



Desert school certified Apple Valley charter earns new designation

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APPLE VALLEY -

A charter school here was among 39 in California to receive certification as high-quality institutions under a new process that resembles accreditation.

The Academy for Academic Excellence, run by the Lewis Center for Educational Research was the only San Bernardino County school to earn the new designation, the California Charter Schools Association announced Wednesday.

The Lewis Center expects to open a similar math-and-science oriented charter in San Bernardino in 2008.

Seeking certification "was a great process," said Rick Piercy, president and CEO of the Lewis Center, who also chairs the board of the charters association, which developed certification procedures. "It gave us a chance to really self-analyze and be introspective about our school. It gave all of our staff a sense that what we do in any school is critical to what happens in the nation."

Charters operate using state money, but because they're meant to nurture creativity in education, they are free from many laws governing traditional public schools.

For a charter to become certified, an approved outside agency must find that the school meets benchmarks in areas including academic excellence, responsible governance and fiscal accountability.

Third parties that administer such independent reviews are the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, which also performs accreditation, Cambridge Education's Charter Program Quality Review, the American Academy for a Liberal Education and the State Board of Education Charter Renewal Review.

"Certainly any time you put regulations of any kind there's constraints put on how much

freedom and flexibility you have," Piercy said of certification guidelines.

But he said the certification program reflected charter officials' desire to police their own kind and set standards that could help educators develop top-notch schools.

Caprice Young, president of the charters association, and Marta Reyes, who heads the charters division of the California Department of Education, said they believe the certification regime is the first of its kind in the country.

Reyes said her division supports the program because it pushes not just for charters but for high quality schools. Among the requirements, charters must show that they engage parents and communities in education and that they implement their missions in their day-to-day actions.

"They've really gone in and drilled down to look at the educational program," Reyes said of the certification program.

Charters that obtain certification will have a strong case when they ask the state to renew petitions that allow them to operate, Reyes said.

In recent years, high-profile charter scandals involving fiscal mismanagement and school closures have led lawmakers to increase regulation of charters. Some charter leaders fear that growing restrictions could dampen such schools' ability to innovate.

Young said she hoped the certification program would show state officials that charters are accountable.

"By showing that we are responsible as a movement and setting our own standards & we believe the state and other entities will feel less inclined to create more regulations," she said.

More than 400 charters are candidates for certification, and it will take three to four years to review all those schools, Young said. The first schools to be certified were ones that volunteered, she said.

Though all charters that have pursued certification thus far have received it, some future applicants will likely fail to meet standards, she said.

Schools denied certified status will have time to improve. Those that ultimately cannot meet goals will lose association membership and access to perks such as inexpensive insurance that the group offers, Young said.

To retain membership to the association, schools will have to be recertified every several years, she said.

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