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Delano caught in tug-of-war over charter school

BY JEFF NACHTIGAL, Californian staff writer
jnachtigal@bakersfield.com | Sunday, Dec 14 2008 12:00 PM

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On one side are Delano public schools, whose students regularly outscore their peers in the rest of Kern County on state tests.

On the other are wealthy business owners who want to create a charter school to send more Delano kids to college.

Round one recently went to the school district, which voted down the charter as too loose on accountability and a danger to funding for existing schools.

In the middle are Delano residents, watching this classic charter school tug-of-war that has played out so many times in other communities.

THE PROJECT

Stuart and Linda Resnick, owners of Paramount Citrus, want to build a charter school on the old Bakersfield College campus in Delano.

It would open next August after the campus undergoes a multi-million dollar face-lift funded by the Resnick Foundation.

School would open with 200 sixth- and ninth-graders, then expand until reaching full K-12 capacity in 2019.

Classes would have up to 22 students and instructional hours would be longer than in the school district, with an emphasis on individualized instruction and college preparation.

Any child would be eligible to attend; a lottery would determine admission if more students are interested than space is available.

And Bard College would run a master of arts in teaching program on site to improve valley education long-term.

Kids are already doing well in Delano schools but more would get to college with the charter school, said its future principal, Brent Malicote.

Delano schools stand to lose about $7,000 per student in state funding, said Delano Unified High School District board member Art Armendariz.

Delano Mayor Sam Ramirez acknowledged the district would get less funding, but still supports the charter's "out of the box" offerings.

"The community wins as a whole," said Ramirez, who taught in Delano and McFarland for six years.

Emma Markham has two grandchildren that would qualify for Paramount Bard.

"I'm not saying the schools are bad, we're just wanting something new, something different," she said.

PHOTOS:

Photo by John Harte / The Californian

Brent Malicote outside the old Bakersfield College Delano campus, which is slated to be the new Paramount Bard Academy, a charter school currently in a battle for approval. Malicote is scheduled to be the principal.

THE OPPOSITION

In November, the Delano Union School District board shot down the Paramount Bard Academy proposal 3-2.

The month before, the Delano Joint Union High School District board released a 10-point resolution of opposition, arguing Paramount Bard would not be "accountable to locally elected school boards."

The charter had initially proposed to operate within the larger school system but negotiations went sour in March over how the school would be run. So it sought approval as an independent.

"They did not want outside agencies telling them how to run their school," said Armendariz, who noted recent academic improvement in Delano and that the charter school could threaten funding for a planned high school in Earlimart.

There were other concerns, said Bill Hornbeck, an attorney who advised the Delano elementary district.

He said the charter didn't propose to serve all K-8 grades before serving 9-12, a violation of state education code; there were conflicts of interest with teachers or staff serving on the charter's

board; and there was a question about how taxpayer-funded school assets would be dispersed were the charter to close.

It's typical for school districts to "view charter schools as competition, and want to keep them out," said California Charter Schools Association spokesman Gary Larson.

"Part of the intent of charter law is to create schools to serve as innovation models, but sadly some school districts think they can do it all themselves," he said.

GOING FORWARD

Paramount Bard will next seek approval from the Kern County Board of Education and if that fails, from the state Board of Education.

Malicote, a teacher and administrator in Delano for 13 years, is optimistic Paramount Bard will get the OK and open in August.

In Delano, elementary district and Paramount Bard officials have met since the district vote to try to forge a working relationship, said Paramount Farming Company Executive Vice President Bill Phillimore.

If and when the charter is approved, student recruitment will begin, Malicote said.

"We're here to take all the kids of Delano and give them an opportunity they wouldn't have otherwise," he said. "There will be no tests to be taken, it is wide open to anybody."

KERN COUNTY CHARTER SCHOOLS

• Valley Oaks Charter, a home school charter run by the Kern County Superintendent of Schools office

• Kern Workforce 2000 Academy Charter

• California Virtual Academy @ Kern

• Pine Mountain Learning Center

• Ridgecrest Charter School, grades K-8

• The California Charter Academy in Bakersfield

CALIFORNIA CHARTER SCHOOLS

What's a charter school?

They're public schools with more flexibility to develop curriculum and experiment with new teaching methods. They can be established by nonprofits, universities or individuals.

How do they start?

Proposals are first reviewed by local school districts. If denied, appeals can be made to the county and state Board of Education.

How are they funded?

Charters are eligible for state funding. Whereas traditional schools rely on categorical funding for specific programs, charter schools can apply for block grants with fewer strings. Charters must be renewed every five years.

How many are there?

There are nearly 750 charter schools in California serving more than 260,000 kids, or about one out of 25 students in the state, according to the California Charter Schools Association.

The majority of California's highest-performing schools that serve children in poverty are charters, according to a recent study released by the association.

Do they survive?

When charters fail, the most common reasons are lack of funding, an inability to find an adequate facility or lack of enrollment, according to the association.

But, it said, there's only a 4 percent closure rate in California.

DELANO SCHOOLS

Four-year dropout rate

Delano Joint Union High School District: 19.4 percent

Kern High School District: 21.9 percent

Kern County: 25.2 percent

California: 21.1 percent

Academic Performance Index (state accountability)

Reflects how schools did on state tests such as the Standardized Testing and Reporting Program and High School Exit Exam. It's on a scale of 200 to 1,000.

Bakersfield City School District: 676

Delano Union Elementary School District: 707

Kern High School District: 661

Delano Joint Union High School District: 674

California

All grades: 742

2-6: 776

7-8: 735

9-11: 702

Source: 2007-2008 figures from the California Department of Education