

SB1448
(author)

'Charter' schools get Wilson OK

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SACRAMENTO — Over the strong objection of California's powerful teachers' union, Gov. Pete Wilson yesterday signed legislation authorizing parents, teachers and community groups to create and run 100 publicly funded schools independent of local school districts.

"This bill will allow Californians to design schools that are more responsive to the needs of the community, establish alternative teaching methods, give parents a choice and, most importantly, improve pupil learning," said the governor.

Sen. Gary Hart, chairman of the Senate Education Committee and author of the bill, which takes effect Jan. 1, said it is "the most important education reform measure to be enacted in recent years.

"... We are in a new era where traditional public schools can no longer be viewed as an exclusive franchise."

With the approval of the local school board or the county board of education, schools could be established at an existing education facility or out of a "store



Gov. Pete Wilson says the measure will allow schools to be more responsive to parents and the community.

front," said Sue Burr, a consultant to Hart, D-Santa Barbara.

Burr said there is considerable interest throughout the state for establishment of new schools serving various grade levels.

The so-called "charter schools" would receive state funding, but be independent of the local school board and district administration and not subject to laws generally governing public schools.

The local school board or county board of education, however, would have to approve any charter.

A petition signed by either 10 percent of the teachers employed by the district or by 50 percent of the teachers in one of

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the district's schools also would be required before a charter school could be established.

The schools would be authorized to operate for up to five years under a revocable charter.

CTA President D.A. "Del" Weber said yesterday Hart's bill does not provide enough protection for California's students, parents and teachers.

"There is no proof that opening charter schools provides any benefits to students that are not already provided in their local school districts," said Weber.

He also complained that no governing board is provided to monitor the effectiveness of the charter schools.

Students could not be required to attend charter schools and the schools would be barred from discriminating and must be non-sectarian. The charter schools also would have to maintain health and safety standards and could not charge tuition.

Supporters of the bill, including state Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, hope efforts to dramatically alter public schools will stave off attempts to establish a voucher system where parents would be given money from the state enabling them to send their child to private or public schools.

"Bill has been really intrigued with the (charter) idea," said Susie Lange, Honig's press secretary. "He feels any attempt to allow that kind of flexibility within the school system will help stave off private school choice movements.

"... There are a lot of communities anxious to try new things all over the state."

In signing Hart's bill, Wilson vetoed a competing bill by Assemblywoman Delaine Eastin, D-Fremont, which would have required approval from the powerful teachers' union before establishing a charter school.

Eastin, who chairs the Assembly Education Committee, charged yesterday that the governor was punishing her for criticizing him during the protracted budget debate this summer.

"I think he's mad I took him on during the budget and I'm being punished," said Eastin. "He vetoed four out of five of my bills (that he acted on) today... and one was an apple pie and motherhood bill."

The governor said he vetoed Eastin's bill because the restrictions in her bill, including requiring teachers' union approval, would not allow "a fair test of this experimental approach."

Under Hart's bill, parents, foundations, universities, businesses or any interested party can petition the local school district for an operating permit to run a charter school.

If approved, the charter school would receive state funds based on average daily attendance.

No more than 10 charter schools could be established in a school district.

Critics of the Hart bill complain that it allows teachers who do not have state credentials to teach in public schools and that it bypasses collective bargaining agreements.

"If anyone can teach, why do we require credentials now?" asked Eastin.

Burr said aerospace workers could teach math and science and other professionals might be tapped to teach who are eminently qualified, but lack a teaching certificate.

Eastin also said teachers would not receive the same job protections they currently enjoy under Hart's bill. But supporters say teachers can establish protections in exchange for signing off on a charter school.

Districts could convert an existing school or reopen a vacant school or look for a new site.

The bill was supported by the School Boards Association and the Association of Large Suburban School Districts.

Burr said schools across the state have seen resources dwindle. The big advantage of the Hart bill is that "every dime goes directly to that site," she said.

Attempts to qualify a school voucher system initiative for the November ballot failed, but supporters eventually hope to place the matter before voters.