

SB1448
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Hart's option

Senator offers another plan to fix schools; but is it too late?

Santa Barbara's Sen. Gary Hart, a state leader in education, introduced a bill last week that he clearly hopes will not only invigorate the public school system, but also head off a current initiative drive to establish a voucher system and school choice in California.

Hart's legislation, Senate Bill 1448, was simultaneously introduced with a similar Assembly Bill, 2585, by Assemblywoman Delaine Eastin of Fremont. Both legislators are Democrats. The bills would create "charter schools" throughout the state, to act as experimental forerunners to a reformed educational system.

The charter schools would be exempt from all existing regulations, allowing teachers and parents ultimate flexibility in setting them up and running them. The only requirements would be to maintain health and safety standards, to operate as non-sectarian schools and to be open to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender or disability. Charter schools also would be prohibited from charging tuition.

They sound very much like private schools without private school elitism and sans state bureaucracy. Clearly, the proposal is an at-

tempt to counteract a growing sentiment that California's public schools are overwrought with regulation and effectively stymied in their mission, which is to educate the state's youngsters. Parents feel powerless and cut out of discussions about the course of their own children's schooling. No wonder the current movement for choice, and particularly publicly financed vouchers to help pay for private school education, is so attractive.

But there are dangers in handing taxpayer funds over to private schools, not the least of which is inevitably fewer dollars for public schools. Hart's bill may provide a viable answer: Get rid of the strings, the oversight and the regulation, and let parents have a greater and stronger voice in school operations.

This is exactly what is needed — statewide — to resurrect the public school system, and would be a far better solution than the Parental Choice in Education Initiative. But the bills don't go far enough. If the choice initiative qualifies for the November ballot, which is likely, Hart and Eastin's bills may be seen as offering too little, too late to frustrated parents.