

The Mercury News

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Districts join charter school bandwagon

By Dana Hull
Mercury News

Article Launched: 11/25/2007 01:37:21 AM PST

The number of charter schools in Santa Clara County continues to soar: Twenty-seven charters, including seven that opened this fall, are up and running. And at least four other proposed charter schools are in the works.

But the recent spike comes from an unlikely place: local school districts themselves.

More than one-third of the charter schools in Santa Clara County - including all of the charters in the Cambrian and Campbell Union school districts - are "conversions," or charter schools that were once regular public schools.

Local school districts are increasingly converting their schools to charters so they can attract additional students and take advantage of more flexible state funding.

Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of most state regulations. California's first charter school opened in 1993, and the number has climbed every year. Nearly 700 charter schools serving 220,000 students are now operating in the state. The vast majority are in Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Most charter schools are "start-ups," independent operations launched by parents, teachers and community leaders. Many began because families,

frustrated with the quality of their local schools, became convinced they could do a better job on their own.

School districts have traditionally viewed charter schools as competition. Last spring, for example, the Palo Alto school board rejected a plea from parents who wanted a Mandarin-immersion program, only to change its mind after parents threatened to open a Mandarin charter school.

But other local districts are embracing charter schools.

"Statewide, start-ups still outnumber conversions by three to one," said Caprice Young, president of the California Charter Schools Association. "But we are seeing more conversions because superintendents are saying, 'Wait, we can do this, too.' "

Why charters?

Conversion charters are attractive for two main reasons.

Charter schools get state funding in the form of block grants: The money comes in one big lump sum, as opposed to being divvied up into numerous small pots with strings attached mandating how the money can be spent. The charter system makes it easier for schools to spend money where they feel it is most needed.

The other reason is that charter schools can also enroll any student who is a California resident - which means they can bypass the fight that sometimes occurs between school districts when a student wants to transfer from one district to another.

Many school districts in the greater Bay Area are

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suffering from a decline in enrollment as young families, frustrated by the region's exorbitant cost of housing, move inland. Some school districts that are struggling with declining enrollment are marketing charter schools as options in the hopes that families - including those from neighboring communities - will enroll.

The Cambrian School District in San Jose has four elementary schools and one middle school; all of the schools, except Bagby Elementary, are charter schools.

Keeping their kids

"A lot of our students are transfer students from other school districts," said Julie Swanson, Cambrian's chief business officer, who noted that Sartorette Charter Elementary is right on the border of the Union School District. "But when declining enrollment was happening, a lot of districts wanted to take their kids back or wouldn't give them permission to transfer. Being a charter allowed us to keep kids."

Campbell Union serves 7,300 students, in preschool through eighth-grade, at 12 schools.

The district already has two conversion charters. Sherman Oaks Elementary, which offers a dual immersion program so students can master both English and Spanish, became a charter school in July 2000. And the Village School, which requires parents to volunteer in the classroom at least three hours a week per child, is now in its second year as a charter school.

Conversions continue

Five other schools in the district - Capri, Castlemont, Lynhaven, Monroe and Rolling Hills - converted to charter status this fall.

"There's more flexibility in state funding, and fewer rules that bind us," said Campbell Union Superintendent Johanna VanderMolen. "I don't care if it's called a charter or not. What I care about is student achievement."

While start-up charters tend to be clustered in high-poverty neighborhoods, conversion charters are more common in affluent suburbs. A June 2007 study by EdSource, a non-profit policy organization in Mountain View, found that conversion charters also have more experienced and fully credentialed teachers than start-ups.

Critics call such converted schools CHINOs, or "charters in name only." They say the fact that the converted schools are not really different waters down a charter school law intended to inspire innovation. It's often impossible, they note, to tell that anything is different: the physical campus, student population, teaching staff and curriculum may stay exactly the same.

But Kathy Gibbs, the principal at Rolling Hills Middle School in Campbell Union, is thrilled.

"We're now getting our money as a charter school block grant, and that means we have a lot more flexibility," Gibbs said. "We're using the block grant to keep our school library open all day."

Contact Dana Hull at dhull@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-2706.