

Students at Leadership and Entrepreneurship Charter high defend 'home' from possible closure

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KIMBERLY MELTON/THE

OREGONIANSarah Moody and William Hunter prepare to watch movies during the Leadership and Entrepreneurship Charter High School's recent lock-in. Students put signs showing their affection for the school on their lockers.

Emily Kipnis leaves her house about 6 a.m. on school days. She takes two buses from her Beaverton neighborhood and arrives 90 minutes later at the front door of Leadership and Entrepreneurship Charter High School near 20th and East Burnside.

At LEP High, she feels accepted. For the first time, she's passing all her classes.

The 15-year-old says the three hours she spends traveling are worth the effort.

"This school has been life-changing," Kipnis says. "I'm a different person now than when I came. All schools say they want you to succeed. Here, they mean it. You feel it."

Kipnis is one of more than 60 students who locked themselves in the school overnight last week in protest of LEP High's possible closure.

Next week, the Portland School Board will decide whether to renew its contract with LEP High.

Superintendent Carole Smith and her staff say the school is financially unstable.

The kids say their school and community are worth saving.

And at this lock-in, pizza and movies take a back seat, and the kids grab the initiative.

In one room, students debate abortion and medical marijuana. In another workshop, they discuss civil disobedience and freedom of speech. Down the hall, students sit in a large circle, sharing their disappointment, fear and anger.

They toss around a scruffy white teddy bear, which gives the holder permission to talk.

They say the school gives them that extra push they need to think of themselves as successful college-goers, creative and bright.

"I wasn't interested in going to college," Felicia Mohr says. "I wasn't going to my classes. But the teachers here inspired me a lot. I can be the first person in my family to go to college."

Though she spent a year at Madison High, she had to repeat her freshman year. In the three years she's been at LEP, Mohr has changed her views on what's possible. She'd never worked before she took part in the school's mandatory internship program. But after only a few days working at a nearby art gallery, the shy 17-year-old called the experience "amazing."

Sophomore April Buerkle said she didn't understand why the school was being treated differently from others in the district.

"They don't close down their schools for financial reasons," she said. "And there, kids are skipping and dropping out. They give them more money to get better. Here, we take kids from the bottom, who live poverty, and give them hope."

Sarah Moody, 16, found herself in a tough spot before she came to LEP High. As a student at Roosevelt High, she was preparing to be initiated into a gang. Her mom was determined to send her to Texas to get a new start away from negative influences.

One day she saw a sign for LEP Charter High School. She tells the story laughing, but pauses as she talks about the school's impact on her life.

"Here, they care about my education," Moody says. "They don't let you give up."

Elijah Townsend, one of the students who came up with the idea of the lock-in, says the school has helped him make better decisions.

"I'm giving effort to do work," says the freshman, who lives in Northeast Portland. "I'm involved after school. There's a sense of love, family. You don't get that at other schools."

Connor Morales left Lincoln High School last year although the school is known for its variety of classes and programs. The 16-year-old says he wasn't doing well in classes because he felt lost.

"It's easy to be lost in the shuffle and go unnoticed at the big public schools," Morales says. "It's easy to get off track. Here, if they see us start to slip, they put us back on track."

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LEP's track record

What: Leadership and Entrepreneurship Charter High School

Mission: Serve a diverse group of students, prepare them for college and entrepreneurship through relevant curriculum, internships and service learning.

Setup: Students must earn a C or better to pass classes. The school doesn't practice social promotion, so students cannot move to the next grade level until they earn a minimum number of credits. The school year is longer than in Portland, and the graduation requirement is 27 credits, higher than district and state standards.

Charter: The school's three-year charter was approved by Portland Public Schools in 2006. The school opened that fall.

Enrollment: About 240 students from 20 high schools.

Demographics

45 percent white

25 percent African American

20 percent Hispanic

5 percent Asian American

5 percent Native American

Other numbers

65 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches

22 percent say they have dropped out or kicked out of school before coming to LEP High

18 percent of students qualify for special education services

14 percent say they have been homeless at least once in their lives

The issue: The school's charter expires in June. District staff and the superintendent say the charter should not be renewed.

District position: The school ended last year in a deficit and isn't financially stable this school year, putting students' education in jeopardy.

LEP High staff and board position: When school began this fall, last year's deficit had been cleared. Under-enrollment and state budget cuts hit the school harder than expected. School supporters are committed to more fundraising and have raised nearly \$15,000 in the past two weeks. In the long term, staff says the district should pass along the full amount of state dollars intended for students in poverty and foster care. That would allow the school to serve students better and provide more stability.

What's next: The school hopes to raise enough cash to make sure they'll finish this school year in solid financial position. Students are leading a campaign to raise \$100,000.

The Portland School Board's charter committee has recommended the school not be renewed. The full board votes Monday at a regular school board meeting.

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More about the school: www.lephigh.org

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