

Charter Schools Are Here To Stay

A Report on Mendocino County Charter Schools

June 6, 2011

Summary

Charter schools first emerged in the 1990's as a prominent and controversial education reform idea; parents' dissatisfaction with traditional public educational system created the formation of the charter school method of education. Charter schools are part of the re-invention of public education; the original goal of charter schools was to develop new education models that public schools could emulate. Parents, teachers, and community organizations are the founders of charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools that have been freed of many restrictive rules and regulations. In return, these schools are expected to achieve specific educational results within three to five years, or have their charters revoked.

Charter schools receive funding from the District and State according to enrollment. Nationwide, charter schools are funded at 61% of their District counterparts, averaging \$6,585 per pupil compared to \$10,771 per pupil, according to The Center for Education Reform document "Charter School Funding."

The 2010-2011 Mendocino County Grand Jury (GJ) conducted a review of four charter schools within Mendocino County. There are currently eight charter schools in the County. Seven of the eight charter schools have *site-based* instruction and one has an *Independent Study Program*. Ukiah Unified School District oversees four charter schools. Charter schools receive General Purpose Grant funding with additional grants that compliment their direct funding. A juror was recused from this investigation.

Methods

The GJ conducted site visits to four local charter schools: Redwood Academy of Ukiah, Accelerated Achievement Academy, Eel River Charter School, and River Oak Charter School. The GJ interviewed school staff, reviewed documents regarding the history and development of charter schools, reviewed Academic Performance Index (API) Reports, and the 2010 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Reports.

Background

The United States Government passed the *Charter School Act* in 1992; California approved the *Charter School Act* the same year, becoming the second state, after Minnesota, to enact the Charter School legislation. Currently there are 912 charter schools in the State of California.

The Federal School Reform Act of 2001, known as *No Child Left Behind Act*, was used as the Local Education Agency Plan for charter schools. This *Act* was established to help students achieve higher scores on the Academic Performance Index (API).

The State goal is to score 800 out of a possible 1,000 on the Standardized Test. California's average for all schools on the latest 2009-2010 API is 767.

Findings – General

1. Charter schools are tuition free public schools of choice, with open enrollment, that use a specialized curriculum with an individualized approach, placing emphasis on *following the child*.
2. Charter schools are funded by Average Daily Attendance (ADA). Charter school boards make decisions independent of the District, based on the best interest of their students and faculty.
3. Charter schools encourage parental involvement. Parents volunteer their time each school year.
4. The majority of charter schoolteachers are younger, non-union with appropriate State Certificate.
5. The cost to educate a charter school student is less than traditional schools; ADA funds given to charter schools save taxpayer money.
6. Charter schools have lower payrolls, operating expenses, use modular classrooms, and have fewer amenities, such as playground equipment.
7. Charters schools receive funding from six primary sources:

General Purpose Grant
California Lottery

Categorical Block Grant
Federal Categorical Grant

Special Purpose Grant
Fundraising

8. Mini grants and fund raising are used to supplement elective programs: such as music, culture studies, and art. Organized sports are not offered.
9. Charter schools are neighborhood schools, managed by local educators, parents, and community leaders. Students can live in one county and be enrolled in a charter school in an adjacent county.
10. There are less disciplinary actions because the students are motivated to learn, receive individual attention, and are rewarded for good behavior.
11. Most charter schools do not provide transportation to or from school; therefore Independent Study at home is an option for some students.
12. Special Education Services are offered to all schools, including charter schools, to support students with exceptional needs, as defined under State and Federal Code.
13. California State law dictates that every school district be connected to a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).
14. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) assessment is determined by the SELPA "care team" (parents, teachers, program specialists, and agency) for the type of educational plan the student needs.
15. The Special Education Department offers specialized instructional services for children ages birth to 22, who have physical, emotional, or mental disabilities.

