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Bid for Valley Charter School Draws Scrutiny

By DUKE HELFAND
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A proposed charter school in the east San Fernando Valley is receiving close scrutiny from Los Angeles Unified School District officials who are concerned about the organizer's ties to the Church of Scientology and are questioning whether church teachings would appear in the new public school.

Advocates of the Northwest Charter School acknowledge that they want to employ teaching methods developed by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard, but say his system emphasizes common-sense strategies appropriate for a public school setting and children of any religion.

After hearing of a possible Scientology link, however, school board President Julie Korenstein placed the charter school proposal on the agenda of the board's closed-door session for discussion Monday. She and other board members expressed concern that the Hubbard materials could violate the separation of church and state.

"We cannot turn our public school students and monies into a religious institution," said board member David Tokofsky. "It's a problem on a fundamental constitutional level."

Scientology was founded by Hubbard in the early 1950s as a movement combining philosophy, modern psychoanalysis and Eastern religion into a system aimed at self-improvement. Criticized as a cult unforgiving of defectors and a front for a profit-driven business,

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the controversial movement received official status as a tax-exempt religion in 1993 from the Internal Revenue Service.

Its potential ties to the proposed Northwest Charter School are especially sensitive because under state law, charter schools are allowed to operate outside many rules that constrain curriculum and budgets, even though they usually receive their state funding through their sponsoring school districts.

The author of the Northwest Charter School petition, Los Angeles school district special education teacher Linda Smith, insisted that the teaching approach she wants to employ—known as Applied Scholastics—is nonsectarian.

Smith, who said she has been a Scientologist for 16 years, maintained that the books are drawn from Hubbard's educational "technology" and not his religious tenets.

"Scientology is a religion. This is Hubbard Study Technology. It has nothing to do with religion," said Smith in an interview at Applied Scholastics' central office in Hollywood, just down the street from the Church of Scientology's headquarters. "It's totally above board."

Applied Scholastics president Ian Lyons said the organization is an "independent, nonprofit corporation" separate from the church, with its own board of directors. However, he acknowledged that Bridge Publications, which prints Applied Scholastics materials, also produces literature for the Church of Scientology.



IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times

Linda Smith, who would be school's principal, wants to employ teaching approach based on Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard's teachings.

Under Smith's charter school proposal, about 100 students would attend kindergarten through grade 8 on a new campus to be established in the Sunland-Tujunga area; a site has yet to be secured.

There are now 15 charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified system, almost all of them on pre-existing district campuses.

Smith, 45, would be the principal of her proposed school, and most of her students would come from private schools after their parents

heard about her plans through "word of mouth," according to her written proposal and interviews.

The curriculum would include standard texts, as well as Hubbard's Applied Scholastics, which Smith said helps bolster student achievement by addressing three "barriers" to learning: Students use dictionaries to look up words they do not understand, they apply their lessons to real life, and they master each rung of material to obtain a thorough understanding of a subject.

Smith said she has been using
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the methods informally for two decades as a special education teacher, including the last six years at Esperanza Elementary School in downtown Los Angeles.

Lyons, who sat in on the interview, said that other schools in the district use the method, as do schools elsewhere in the state and around the country. Applied Scholastics maintains its own site on the Internet.

"I have found an incredible tool," said Smith. "I use it because it works."

Still, 1st Amendment experts say that, regardless of any merits, the Hubbard materials present the school district with troubling constitutional and legal issues.

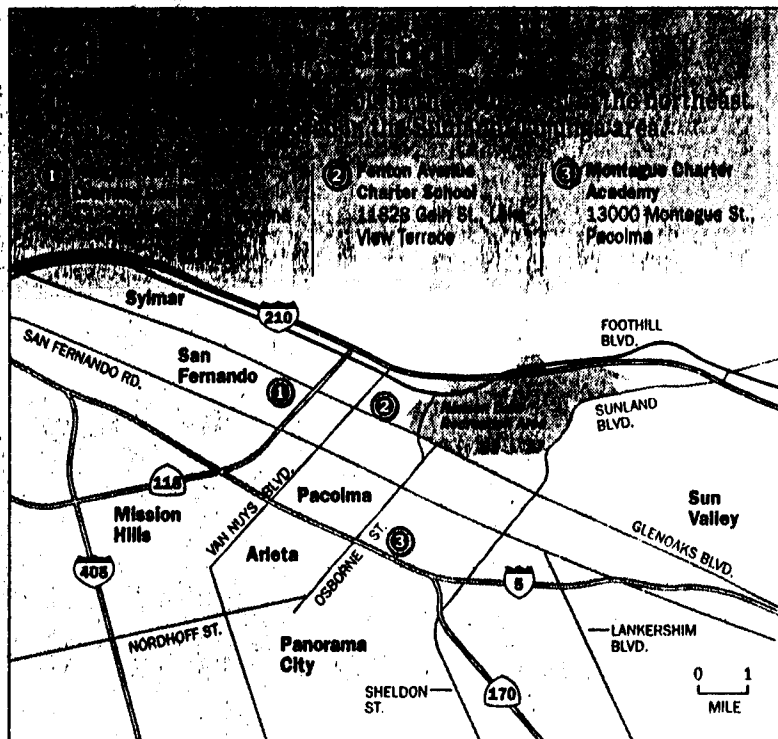
"I think that the [district] ought to do everything within its power to ensure that this is not a subterfuge for teaching about the Scientology religion," said Doug Mirell, a 1st Amendment specialist and American Civil Liberties Union board member. "The concern is certainly a legitimate one, and one the school district ought to take seriously."

The charter school controversy is not the first time that Smith has come to the attention of school district officials for her Scientology ties, as Smith acknowledged Wednesday.

Smith said she was reprimanded by her principal at Esperanza in early 1995 after she wrote a letter on school district stationery seeking advice on the legality of purchasing Hubbard materials for her students.

Smith defended her actions, saying her only mistake was using the school letterhead.

Her principal at Esperanza, Rowena Lagrosa, praised Smith's teaching skills in a June 9 letter of recommendation. "Miss Smith has done a remarkable job of individualizing the instructional pro-



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gram of her students," Lagrosa wrote. "Additionally Miss Smith has worked toward building a community of learners within her room who are respectful and caring toward one another."

When Smith made her pitch for the Northwest Charter School before the Board of Education on Monday, she did not mention her involvement with Applied Scholastics or Scientology, nor did her 62-page charter school proposal.

Smith said she did not mention the details because she has yet to be licensed by Applied Scholastics to use the Hubbard materials, and because Northwest's "curriculum committee" ultimately would have to decide what to teach in the school.

Smith's proposal drew mixed reactions from the board. Some members called it vague, while others applauded her novel teach-

ing ideas, which include individualized plans of instruction for students and a "quality control department" in which each student must demonstrate knowledge of a given lesson before he or she can advance to new material.

Proponents of the charter school said that Smith is being treated unfairly. They say the school would serve a diverse population, including the children of Scientologists, Jews, Catholics and others.

"Religion has nothing to do with a public school," said Evelyn Hoy of a La Crescenta. The mother of four said she is a Methodist and her husband is a Roman Catholic and they want to send their children to Smith's school. "There is no connection between church and state here."