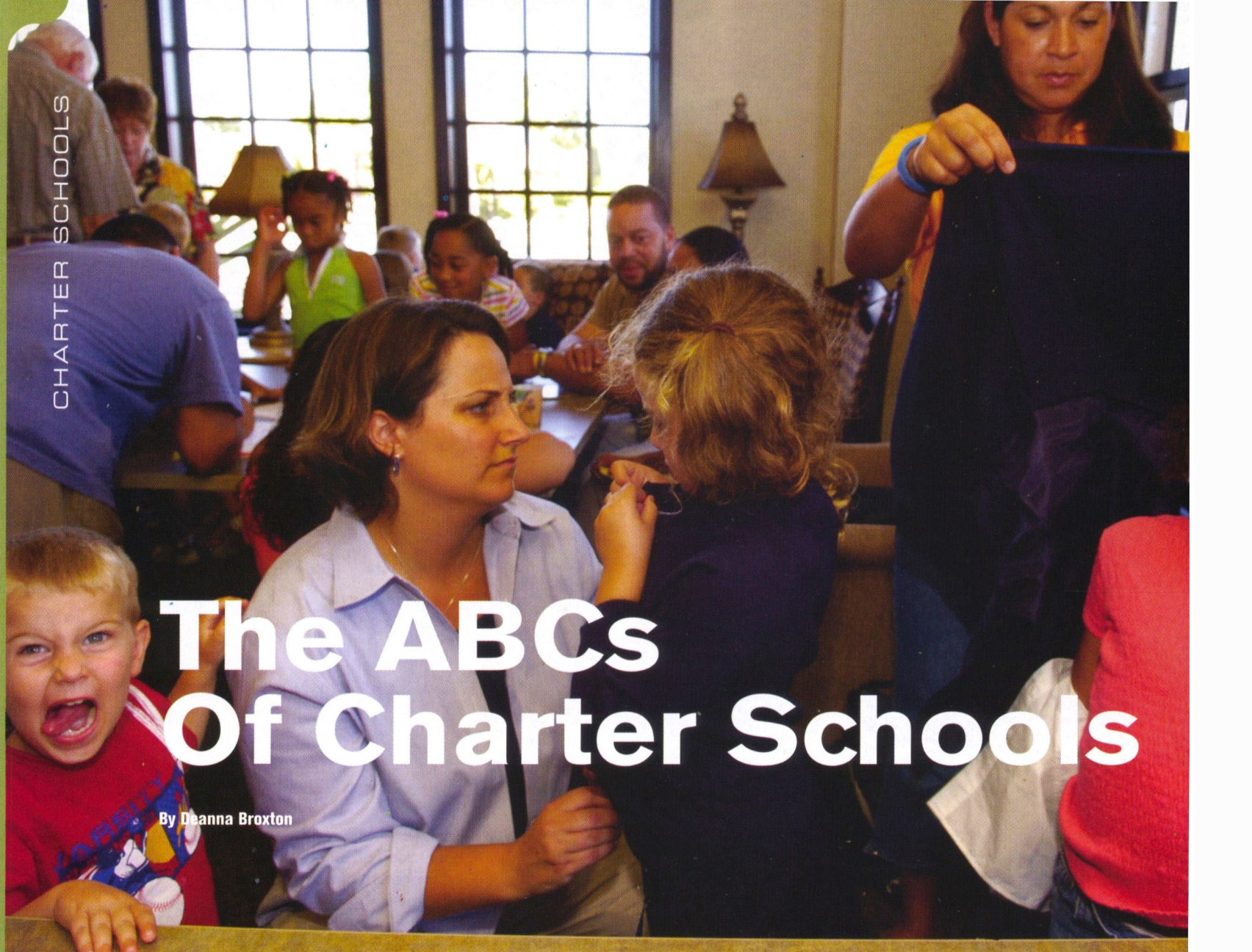




The ABCs Of Charter Schools

By Deanna Broxton

Charter schools are springing up all over the Sacramento region as more and more parents seek innovative alternatives to traditional public learning institutions.

The Sacramento region boasts 26 charter schools with educational programs that range from nontraditional vocational/technical training, global instruction, performing arts, health and science, construction and more. In addition, 13 up-and-coming schools are located in Sacramento, El Dorado, Yolo and Placer counties.

Marcie Launey, president of the Sacramento City Teachers Association, believes more attention has been

given to local charter schools in recent years, in part because of the controversy surrounding the reopening of Sacramento High School as a charter in 2003. Launey says the number of charters in the district has mushroomed.

And while the association supports charters, it is concerned with the financial drain they place on declining-enrollment districts, such as Sacramento City Unified School District, and the risky position they place teachers in as at-will employees.

"We are underfunded in all educational programs across the state, and independent charters take away from the larger organization. At the high-school level, when a school becomes a charter, the district is obligated to give them

not only ADA (average daily attendance funding) but also pay them close to \$800 per student on top of that. That is a very serious cut into this district's budget," Launey adds.

