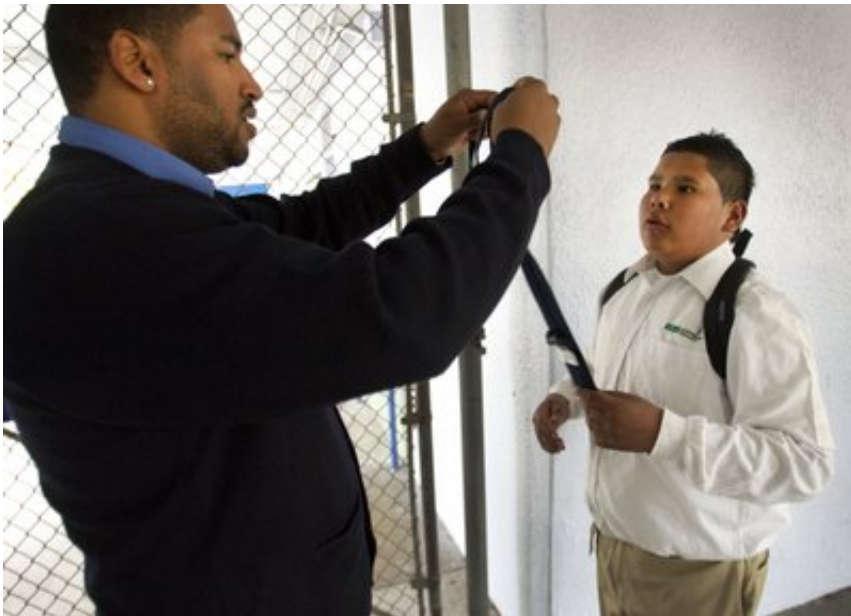


Examining charter schools at 20

Movement has taken off in California, but some cite unfulfilled goals

By Karen Kucher

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The charter school movement is gaining in popularity and maturity two decades after the passage of the state law authorizing the schools.

Charter backers had hoped the creation of publicly financed, privately managed schools would reinvent and transform public education. Charters clearly have fostered change within the system.

But education experts and even some of those in on the ground floor of the charter movement say the broader goal has not been achieved.

“We just thought this was going to foment a real revolution, that we were really going to turn the education world upside down, and to a certain extent it has happened,” said Alice Miller, who along with her husband and other parents started the San Carlos Charter Learning Center in Northern California, the state’s first charter school.

“But the resistance to charter schools and the issues that we have unexpectedly encountered ... (meant) we have not made the progress that we thought we would make back in 1992. It has been slower.”

Some observers say it’s not just resistance. The notion that charters would make parents more discriminating

school consumers hasn't fully panned out. Further, they say, studies of charters have not done a good job of assessing whether a charter school is really working and why.

Jeffrey Henig, chair of the department of education policy and social analysis at Columbia University's Teachers College, said gains have not measured up to the rhetoric of early supporters.

"Early on, a lot of charter proponents really did believe that getting out from under the basic bureaucratic restrictions of the traditional system would really lead to truly dramatic change in what schools did because they would be aggressively competing for students and their outcomes," he said.

"And they believed that would be driven by parents as alert consumers who would shop around for the best school," Henig said.

He said families tend to stick with a school, even when management and quality problems are documented.

The California Charter Schools Association now is taking steps to weed out bad apples that can tarnish the image of the movement. Just last month, the group called for the closure of 10 underperforming schools, saying they wanted to improve accountability and fulfill a "collective promise" of quality education.

"We see this as another step in moving forward on this issue," said Jed Wallace, president and CEO of the California Charter Schools Association. "It is just natural people would turn to the charter school movement itself and say if something more needs to be created, it is natural it would come from the movement."

The roots of the charter school movement, both in California and in other parts of the country, grew out of frustrations over the state of public education and an outcry for change. State reformers were pushing two options, vouchers for private schools and charters, when Gov. Pete Wilson signed the charter law authored by then-state Sen. Gary K. Hart in 1992.

