

Oakland Tribune

"The battle over charter schools; After 14 years, controversial movement still sparks arguments over resources, students, results"

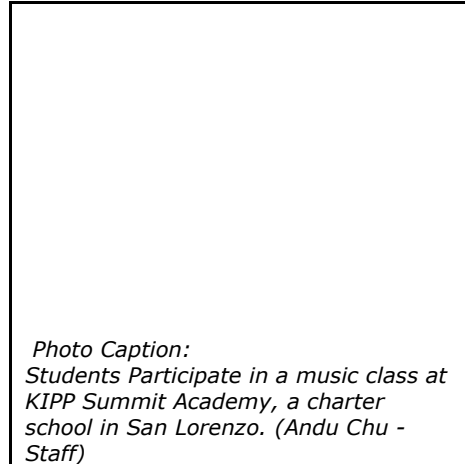
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WHEN THEN-GOV. PETE WILSON signed the legislation in 1992 that created charter schools in California, supporters hailed the law as one of the grandest education reform movements the state had yet seen.

"We are in a new era," intoned then-Sen. Gary Hart, who authored the charter legislation, "where traditional public schools can no longer be viewed as an exclusive franchise." Fourteen years later, charter schools indeed have taken hold in California, growing from 31 schools serving 10,700 students in 1993 to 550 schools and more than 200,000 students today.



*Photo Caption:
Students Participate in a music class at KIPP Summit Academy, a charter school in San Lorenzo. (Andu Chu - Staff)*

Despite the growth, charters make up only about 6 percent of the state's schools, and they enroll only about 3 percent of California students, according to EdSource, a nonpartisan educational policy group.

Charter schools never have found easy acceptance in the state.

School districts have fought or blocked their creation within city boundaries, teachers' unions accuse the movement of undermining hard-won contracts and charter operators complain they have been hamstrung and undercut by a confusing and constricting stream of laws that stifle the very reform the schools were formed to foster.

"People are at each other's throats," said Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, at a Senate hearing in August on charter schools. "Charter schools think they're facing too many impediments, and districts are feeling besieged, as if their time, energy and resources are being drained away.

"A lot of people feel the current system isn't doing anyone any good."

The Bay Area is a microcosm of the charter school movement with some communities embracing the schools and others treating them with wary acceptance.

Charter schools have blossomed in the Oakland Unified School District, for instance. Thirty charter schools operate in Oakland, enrolling about 7,000 students. This fall, one in about every five public schools in Oakland will be a charter school, according to information from the California Charter Schools Association.

Charters have been much harder won elsewhere in the region.

The sole charter school in Livermore came up for a vote three times before it finally gained approval; and in Hayward last year, district officials initially refused to supply a state-chartered high school with a building. They even accused the organization of inflating its enrollment projections by offering kids candy in exchange for signatures. The two sides eventually called a truce; the school board president said it wasn't worth a court battle.

Tensions over money, students

Money is often at the center of many tensions between traditional school districts and charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools, and thus receive funding from the state based on the number of students they enroll.

Under state law, a school district, a county Board of Education or the state Department of Education must agree to sponsor a charter in order for the school to open.

The arrangement can lead to problems between traditional districts and would-be charter operators, especially in districts where enrollment already is declining.

In districts with too many students, charter schools can serve as a welcome relief valve to ease overcrowding. But in the high-priced Bay Area, as families leave in search of cheaper housing, school districts are often fighting for every student.

"The reason there is so much feuding is because there's not enough funding for public schools in general," said Kelly Garcia, director of admissions, enrollment and special projects at Summit Preparatory High School, a four-year-old Redwood City charter school with 327 students.

The Sequoia Union High School District agreed last spring to sponsor Summit and provide it with facilities, but the sponsorship comes with a cost.

Sequoia Superintendent Pat Gemma said it will cost the district roughly \$2.4 million this year to educate the students at Summit. If the students were attending district schools, it would cost \$800,000, he said.

That's because the district's schools have most of their infrastructure in place while Summit is a newer school that is still hiring administrators and other staff.

Sequoia also has to pay for the school's classrooms — around \$2.5 million — because of a state law that requires school districts that pass bonds to honor requests from charter schools within their boundaries for classroom space.

Summit, which added a 12th grade this year, operates out of portable classrooms next to the district office.

"If the sponsoring district was not hurt financially, I think there would be a lot less tension between charters and school districts," Gemma said.

The funding quandary was at the center of a battle last year over what would become Fremont's second charter school — FAME, or Families of Alameda for Multilingual Education.

Then-Fremont schools Superintendent John Rieckewald urged the Alameda County Board of Education to reject the charter, fearing that the district would lose more than 300 children to FAME, resulting in a loss of more than \$1.4 million in student attendance dollars, plus an extra \$600,000 in over-staffing costs for Fremont schools.