Findings - Redwood Academy of Ukiah

16. Redwood Academy of Ukiah (RAU) Charter School began the application process in 1999; the doors opened in September 2000.
17. The RAU and Accelerated Achievement Academy (AAA) Charter Schools are managed by the Charter Academy of the Redwoods and share the same campus, located at the 12th District Fairgrounds in Ukiah. Their mission statement is to prepare students for a successful future, in a safe, challenging, and well-managed charter school.
18. For the RAU and AAA Charter Schools, parents and students must attend an orientation session, submit a complete application form, and agree to provide the effort and support needed for the student's academic progress.
19. The RAU is a school for students from grades 7-12 and has full term accreditation through the Schools Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.
20. The RAU staff consists of a Principal and six full time teachers; median teacher experience is eight years.
21. The RAU is a college preparatory school; courses are designed for acceptance by the University of California and the California State University systems. High levels of mathematic courses are taught.
22. At the time of the GJ visit, there were 158 students enrolled. Class size for grades 7-9 is 30 students, grades 10-12 is 20 students.
23. The school dress code requires students and staff to wear uniforms; navy blue, maroon, or forest green polo shirts are worn with dark jeans/slacks.
24. The school has a lunch program; food is prepared and delivered by the Ukiah Unified School District Cafeteria and served at the school site.
25. Disciplinary action seldom occurs; there is a *Zero Tolerance Policy* regarding drugs, gang activity, baggy pants, and gum chewing on campus.
26. The RAU greatly improved its 2010 API score. The previous API score improved from 803 to 863.
27. After school activities include: Chinese brush painting, journalism/yearbook, team dance, group singing, and mock trial competition, which gives higher grade students the opportunity to experience the American Judicial System first-hand.
28. The RAU was named a California Distinguished School in 2005 and 2009. The U.S. News & World Report named Redwood Academy of Ukiah as one of America's top schools, receiving a Bronze medal in 2008.
29. Staff reports that 81% of the 2011 graduating class are accepted at the college of their choice.
30. A free tutorial program is available on campus after school for students that request assistance.

Findings - Accelerated Achievement Academy

31. Accelerated Achievement Academy (AAA), located adjacent to the RAU campus at the 12th District Fairgrounds in Ukiah, opened in 2002, with grades 6-12. Presently, grades 4-12 are offered. Students in grades 7-10 have some classes on the RAU campus.

32. The AAA is designed for students who are inclined to pursue life/vocational skills. At the time of the GJ visit, student enrollment was approximately 170.
33. Students, on academic probation, are required to participate in a mandatory tutorial class, two hours per week, after school.

Findings - Eel River Charter School

34. Eel River Charter School (ERCS) was one of the first charter schools in the State and first to open in Mendocino County in 1994; it is centrally located in Covelo.
35. In 2006, the ERCS Mission Statement was rewritten. The new Mission Statement states, "Working with families in community through holistic-style¹ teaching to develop educated, responsible, compassionate people."
36. The school board is comprised of volunteer parents and community members.
37. The school has *site-based* instruction and is formed by community members and parents as an alternative to traditional education.
38. The school has four teachers: three credentialed teachers, one non-credentialed, but working to obtain it, and one part-time paid office employee.
39. ERCS is a K-8 school, with 66 students, at a ratio of 15-20 students per instructor.
40. Meals are subsidized for all students through the Federal Nutrition Program; breakfast and lunch are provided at the school.
41. Transportation to and from school is provided by Round Valley Unified School District.
42. The last API score, published in September 2010, was 634. There is acceptance among students, parents, and teachers to repeat the same grade, if necessary.
43. The school has a large exercise area for students, but is limited in playground equipment. The facility is in compliance with the American Disability Act (ADA).
44. After graduation from ERCS, some parents have opted to send their children to other high schools in the county rather than continue their education at Round Valley High School.
45. The number of English Learners (EL) is 10% of the total student enrollment.
46. The school offers a Homework Help Program afterschool, two days per week with transportation provided.
47. Students are not required to wear uniforms; acceptable attire is desirable.
48. The ERCS receives Special Education Funding from SELPA.

