wondered if the same standards are being used to measure the district's traditional schools where African-American students are graduating at just 43 percent.

"Thirteen percent of our kids are homeless, we have kids who can't get to school regularly because of transportation issues, we have kids who have been incarcerated, we have kids who have bounced around to four or five schools, so we have challenges," said Ron Simmons, school director at ULA. "We have needs we need to fill. I believe we can meet all of (the district's) goals, but we need help."

According to Simmons, ULA needs a fulltime social worker to assist the nearly 30 percent of students with mental health issues, a physical education instructor – as required by the state – and a fulltime special education instructor. Simmons said to fill all the needs of the ULA the total costs would come in at \$190,000.

"We need the district to step up – we need others to step up too, but we all need to stand up to the district to see to it that it give us the resources we need," said Scott Gray, CEO of the Minneapolis Urban League. "These are the district's kids, so we shouldn't be getting less than half the resources as other schools."

Gray said the district spends about \$20,000 per student on a child at a traditional high school, but students at ULA only get about \$7,500 in resources. Gray said even with the limited funds, he wonders if other traditional district high schools are doing any better at educating children of color, in particular African-Americans. Gray said he has sent numerous requests to MPS to compare student proficiency rates, but his requests have fallen on deaf ears. Insight News has also made a similar request, but the district has yet to provide such data.

"It's not in the district's best interest to save schools like the Urban League Academy," said Bill English, an interested citizen who attended a recent meeting detailing the ULA's plans to meet the MPS' new requirements. "(The MPS board) would not like to see schools like this and charter schools succeed. It's going to take the outrage of the community to have the same standards and resources for African-American kids and poor white kids as any other student."

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Gray said regardless of the odds, the Minneapolis Urban League and the Urban League Academy are up for the fight.

"We as the Urban League don't back down from a challenge," said Gray. "We cannot back away from our students. We need to make sure they have every opportunity to succeed. We want to be seen as a true partner (with MPS) and I don't know that we've been seen as a partner in this process of educating our students."