Miller and her husband got started after they donated computers and educational software to her son's class, but they sat unused.

Instead, the third-graders built covered wagons out of toilet paper rolls and toothpicks. Asked why, the teacher explained she hadn't yet mastered the program.

Frustrated by that and other things going on in classrooms, Miller and a group of parents decided to start a new school for their children.

Sixty-seven students signed up for the experimental school, designed as an educational test site that emphasized technology.

"No one knew what this represented. All we knew was this was a wonderful opportunity and we didn't want to let it pass us by," Miller, now on the staff of the California Charter Schools Association, said of the charter movement.

She went on to help start four charters.

There's no question the charter movement has taken off. California added 100 charter schools in the 2011-12 school year, bringing the total to 982, and saw student enrollment surge by 13 percent. It now claims 7 percent of the state's K-12 enrollment, with 412,000 students. There are 95 charters in San Diego County, including more than 40 in the San Diego Unified School District.

Nationally, enrollment exceeds 2 million students in 5,600 charter schools.

Backers of California's law envisioned the state's charters would become hotbeds of innovation and would find new ways to teach students while also providing parents an alternative to local schools they felt were not meeting their needs.

Results, however, have been mixed.

"There were too many schools started early on that were doing interesting things but weren't related to achievement and quality, or were started by community groups that were loud and powerful and felt entitled to start their own schools," said Robin Lake, associate director of the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education. "We have learned a lot about screening applicants to make sure that the people proposing the school really have a solid educational plan and aren't just groping their way to something great."

Legislators in many states found it easy to vote for charter laws because it didn't look to be a costly policy on paper. "To them, it looked like redirecting funding they were already providing," Henig said.

Even as charter schools become more well known, it remains difficult to define them. That's because there is no such thing as a typical charter school.

Some operate out of malls or museums; others have built their own campuses. Some target kids who have failed in traditional school environments while others promote specialized instruction in such topics as science or math, or professional internships. Most are nonunion, but some have collective bargaining agreements.

Some are so well regarded that parents camp out overnight to put their kids' names on a list for consideration.

"I think it is fair to say what we know now is that chartering isn't a magic wand, that there's a wide range of charter schools in terms of quality, some that appear to be very good and at least as many that appear to be poor," Henig said.

Even so, charters have shaken things up in the education community and attracted attention to K-12 education, Henig said. Many public school districts now offer far more choices and options in their traditional school mix, including magnets and virtual academies.

San Diego is recognized as a leader and as an innovator in the state when it comes to charters. High Tech High became one of the first charters to credential its own teachers. Escondido Charter High School was able to build its own campus by raising millions of dollars through the private sale of revenue bonds. When San Diego completes its new downtown library, a charter school will be part of the mix.

"My hope is that the charter school movement in San Diego will only accelerate," Wallace said.

Things haven't always gone smoothly. Programs have had to be shut down on occasion but San Diego has avoided some of the political battles found in other regions where unions and charters back competing school board candidates, San Diego Unified board trustee Richard Barrera said.

"I've been on the board of a charter school, both my sons have attended a charter school, my eighth-grader attends a charter school, but I've been endorsed by the teacher's union. I think you can be both pro-charter and pro-teacher in San Diego Unified," Barrera said. "The district doesn't see charters schools as a threat but for the most part as providing a good option for parents."

Another point of friction comes on the facilities front. Schools that are unable to secure unused district

facilities have to divert money from educational spending to rent facilities.

Miller remembers the scramble for space for the San Carlos school. Parents came in and tore down interior walls to make classrooms in the rented Silicon Valley office building. She pulled network cables herself so the school could hook up to the Internet.

The charter association says improving the mechanism to gain access to district facilities remains a high priority. Seeking more school funding and fighting against legislative efforts to regulate the schools also are priorities.

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