Bipartisan Innovators

Charter schools can be started by teacher- or parent-led initiatives, community members or even school districts, but they cannot exist without approval from a local district or the county office of education. The "charter" that establishes each school is a performance contract that details the school's mission, program goals, students to be served, methods of assessment and ways to measure success.



Left: Students, parents and staff gather at the Westlake Charter School for uniform try ons in anticipation of the school's first year.

Myrna Castrejón, general manager of the northeast California region of the California Charter Schools Association, explains that historically the charter school movement was a huge bipartisan reform effort to bring innovation into the public school system. The Center for Education Reform reports the movement started well before 1992, when the Charter School Act was passed in California. About a dozen schools were opened the following year, including Natomas Charter School in north Natomas that initially served seventh and eighth grades but has now grown to K-12.

These schools are publicly funded, yet they operate independently from the bureaucracy of traditional education. They offer flexibility in how they reach educational goals but must meet state guidelines within five years. Proponents of the schools say they often challenge high achievers and foster academic success in a traditionally underserved student body.

As of April 2005, CER reports that approximately 3,400 charter schools are operating across the United States, serving nearly 1 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia. Data from the California Department of Education shows there are 533 charter schools serving more than 180,000 students from elementary school through high school within the state.

"Since the first schools were opened in California, the charter movement has seen an explosion of growth over the past five years, particularly in districts with low-performing schools and students from lower socioeconomic households," says Castrejón.

Such was the case with the Sacramento Unified School District, which has

11 charter schools operating within its district, including Sacramento High Charter School and The Met Sacramento.

Significant Failures

SCUSD was looking for new ways to meet the academic needs of the students in the communities it served. After evaluating the Providence-based program, The Met, which reportedly had 100 percent of its urban students enroll in colleges, the district decided it wanted to use The Met's model to reform its schools.

"There were significant amounts of failure and dropout in our city schools and primarily with students already in need—kids who haven't been well-served before by the system—kids of color and kids living in poverty," explains The Met

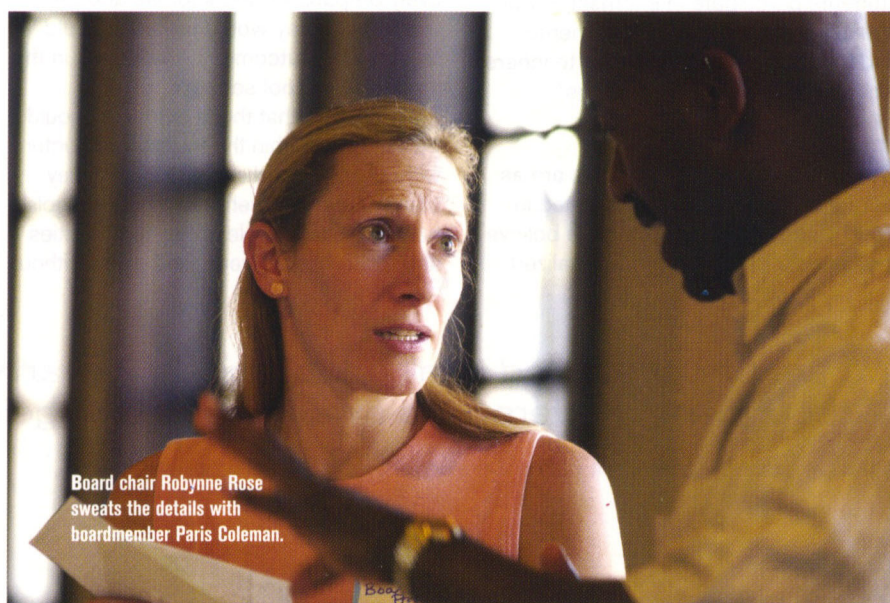
Sacramento Principal Beth Kay.

But it's a lack of public accountability as well as poor teacher retention at some charters that worries Patrice Rogers, whose son is a student at the Visual and Performing Arts Charter School, which became a charter in 2003 after the popular arts program was forced to leave Sacramento High School. Rogers was a parent plaintiff in the lawsuit filed against the school board and St. Hope Corp., Kevin Johnson's nonprofit behind the Sacramento High School charter.

"There's no real public accountability and too much power in too few people's hands. In every charter it's the directors of the program running the show. I have tremendous concerns about next year at VAPAC. Several of the top-notch teachers are leaving the school. They are not

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Board chair Robynne Rose sweats the details with boardmember Paris Coleman.



Alison Nanni finds the right fit with help from mom Cathy.

happy with the administration. There's been a huge turnover in staff at every one of the charters. With that kind of turnaround, it's going to be hard for charters to build stable reputations. There's no clear way for staff or parents to have a voice in helping to shape what really happens at the school," says Rogers.

District officials did not respond to repeated attempts to contact them.

