

Oakland Tribune
"Quality control plan unveiled for charter schools"
By Katy Murphy
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Thirty-nine charter schools statewide have received a special seal of approval from the California Charter Schools Association, the group announced today.

Those schools were selected from 380 candidates seeking recognition under a new, charter-specific quality control program. None of Oakland's charter schools made the Certified Charter Schools list, although 26 applied. In Alameda County, just two schools did so: FAME Public Charter School in Newark and KIPP Summit Academy in San Lorenzo.

Caprice Young, the charter school association's president, said many of the uncertified schools simply have yet to complete an independent review, which can take years. Eventually, she said, she expects most of the state's charter schools to become certified within their first four years.

"These are really basic standards," she said.

The new accreditation process is designed to bring a greater level of transparency and credibility to the publicly funded, but independently run schools, which have sprung up throughout California since they were authorized in 1992.

Young said she believed the reports -- which will be available to the public -- will help families sort through the array of options they face when choosing schools. Her association represents more than 600 charters with nearly 220,000 students, and, she said, it is expanding by about 70 schools a year.

"If you're a parent, and you're moving from San Diego to Oakland, you'll know whether a charter school is high quality," she said.

Though many charters have been successful, some have crumbled under the financial constraints. Others have been marked by scandal.

In 2005, the state accused officials from the California Charter Academy -- which operated a number of schools throughout the state, including one in Oakland -- of misusing more than \$25 million in public funds for such things as spa visits, personal watercraft and travel.

During the outcry that followed, Young said, her members "demanded" the adoption of charter-specific quality control standards. In fact, they drafted the association's Quality Standards, a lengthy list of how schools should handle finances, academics and governance.

"The process may not catch the crook, but it is going to be able to affirm the schools that are doing a good job," Young said.

But Ben Chavis, the outspoken founder of the high-performing American Indian Public Charter School, was skeptical that the process will ultimately prove much tougher than the regular accreditation process used by public schools.

"I don't think it's enough," Chavis said. "We should hold charter schools to a higher standard."

Describing the lengthy Quality Standards document as "a bunch of gobbledygook," he offered his own way of evaluating quality: "It's real simple. Use numbers."

Priscilla Wohlstetter, a professor of educational governance at the University of Southern California who is involved in a project to increase charter school accountability, has another concern. She said the process could further the misconception that charter schools are not public.

"In California, we already have an accrediting body," Wohlstetter said, referring to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which is also one of the groups approved to conduct the new charter school reviews. "If, in fact, charter schools are public schools, what are the advantages of having a separate accreditation process?"

Cathy Cowan, principal of KIPP Summit, which opened in 2003, said she understands Wohlstetter's point of view. Still, she said, the regular accreditation process doesn't necessarily shed light on some areas unique to charters.

Cowan said her school has been equipped with a banner bearing the certification seal, and even special letterhead. "It's quite an honor," she said.

But for the principal, who began as a teacher four years ago, a greater testament to her school's success will be marked by the 61 eighth-graders -- the founding class -- who will walk the stage next month, ready to take on the ninth grade.

"It's been a wonderful experience to watch their evolution," she said.