



Wednesday, July 14, 2010; Section: Front Page; Page: A1 Daily Press

CHARTER MOVEMENT IN VICTOR VALLEY

Parents choose charter schools for unique programs, small class sizes

BY NATASHA LINDSTROM

STAFF WRITER

Sherena Hunter firmly believes her zip code shouldn't limit her children's educational options.

As her oldest daughter neared high school, Hunter felt empowered to shop around the Victor Valley for the school that would best meet her needs. While visiting her neighborhood public schools, she hadn't liked what she'd seen. "It seemed like the students were running the class instead of the teacher. I didn't feel safe with my kids there because of disrespectful incidents," Hunter said. "I was just looking for something other than the traditional public schools."

Hunter selected Excelsior Education Center charter school in Victorville, where she enrolled her three children, who recently completed grades 7, 10 and 12. She said she appreciated the warm environment and structured yet-personalized feel to the school's independent study program.

Hunter's quest for choice within the public school system echoes a growing trend nationwide. Dubbed "the charter school movement," the rising popularity of charters has been fueled by parents who want smaller-sized programs that cater to their children's interests and learning styles.

"I think that as parents become better consumers of educational programs for their children ... I think you'll see the movement continue to grow," said Rick Piercy, founder of the Lewis Center for Educational Research and Academy for Academic Excellence charter school in Apple Valley. "It's growing in California. It's growing in areas where people really are desperate for a new choice. It's growing faster in those communities with at-risk and underperforming youth."

The number of California charter schools increased by nearly 10 percent last year, with at least 820 charter schools now operating across the state, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. The Victor Valley is home to more than 15 charter schools, with several new proposals for charters popping up within the last year.

Charter schools are non-religious, no-cost public schools governed by a contract with the state, typically under the supervision of a school district, group or other organization. They generally have nonunion teachers and freedom from certain state and local regulations.

"My perspective is the more local control you have, the better," Piercy said.

Phil Dotson, principal of Summit Leadership Academy charter school in Hesperia, said he thinks charter schools are thriving in part because they can offer flexible schedules. His school focuses on preparing students for careers in law enforcement, the military or fire science. Summit students wear uniforms and perform daily physical training exercises.

"That's great that there's a choice," said Gina Martin, whose son Jovoun Brown attends

Summit. “Everybody doesn’t learn the same. Everybody has different interests. It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach.”

Brown, 15, said initially he was hesitant to enroll in a charter school, but after his first year he’s happy to be in an environment he said has “a lot less drama” and better motivated students than his former school in Colton. He also said his teachers seem to have more time for him.

“Because it’s a small class size, kids do not get lost in the shuffle,” said Chala Salisbury, who founded two Crosswalk charter schools in Hesperia. “You’re able to focus on kids that really need help. You know every single child so well that you can help them.”

Salisbury’s Crosswalk schools have an environmental emphasis, with students embarking last year on a 20-year project studying wildlife at Mojave Narrows Regional Park in Victorville.

Also in Hesperia, the Encore School for the Performing Arts specializes in fine arts, offering students music, dance and theater lessons that could otherwise cost parents hundreds of dollars per month.

“Those students that want those specialties, they’re able to really connect to that life at an early age,” Dotson said.

The Academy for Academic Excellence focuses on science and technology, and projectbased learning. Academy students have helped monitor NASA missions through a local radio telescope, and built floating islands to protect the endangered Mojave tui chub fish.

Despite such unique efforts, data is mixed on whether charter schools are the stronger academic choice.

The many conflicting studies on charter schools have been eyed with skepticism, with a March report by the Center for Public Education concluding “reliable charter school research is still in its infancy.”

In what they called the most comprehensive study on charter schools to date, researchers with Mathematica Policy Research examined data from 36 charter middle schools across 15 states. The study, released two weeks ago, found generally charters were not better or worse than traditional schools in improving achievement in reading in math. However, the charter schools proved more effective for low income and lower achieving students.

School officials point out some charter schools cater specifically to students at risk of dropping out or with behavioral problems — like the Mojave River Academy in Oro Grande — so it’s unfair to compare their test scores against other local schools.

“Charter schools do run the gamut,” Piercy said, noting so do traditional public schools.

Ralph Baker, who was superintendent over the Victor Elementary School District for 24 years and now oversees Excelsior, said he believes the community effort that goes into the formation of most charter schools gives them an inherent edge. He laid the groundwork for even the traditional schools within the VESD to become parent-choice schools — not independently governed, but not confined to enrollment boundaries.

“Whenever you get a group of professional educators together where they agree on the educational program, and then you convince students and parents to join you, that program is so much stronger,” Baker said.

Piercy pointed out all charters have a built-in checks and balances system: “Probably the greatest test of a charter school is that the parents can vote with their feet; they can leave.”

Natasha Lindstrom may be reached at (760) 951-6232 or at nlindstrom@VVDailyPress.com.