Chartering unfamiliar territory in academia

Leaders glance sideways at charter schools, while champions of alternative schooling tout praises

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Renee Bowen was always interested in alternative schooling for her three children.

“I knew early on that my kids were highly creative,” the 40-year-old Valencia resident said. “I felt like the traditional school systems would not be able to recognize their strengths and would just recognize their weaknesses over time.”

When Bowen heard about Santa Clarita Valley International Charter School, her ears perked. She enrolled her children at the Castaic charter school, which emphasizes project-based learning instead of the traditional, textbook-based education.

Two of her children are in fifth grade, and her oldest is in sixth grade.

Bowen’s oldest son has autism. Although he is high-functioning, she was worried about switching schools.

Now, she sees a completely different kid.

“He feels very confident,” she said. “He feels happy, secure, safe.”

In the last few years, the charter-school movement gained momentum in the Santa Clarita Valley, as parents take their children out of public, private and home schools to enroll in charter schools.

Charter schools are open to everyone, publicly funded and do not require tuition. Those wanting to open a new charter school must get approval from a school district, county or state office of education.

Yet, despite their popularity, charter schools often face an uphill battle in the Santa Clarita Valley.

Concerns about charters
Doug Bryce, president of the Saugus Union School District board sees value in charter schools. But he also sees less of a need for them in the Santa Clarita Valley.

“In an area where you have low-performing schools, I think charters are an absolute (option),” he said. “Obviously, we have a very high-performing district,” he said. “I just don’t know where they’re going to meet needs that aren’t being met.”

“I have seen a lot of skepticism about charter schools in general,” Bowen said. “A lot
of people I find don’t understand what charter schools are. ”

But charter-school officials see it another way.

California’s charter-school-approval system creates problems, because it puts traditional schools against charter schools, said Amber Golden Raskin, SCV International’s executive director of business development and operations.

Other states, like Arizona, have completely different boards that oversee and manage charter schools, she said.

At the same time, charter schools also are a new concept, especially locally.

“I think it’s new, and it’s kind of scary,” Raskin said. “And it’s causing change.”

**Einstein demand**
The SCV’s newest charter school, the Albert Einstein Academy for Letters, Arts and Sciences, opened its junior high and high school this year in Valencia.

At first, the William S. Hart Union High School District didn’t approve the charter, but through back-and-forth discussions and meetings, the board eventually approved the school’s charter.

Einstein Academy leaders have tried to petition three local school districts for an elementary school charter, but have yet to find a home.

More than 300 parents have expressed interest in enrolling their children at the elementary school.

This week, the junior high and high school organized a lottery, because the school only had 100 spots and about 300 applicants.

Many have flocked to the Einstein Academy because of its college-preparatory education that emphasizes foreign languages and smaller class sizes.

“It’s how we’re teaching that makes the difference,” Einstein Principal Edward Gika said.

Charter schools often have more flexibility and freedom to streamline the education process.

“It’s hard to do that when you have a school with 4,000 students,” Gika said.

Bowen hopes to see more charter schools locally.

“The whole system is just broken,” she said about the traditional approach to public education. “We don’t need to teach to these tests. There needs to be other ways.”