

Liberate the system

Free schools from excess regulation

by Sen. Gary K. Hart

Imagine a public high school which provides academic instruction at a traditional school site in the morning, intensive employment training at various work sites in the afternoon, and is completely administered by a group of teachers, in a flexible environment without complex and legalistic personnel practices. Or how about a public elementary school which serves children ages 4 through 9 in an upgraded program which provides developmentally appropriate curriculum, allows children to progress at individual rates, and is taught by teachers trained in the Montessori method.

Sound far fetched? These types of schools, along with an endless variety of other innovative possibilities, could be established under a legislative concept which has come to be known as "charter schools."

Senate Bill 1448, which I have introduced, would allow a group of public school teachers to petition the local school board to operate a charter school. The specific goals and operating procedures for the school would be spelled out in the agreement between the board and the organizers, but in exchange for committing to the principles outlined in the charter, the school could be freed from many state statutes and regulations.

We currently have 11 volumes, more than 6,000 pages, of laws governing education in California. These statutes cover items ranging from how many square feet are allowed for each classroom to teaching children to be kind to animals. All of these provisions were enacted to respond to a specific problem or anticipate some contingency. In isolation they seem reasonable and justified, but taken as a whole, they can create a stifling, bureaucratic atmosphere. I think charter schools can invigorate and may liberate our existing system, produce creative new approaches to educating children, and stimulate other schools to evaluate their programs.

Why create charter schools? Quite simply, too many of our schools are failing. The purpose of charter schools is to provide parents and students with expanded educational opportunities within the public school system without the constraints of traditional, oftentimes cumbersome, public school bureaucratic rules and structure. Based on the work of some of the

best people in education, we know what ingredients are needed to have effective schools. These include innovative and involved teachers and pupils who are enthusiastic and interested in what's being taught.

I hasten to add that there are areas which are absolutely fundamental to the basic democratic tenets of the public school system and I believe must be followed in charter schools. To address these, SB 1448 requires charter schools to maintain a pupil enrollment which is reflective of the existing school district's racial and ethnic composition and certify that the school will be nonsectarian in its programs, admission policies, employment practices and all other operations. Charter schools cannot charge tuition and cannot discriminate against pupils based on ethnicity, national origin, gender or disability. In addition, the charter school petition to the local school board must outline the educational objectives for the pupils of the school and specify how pupil progress will be measured.

Recently there has been considerable discussion both nationally and at the state level about private school vouchers. I believe the charter school approach is a superior alternative by providing school choice *within* the public schools. Private schools which participate in a voucher system would be funded with taxpayer dollars, but not held accountable to any public school standards. This means that private schools which espouse specific religious beliefs or political ideologies would receive taxpayer money, but operate without any oversight. In addition, private schools can limit enrollment based on admission standards they set.

In contrast, charter schools would be public schools operated in a nontraditional manner, but accountable to specified standards.

I believe many public schools do an outstanding job of educating students. However, too large of a percentage of our students are failing miserably and are disillusioned by school. Their plight cries out for bold departures and alternate ways of providing educational services. The charter-school approach represents a major education reform which will stimulate and encourage such alternatives, while maintaining our traditional democratic commitment to public schools. Charter schools will send an important message to parents, teachers and the education community that there are new ways of operating schools that must be considered and that traditional public schools can no longer be viewed as an exclusive franchise. ■

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