

[Print This Article](#)

Schools: Chartering a new course

Some say charter schools are the future. Others say they're a niche. Experts say they're staying.

By Tammy Marashlian
Signal Assistant City Editor
tmarashlian@the-signal.com
January 31, 2010

Homework is different for students at Santa Clarita Valley International Charter School.

Instead of filling out workbooks and memorizing historical dates, these kids start their own businesses and set up their own Renaissance fairs.

The project-based learning philosophy sets the school apart from its traditional public counterparts - a draw for some parents who are looking for an innovative, hands-on education for their children.

Educators are split on the issue.

Some say it's the future of education. Others argue the charter school appeals to only a niche population and fulfills the same basic needs as non-charter schools.

Across the state, charter schools have become a topic of controversy as they take students - and money - from traditional public schools.

A different approach

Lessons at SCV International are interactive, encouraging students to think, rather than memorize.

Educators there call it project-based learning.

"It's that natural curiosity that you springboard off of," Principal Dawn Evenson said.

Instead of outdated textbooks, SCV International students do their research on laptops they bring to class.

Kids in language arts classes still read novels, but the teachers have them use the Internet for research. They learn how to figure out which Web sites are legitimate sources and which can't be trusted.

And, if the school receives the grants it's applying for, next year's ninth-graders will receive their own Kindles.

Science lessons don't involve answering questions out of musty old textbooks; kids create habitats for turtles and mice. For business and math? They start up and manage their own businesses.

But local superintendents are quick to point out the successes of traditional schools.

"I would say that in this valley, the elementary districts, as well as the high school district, have been doing a very good job of preparing kids," Sulphur Springs School District Superintendent Robert Nolet said.

"The concept of discovery learning is not a new one. It's also something that has been somewhat under question when it comes under the rigors of testing and test results."

Newhall School District Superintendent Marc Winger said charter schools have focused specialties, which allows them to serve niches.

Winger doesn't worry about charter schools taking Newhall School District's enrollment because the district continues to offer a strong program for students.

'Here to stay'

Heather Riddle of Newhall said she wanted something different for her kids.

"I really liked the way they weren't just sitting at their desks doing paperwork all the time," Riddle said.

In its second year, SCV International's enrollment is at 415 students, Kindergarten through eighth grade.

The student body is a mix of former homeschooled kids and students from local districts.

The public school, chartered through the William S. Hart Union High School District, plans to add ninth-grade next year.

Last year, 809 charter schools served about 345,000 students across California, according to the state's Charter Schools Association

During the 2009-10 school year, California's charter schools saw 56,000 new students - the largest single-year enrollment increase in history, according to the association.

"They've become unquestionably a permanent fixture in the public school landscape," said Priscilla Wohlstetter, University of Southern California professor and director of the Center on Educational Governance.

"It's no longer the question of whether charter schools are here to stay."

More flexibility

The state gives charter schools more control over the money they get.

Charter schools also can be more selective in staffing and what they teach, Wohlstetter said.

At SCV International, that freedom allows the schools to focus on education, rather than state test scores.

"We don't play the testing game," said Amber Golden Rasquin, executive director of business development and operations for SCV International.

"We follow the state standards," she said. "We just teach them in a different method."

The school doesn't have a student of the month program either.

Focusing on project-based learning, Raskin and Evenson say, will lay a stronger foundation for students. They expect strong test scores will be an indirect result of that.

So far, the school, which is in its second year, has had strong test results - an Academic Performance Index (API) score of 844, well above the state average.

However, it's too early to know how much of an influence students' previous educational experiences at traditional schools may have had.

"We need to know they are creative and innovative and have people skills that will carry them into the future," Evenson said.

There have been criticisms that charter schools don't serve the same amount of English-language learners and special-needs kids as traditional schools.

Evenson said that comes back to the lottery system they use to admit students. They also do outreach for Korean and Spanish-speaking families.

"It's all by lottery," Evenson said. "Whoever we draw is who we take."

More power to parents

Charter schools give parents more power in shaping their child's education because the schools are meant to be smaller and focused on a mission.

"As a parent, you can go from charter school to charter school and you get a different sense of each community and what they're offering," Wohlstetter said.

At SCV International, parents are asked to do eight hours of volunteering a month, whether it's doing yard duty or serving lunch.

"It puts responsibility on the parents to be part of their education," Riddle said. "It's kind of a community that's working all together."

It's that need that the Saugus Union School District hopes to address by opening West Creek Elementary School in the fall with up to 500 K-6 students.

The school will be known as the West Creek Music Academy, and will show that music, performing arts and dance can serve as a universal language that links America to other nations, Superintendent Judy Fish said.

"It's not about getting our kids back from charter or private schools," Fish said. "It's about being responsive to the needs of our children in the community."

At the same time, the next step is showcasing what traditional schools are already doing to educate kids.

"As a public school system," Fish said, "I don't know that public educators market themselves and communicate the exciting things we're doing."

<http://archive.signalscv.com/archives/24040/>