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A different approach: Charter schools

Charter schools meet student needs with hands-on learning environment

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March 2, 2009

An increasing number of parents are turning to public charter schools that provide children a more intimate, dynamic and personalized education.

Enrollment at Santa Clarita Valley charter schools is stable or increasing, providing an alternative education for students who don't fit the one-size-fits-all of traditional public schools.

"We are aiming to be different and an alternative that addresses the whole child," said Dawn Evenson, principal of Santa Clarita Valley International School.

SCV International, in its first year, takes a hands-on approach to learning, said Amber Golden Raskin, charter school founder.

Already, 273 applications are in for 132 open spots for the 2009-10 school year, which will offer kindergarten through eighth grade.

Raskin expects to move the school from its Smyth Drive home to a bigger location because of a need for six more classrooms.

The school builds on fact-based learning, organizers said.

"I believe that students need to learn how to find out things for themselves and to work together. You give them the basics of what they need and provide them an opportunity to use their knowledge to create something," said Cheryl Sena, a seventh-grade English teacher at Santa Clarita Valley International Charter School.

For instance, seventh-graders take on a "snack shack" project that requires them to design, market and run their own business selling healthy snacks to other kids.

"It's not about memorization, it's about doing things they're going to be doing in the real world," said Dawn Walker, a parent of three SCV International students.

Sena sees a "huge paradigm shift" in education, given the fiscal crunch public school districts face.

The focus on standardized testing is one reason for the shift, she says, saying it "stifled a lot of creativity."

Charter schools are given more latitude for creativity, and Sena said she feels

empowered as a teacher.

Two other local charter schools, Mission View Public School and Opportunities for Learning Public Charter School, meet the needs of students who have difficulties in the traditional high school setting.

"A great many of our students just cannot achieve in a regular school environment," said Jeff Brown, CEO of Mission View Public School in Canyon Country.

"They can't attend a regular school or they get overwhelmed by the number of classes."

Mission View students include single mothers and students who take care of family members or work full time.

Some Santa Clarita Valley students attend Mission View, but many come from the San Fernando Valley, Brown said.

Mission View has about 180 students, a sharp increase from the 11 students who attended the school when it first opened in 2007, Brown said.

He expects the number to increase.

"I feel that by next year at this time, we should probably double our student base," Brown said.

"We knew there was a need. We actually had students going to Palmdale and Lancaster," Brown said.

Opportunities for Learning, a seventh-through-12th-grade charter school, also provides an intimate education for its students.

"A lot of students, they tell us that the social environment has been a struggle for them, a peer-pressure thing," said Chris Hodge, area supervisor for Opportunities for Learning.

The school has three sites in the Santa Clarita Valley and educates about 600 students, Hodge said.

Mission View students find themselves more focused.

"This school really teaches you more than regular school because you pay more attention," said Abi Garcia, 16.

Garcia attended Golden Valley High School until the second semester of her junior year, when she transferred to Mission View to catch up on credits.

She hopes to return to Golden Valley to graduate.

Classmate 16-year-old Chelsi Portman, who also hopes to return to Golden Valley, says she's learned a lot at Mission View: "I finally learned how to study and I've been getting A's on everything."

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