

CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Summary

Charter schools are public schools of choice that are free from many of the regulations that apply to non-charter public schools. They receive state funding and must follow state rules on hiring credentialed teachers and testing pupil performance but may choose their own teaching material and curriculum. A charter school is characterized by a mix of oversight and genuine autonomy with a strong involvement of teachers and parents in governance.

A successful charter school needs a clear educational vision specified in the “charter” establishing the school. It needs committed students, parents and staff. The sixteen charter schools in Sonoma County are a crucial part of public education in this county as they enlarge the educational choices available.

Reason for Investigation

In the fall of 2002, a considerable debate about charter schools in Sonoma County was chronicled in the local media. Opinions varied from asserting that charter schools were the best hope of public education to alleging that charter schools were damaging education by initiating competitive struggles between school districts. Charter schools were accused of fragmenting the local public school system. Consequently, the 2002-2003 Sonoma County Grand Jury initiated an investigation of charter schools in the county hoping to clarify this complex subject.

Background

In 1992 California defined the goals of charter schools and the regulatory oversight they required in the Charter Schools Acts, SB1448 (Hart). These goals include:

- “special emphasis on the academically low achieving”
- “the use of different and innovative teaching methods”
- “performance-based accountability systems”
- “vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools”

Prior to 1992, there was a concern that since charter schools would have an enriched curriculum, the emphasis would be on the gifted student. To counter that, the Charter Schools Act of 1992 called for special emphasis on academically low-achievers.

The goal of “performance-based” accountability systems was a call to move away from reliance on traditional paper-and-pencil tests such as STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting) to an assessment of the students’ creative work.

There are charter schools in thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia, and those students make up 1.4% of public school students. There are 436 charter schools in California with charter school students making up 2.5% of public school students in the

state. At the county level there are 16 charter schools, and 4.6% of the county's public school students are in charter schools.

These are Sonoma County's charter schools:

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| • Pathways | Sebastopol Independent |
| • Live Oak | Sonoma |
| • Mary Collins | Orchard View |
| • Petaluma | Sun Ridge |
| • Piner-Olivet | Russian River |
| • Kid Street | Santa Rosa |
| • Cali Calmecac Immersion | Village |
| • Roseland Accelerated Middle | Woodland Star |

School enrollments vary from 33 to 900. The oldest charter school in the county is Sonoma Charter (1994). Four schools, Pathways, Russian River, Sun Ridge and Mary Collins began in 2002. No new charter schools will open in 2003. The districts of Rincon Valley Union and Santa Rosa both plan to start a charter school in 2004. Two school districts, Roseland and Piner-Olivet, are planning charter high schools in 2005.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury:

1. Interviewed the following persons:
 - Charter School Consultant
 - General Counsel for School and College Legal Service
 - Superintendent of Schools, Sonoma County
 - Two Directors of Charter Schools
 - Superintendent of a Charter School
 - Two Sonoma County Office of Education Staff Members
 - Member of the School Board, Santa Rosa Board of Education.

2. Reviewed the following documents:
 - Informational letters from sixteen Sonoma County Charter Schools.
 - Letter from the Superintendent of Schools, Sonoma County
 - Letter from a Charter School Consultant
 - Letter from the General Counsel, School and College Legal Services.
 - Charter Schools Act of 1992
 - Various newspaper articles.

3. Attended:
 - Five School Board Meetings
 - Two Sonoma County Charter Schools.

Findings

F1. With a few notable exceptions, charter schools have avoided the higher costs associated with special education students, while still receiving the same funding per

student as the general population. This shifts an ever-increasing burden onto non-charter schools.

F2. Charter schools are not accredited at the present time. In 2002 the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC) announced that they were going to champion a system of accreditation for charter schools. A pilot program, in conjunction with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), has been put in place.

F3. Some of the leaders of Sonoma County's charter schools have expressed opinions against large, separate middle schools because the transition from elementary to middle school may be too difficult for some students. By 2004 seven of the county charter schools will have middle school grades added to their elementary schools.

F4. The Charter Schools Act of 1992 calls for vigorous competition within the public school system by means of the challenge of charter schools. The reasoning is that academic competition can lead to reform. As an example, Santa Rosa city schools are beginning accelerated courses in science, English and social studies in one of their middle schools as a response to competition from charter schools planned by the Rincon Valley Union School District.

F5. Educators in Sonoma County are trying to abandon the academic competitive model of charter versus traditional public schools and are moving toward mutual cooperation in public education. Some charter schools are now meeting with non-charter schools to share their innovative teaching methods.

F6. Certain Sonoma County charter schools are fulfilling specific educational niches. These special programs include teaching children from families in crisis, immersing children in foreign language instruction, running an international accelerated program (International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program), coordinating individualized instruction for home-schooled children, and using the Waldorf methods to integrate core academics with the creative and performing arts.

F7. Committed parental involvement is part of the charter school contract. Parents must sign a commitment agreement with the school to enroll their child. This strong interaction of parents with the teachers and staff of the school has been a constant of the charter school movement.

F8. The majority of charter schools have not provided accountability systems for measuring student progress beyond those of the standardized Academic Performance Index (API).

F9. Roseland Accelerated Middle School is an example of a school that caters to low-achieving students in an area that is economically below the city average and with a large population of students who are not native English speakers. The school serves seventh and eighth grades with a very close connection to Sheppard Elementary School.

F10. The Sonoma County Office of Education and school districts each have responsibilities in the oversight of charter schools. Charter schools are required to provide their district board with regular reports. Sonoma County charter schools meet this requirement.

F11. The Sonoma County Office of Education monitors the finances of charter schools. This is labor-intensive since some schools require more oversight than others.

Conclusions

Of the four initial goals of the Charter Schools Act of 1992, one, “performance-based accountability systems”, has not been achieved by Sonoma County Charter Schools. Some progress has been made on the three other goals, “special emphasis on the academically low achieving”, “the use of different and innovative teaching methods” and “vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.”

Charter schools claim that they can improve the educational experience for the children they serve. Until they are able to provide data in addition to standard paper and pencil testing for evaluating educational performance, this claim is difficult to substantiate. Charter schools offer teaching modes that are tailored to children who do not thrive in standard school settings. They emphasize parental involvement as part of their “contract” while non-charter schools can only request that parents become involved. Strong parental involvement is the hallmark and strength of the charter school movement.

Recommendations

R1. All county charter schools should join the California Network of Educational Charters (CANEC) to take advantage of that resource.

R2. The staff of each charter school should implement a process of regular meetings with the staffs of charter schools and non-charter schools to share ideas, curriculum and innovative teaching methods.

R3. County charter schools should continue to promote their schools with events open to the public.

R4. Educational leaders should gather and publish data, more than just test scores, which would enable the public to understand whether charter schools are improving pupil learning.

R5. The Sonoma County Office of Education and/or school districts should develop a more equitable way to fund special education needs across all schools and to recognize the higher costs associated with educating special education students.

Required Responses to Findings

Charter Schools: F1, F5, and F8

County Superintendent of Schools: F1 and F2

Required Responses to Recommendations

Charter Schools: R1, R2, R3 and R4