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"WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR OF FRIEND OR FOE"

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Schools within schools

Hart's charter school concept a better option than vouchers

Imagine the benefits of having the same teachers teaching the same group of students throughout their entire elementary and middle school experience. Such an intriguing option doesn't exist in today's public schools, but it would become a possibility if Sen. Gary Hart's charter school legislation is enacted.

So would many others, such as a specialized curriculum for at-risk students. Or one geared to ready students for immediate placement in the work force. Whatever the need, the charter school concept would allow the creation of alternative schools within schools, empowering teachers to break through the lock-step bureaucracy that has rendered public education so leaden.

Hart, D-Santa Barbara, champions his bill as a "major departure from business as usual in our schools." A party interested in forming an innovative school could petition the local school board, outlining operational procedures and specific outcomes expected to be achieved.

A charter school might be initiated by teachers, parents or members of the community, but whatever the impetus, the idea is to provide students with an intensified educational focus not now available in the basic public school curriculum.

Hart's bill, which passed both the Senate and Assembly with impressive bipartisan support, would exempt charter schools from the Education Code, freeing them from the laws on teacher tenure and maximum instructional time. The exemption is a controversial provision, but it withstood strong opposition from the Califor-

nia Teachers Association.

Public schools all across the country have been much maligned as waning test scores and the dubious educational readiness of graduates have drawn increasing scrutiny. The thirst for educational reform is behind California's school choice initiative, which would give parents the option of receiving a government voucher for private school tuition.

Parents deserve a voice and a choice in deciding the educational direction of their children. But taxpayer-financed vouchers is a poor means to an admirable end. Vouchers would encourage a two-tiered school system — one for the rich, one for the poor. They would also put government money in church coffers if private schools have religious foundations — a clear violation of the separation of church and state doctrine.

Charter schools offer an alternative. Though initially limited in scope — Hart's bill authorizes just 100 statewide — the concept is bound to engender the kind of enthusiasm among teachers, parents and students that will warrant expansion.

Charter schools won't solve all the problems that ail California's schools, but they will provide a vehicle for improvement from within the same walls of the existing educational structure. And because that improvement is driven by the energies and ideas of the people who see the most urgent needs firsthand, Gov. Wilson should sign Hart's bill so the array of options it proffers can be put into play without delay.