Rieckewald's fears were not realized. While interest in FAME is growing — about 380 students will enroll during the school's second year this fall, up from 150 last year — current Fremont schools Superintendent Doug Gephart said the school has not lured a significant number of students from the district.

Twenty-one students left Fremont schools for FAME last year, according to district figures. New alternatives, more options

Charter operators, however, say it doesn't have to be a battle for resources or students. Charter schools, they say, provide new options for parents seeking educational alternatives for their children.

Charter schools generally are exempt from most laws governing traditional school districts and thus are able to experiment with new teaching methods, unique student programs and non-traditional schedules. Charter schools may not charge tuition and are bound by state anti-discrimination and other laws.

"The way I look at it is, are we using resources to get the most bang for the buck?" said Diane Tavenner, executive director of Summit, the Redwood City charter school. "Charter schools provide some interesting possibilities."

Summit focuses on preparing students for college, Tavenner said.

Other schools fill similar niches.

FAME, the Fremont school, caters to English-language learners whose needs aren't being met in traditional schools, school officials say.

Many students are Muslim, and the school's schedule varies from that at a traditional school. Students are let out early Fridays — in time to attend mosque — and the school is closed on two Islamic holidays, in addition to Christmas, Hanukkah and Easter. School officials stress that the school does not teach religion.

More than 40 percent of the students speak Arabic at home and the school offers it as a foreign language.

FAME offers Arabic to help students maintain their cultural identity, school director Maram Alaiwat said.

"I believe this is a reason that people keep knocking on our doors," she said. The school draws students from as far as Santa Clara and Tracy.

"Arabic is offered all over (at colleges) but not at (K-12) schools. We do attract a large proportion of Muslims, and we're happy to serve them appropriately."

In Livermore, dissatisfaction with district schools led a group of parents to open the Livermore Valley Charter School in August 2005, after several failed attempts.

In 2004, the Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District was in a financial crisis and had failed to meet a mandatory 3 percent budget reserve.

The district was forced into budget cuts, including the closure of two elementary schools. The closure spurred parents to explore a charter option.

Parents were also dissatisfied with a lack of district programs outside of math or English.

"The closure of the schools was definitely a catalyst, but what I saw locally was there was less and less emphasis placed on educating the whole child, as everybody concentrated solely on components from standardized tests," said Lon Goldstein, Livermore Valley Charter School president.

A group of families filed a charter petition — which district trustees shot down unanimously in May 2004, fearing the charter school would disrupt the district's financial recovery plan. Officials said the charter school would have taken \$900,000 from the district.

Parents appealed the board's decision to the Alameda County Board of Education, and were again shot down. The state approved the charter in November 2004, and the school opened the following August with 582 students.

Despite some early turmoil — including the dismissal of the first principal only five months into the school year — the school has continued to grow. Enrollment has grown to 737 students, and the school will unveil its middle school program this year.

Students have performed well on standardized tests, with most falling in the advanced and proficient categories on the state's STAR testing program. The school also recently received accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, one of six regional accrediting associations in the United States.

Tensions with the district have also eased.

"I think the competition is going to be beneficial for both of us," Goldstein said. "We're going to push the district to do things they may not have done, and vice versa. I think we can feed off each other, and that's a good thing."

Spats like those in Fremont and Livermore are one reason Simitian called a series of hearings on charter schools this year. The hearings are intended to get a status report on charter schools and to see if the series of legislative attempts to rein in rogue charter schools are working or are hampering innovation.

A second hearing is planned for October.

"To my knowledge there has not been this kind of thoughtful, big-picture step back," Simitian said. "Every time I turn around, we've got another bill trying to fix another problem with charter schools."

Who's the best?

Still, some data suggest that charter schools don't necessarily perform better than traditional schools.

The graduation rate at charter schools is about 60 percent, compared with 87 percent in non-charter schools, according to EdSource. At the same time, only about 20 percent of charter school graduates complete college-preparatory coursework, compared with about 36 percent in non-charter schools.

Gary Larson, vice president of communications for the California Charter Schools Association, said those numbers don't tell the whole story.

Numerous studies have found that charters outperform traditional schools at the middle and high school level, although they trail at the elementary level, he said.

But what's most noteworthy, Larson said, is that students in charter schools post better year-over-year gains on standardized tests than their peers in traditional schools.

"Charters are improving student achievement at a faster rate," Larson said. "That's the trend that every one of these studies has shown."

Goldstein, of Livermore Valley Charter School, doesn't buy arguments that charters don't perform better than traditional schools.

"Keep in mind the vast majority of charter schools serve predominantly students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and urban populations whose numbers are atrocious," he said. "The reality of it is we can spin the numbers the way we want. Charter schools are an alternative. We offer an environment a lot of people are apparently seeking."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Education writers Kristofer Noceda, Michelle Maitre, T.S. Mills-Farauto, Katy Murphy, Grace Rauh and Linh Tat contributed to this report.