

SB 1448
(author)

Nancy Ohanian/LATS

More cost-effective public schools

By David Patterson

3/5/93 SBNP
A-9

Are you a parent or grandparent with a child in public school? Does your child go to a good school, one that is free from drugs, gangs and violence? Are you a teacher in public schools who believes that our schools can do better? Are you concerned about the quality of public education and frustrated that things just seem to get worse? Do you want to do something about it, in your own way?

A new type of public school, a charter school, allows each of us — not self-serving bureaucracies — to create public schools that we can believe in. The Charter Schools Act of 1992 allows a school district to enter into a revocable contract with a group of teachers, parents or community members to run a charter school. The school would be freed from more than 6,000 pages of state education laws that too often make it hard and sometimes impossible for our children to get a quality education. In exchange, charter schools must do something that no other public school must do: The students who attend them must meet measurable performance objectives and goals.

Charter schools are public schools. They are non-sectarian in their programs, admission policies, employment practices and all other operations, and cannot discriminate against any student on the basis

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of ethnicity, national origin, gender or disability. Charter schools are open to anyone, regardless of where they or their parents live. They cannot charge tuition. They also don't get one cent more than any other public school.

The idea is that parents and teachers working together will create programs that work better. Public schools don't have to be impersonal never-never lands, too rigid to meet the needs of individual children and their families, and disconnected from society at large.

Teachers at charter schools will have the opportunity to create schools that they know work for children, including specialized educational approaches such as Montessori, math and science or performing arts academies.

The concepts of community control, personal commitment and an obligation to make government work again are em-

bodied in this approach. It is what President Clinton means when he talks about re-inventing government. Gov. Pete Wilson supports the concept and has advocated allowing more schools to participate.

Nine of the 100 charter schools allowed under the new law have already been formed. Parents and teachers at Garden Valley School, which one of my children attends, are currently meeting and talking about the type of school they want to create.

Large, entrenched bureaucracies are incapable of reforming themselves, and they fight vigorously any change that threatens their power and control. The opposition to charter schools by the power blocs in the large bureaucratic system we call public education convinces me that charter schools are a powerful vehicle for change.

Senior management in the teacher unions, too many school board members and some powerful superintendents and administrators are working to intimidate those who want a chance to create a charter school. We cannot let this happen.

David Patterson is a consultant with the California Department of Education and a member of the board of trustees of the Del Paso Heights School District. He wrote this commentary for the McClatchy News Service.