Despite these struggles, the charter school movement continues. With a student-teacher ratio of 18-to-1, The Met Sacramento High School will graduate its first class in the spring of 2007. Approximately 130 kids are enrolled for the 2005-06 school year from cities throughout the greater Sacramento region. The students participate in internships with businesses throughout Sacramento under the watchful eye of their teachers, who are referred to as "advisers."

Not One Size Fits All

"Our philosophy is that students are as unique as what they are interested in, good at, and challenged by. We believe they need a completely individualized

curriculum for four years. Any parent, who has more than one child, knows that's true. So instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, we use what students' strengths and interests are to drive their learning," says Kay.

While Kay says many schools use internships and individualized learning plans, what sets The Met apart is that student projects must be useful to the job site; students must learn new skills and knowledge; and the projects must remain in the student's interest area. At the end of four years they will have received a real-world education, be critical thinkers, productive citizens and valuable additions to a locally grown workforce.

Do charters such as The Met effectively prepare students for life and the workplace? Kay would say yes. Could these same outcomes be achieved in the traditional school setting?

"My belief is that these outcomes could be achieved within the traditional structure without going to charters," says Launey.

"Many of our comprehensive high schools have gone to small learning communities and established career academies without

becoming charters. One example of that is Hiram Johnson, which has a health academy and is doing very well."

Organizations such as Linking Education and Economic Development have partnered with the SCUSD to oversee their fiduciary concerns and to help facilitate educational and business relationships. According to LEED's Kate Fisher, the organization is a coalition of regional business, education, community and government leaders who are working together to strengthen the region's economy through improvement in education and training.

"Sacramento has become a model for developing business and educational partnerships," Fisher notes. "Charter schools are definitely changing the way the community looks at schools. There isn't this dividing line between the students and the rest of the community."

Internships and job shadowing aren't the only ways that charters are connecting to local businesses, communities and philanthropic organizations. Local businesses make monetary and equipment donations, and philanthropic enti-

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Cristo Rey: Schools That Work

Based in Chicago, the Cristo Rey Network operates 13 Catholic college-prep schools in 11 states and uses traditional work-study options to put disenfranchised kids to work in entry-level jobs at local businesses. The organization plans 10 more schools, including one in south Sacramento, which could open as soon as fall of 2006. So far, three religious orders have agreed to co-sponsor the Sacramento school – the California Province of Jesuits, the Sisters of Mercy of Auburn and the Sisters of Notre Dame in Belmont, Calif.

Based on the Cristo Rey model, students attend classes four days a week, and four students share one job at an area business where they work one full day. Jobs include filing, data entry and reception work. Their employer pays the tuition to a private school students would otherwise be unable to attend. The school only enrolls students whose families earn an annual salary of \$30,000 or less.

For Sandy Malaney, CEO of the local software distributor Big Hairly Dog Information Systems Inc. which is offering one of these jobs to students, it's a win-win.

"It's a brilliant idea. There are these brilliant children who weren't lucky enough to be born into a family that could afford to send them to St. Francis or Christian Brothers," she points out. "So from our vantage point, we're going to get some bright kids (who) we can mentor and who are going to help our business. In return, they're getting a resume very young, and a prep-school education. The kids are earning their own education."

Once approved, the Cristo Rey high school will be located on the campus of St. Peter Elementary, which according to Chris Bakes, a local attorney with Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, was recently closed because the community it served could not afford to attend. Although the new school will be open to all

students, it will serve a largely Hispanic population and will also target farm laborer communities, a first for the region.

Bakes, a strong advocate for helping the poor and disenfranchised, was instrumental in spearheading the Sacramento Cristo Rey school project. As a graduate of Catholic schools – All Hallows Elementary School and Jesuit High School – he believes in alternatives to public schools, and he feels it's important to meet the needs of students who cannot afford the typical Catholic school education, which can cost from \$3,000 to \$9,000 or more a year.

"Cristo Rey schools unite the entire community in a solution. It joins corporate, it joins the kid's parents and the volunteers who want to see the model work. It joins segments of society that would otherwise not have contact," Bakes explains. "The Spanish-speaking parents would never be able to place their kids in a job at Vision Service Plan except via Cristo Rey." 

ties – such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – often provide the financial backing in the form of grants to help schools get started.

Although charter schools have financial flexibility, many face the same challenges of any other small business, such as raising operating capital and finding permanent facilities – problems facing Westlake Charter School, a new charter that will share space at Two Rivers Elementary in Natomas. The Met, which is starting its third year, will be sharing space with Jedediah Smith Elementary School.

Westlake raised \$70,000 through creative fundraising but is looking at taking out a business loan until it receives its state ADA funding. According to Karen Snell, media relations coordinator for the California Charter Academy, that money often takes four to six months to arrive.

"Local executive directors or principals have to be entrepreneurs, educational specialists and principal fundraisers who end up having to make not only instructional decisions but also fiscal decisions, and be fully accountable for them," says Castrejón. 