Charter school community rallies for inclusion in scholarship program
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About a dozen elementary-age children chanted in union Wednesday afternoon at the corner of Park Place and Washington Avenue in Point Richmond, within shouting distance of Mayor Tom Butt’s office.

And shout they did.

“We want to go to college! Help us make our dreams come true!” they called out. Parents, students and teachers from Richmond-area charter schools are demanding that the mayor and other councilmembers extend eligibility for a $35 million college scholarship program to charter school students as well as public school students.

Brian Buttacavoli, an English and journalism teacher at Making Waves Academy, said opportunities like the scholarship, known as the “Richmond Promise,” should be open to all students in Richmond.

“Why should my students be penalized just because they are seeking different educational opportunities from different public schools?” Buttacavoli said. “My students in every way, shape and form are community members of Richmond.”

City council approved an outline for the Richmond Promise on September 29. They will take up the issues of who is eligible and how much money college-going kids would expect to receive within the next two months, the mayor’s office said. The program is financed by a grant from Chevron Corp.

Parents, students and teachers from Richmond-area charter schools have been vocalizing their concerns over the last few months. Initial discussions in the spring about the scholarship program did not make it clear if students attending charter schools will be included alongside their peers attending public schools in West Contra Costa County.

At Wednesday’s protest, Alondra Reyes, a 12th grader at Leadership Public Schools, carried a large batch of blue and red balloons. Each balloon represented 10 kids who would be excluded from the Richmond Promise if charter school students were not eligible. Mayor Butt released a statement in response to Wednesday afternoon’s demonstration saying he is open to including Richmond students attending charter schools into Richmond Promise. However, he said he does not support launching it as a pilot program at just one high school as some other councilmembers do.

“That, I will not support because I believe that is not the intent of [the] Promise Program and is counter to our efforts to create a college-going community,” Butt said. “Like you, I believe that every student should have the opportunity to access higher education.”

Next week, the city manager’s office is scheduled to meet with charter and private school administrators to discuss their concerns and gather necessary data from the schools to create a final plan for the Richmond Promise.

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For Armando Garibay, the scholarship would be an opportunity to help his children, Melissa and Armando Jr., go to college and establish a good career. “I want better lives for my kids,” he said.

Patricia Ornelas, a 12th grader at Making Waves Academy, said she should not be denied this opportunity just because she attends a charter school.

“I live in Richmond,” she said, addressing the crowd. “I have led two community projects to make this place better and I hope it contributes to my success just as I hope to contribute to it.”

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