Findings - River Oak Charter School

49. River Oak Charter School (ROCS) began operation in 1999, serving students grades K-4, and was located at the 12th District Fairgrounds in Ukiah for only two weeks, before relocating to Leslie Street in Ukiah. On July 1, 2007, the school was re-chartered under the Ukiah Unified School District.
50. The ROCS is a free, public school where teachers use a modified version of the popular Rudolph Steiner curriculum and are dedicated to teach the whole child; head, heart, and hands.

¹ "At its most general level, what distinguishes holistic education from other forms are its goals, its attention to experiential learning and the significance that it places on relationships and primary human values within the learning environment." (Robin Ann Martin – 2003)

51. At the time of the Grand Jury visit, the enrollment was 228 students, grades K-8. Teachers and students remain together from grades 1-8. Teachers meet with parents before the students start the first day of class.
52. There are 10 unionized classroom teachers with California Teaching Credentials and most have been awarded the Waldorf Teacher Certificate.
53. During the summer, teachers from grades 1-8 are required to attend a week long Professional Development Program, in order to teach the students for the subsequent school year.
54. There are eight specialized teachers for the following subjects: advanced math, Spanish, string music, band, woodwork, handwork, painting, and art; two teacher aides assist in grades K-1.
55. The API score for ROCS was 757 for the 2009-2010 school year. The score from the previous school year was 777.
56. There are currently 25 students in the Special Education Program. The program is designed to assist the student that has fallen behind his/her grade level. These students are given an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
57. Thirty students are English Learners (EL).
58. The ROCS has no Federal Nutrition Lunch Program; students bring lunch and eat with their respective teachers in the classroom. The school will provide lunch for students who are not able to bring one.
59. During the 2010-2011 school year, the average daily class size increased from 20 to 26 students due to budget reduction.
60. Students in grades 7-8 are taught computer science.
61. Cursive writing is introduced in the lower grades; homework is not generally assigned until the third grade.
62. Eighth grade students begin a yearlong project for presentation at the end of the school year.
63. Eighth grade students, after organizing and holding fund raising events, are given the opportunity to select field trips associated with their curriculum. In the past, classes have camped at Ft. Ross, attended the Shakespearean Festival in Ashland, Oregon, and a recent class traveled to New Orleans.
64. The majority of students, who complete ROCS, attend Ukiah High School to receive their diploma. Many students continue higher education.
65. Students with perfect attendance are rewarded with certificates and attend a special luncheon with the Principal.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. charter schools continue to collaborate with non-profit agencies, community organizations, and apply for grant funding to accomplish their mission, (Findings 7-8)
2. charter schools continue to encourage students to perform physical activity without the use of expensive playground equipment, (Findings 6, 8, 43)

3. charter schools continue to encourage students to learn life-skills: home economics, budget management, and vocational skills. (Finding 32)

Discussion

Charter schools cultivate a love of learning for students. This helps individuals develop their fullest potential, resulting in more students achieving their goals for higher education.

The GJ determined charter schools satisfy and serve parents, teachers, and students by providing an exciting, viable method of education.

The student-to-teacher ratio does not guarantee students' success in the classroom. There are three main factors that determine the success of the student: parents, teachers, and community support.

Charter school administration, staff, and parents agree with recent research conclusions that television viewing and video game playing for long periods of time are detrimental to the students, limiting their imagination and creativity.

The percentage of dropouts in charter schools is minimal compared to traditional public schools. The parental/teacher involvement and community participation are factors that contribute to the lower dropout rate of students.

Eleven ROCS students competed in the *Redwood Empire Regional Mathcount Competition* in Santa Rosa, on February 5, 2011. An eighth grade student earned first place honors. The student was invited to compete at the State Championship at Stanford University on March 19, 2011. This was the second year that the school participated; the team achieved fourth place finish overall.

According to the proposed Assembly Bill 1172 (Mendoza), if passed, dramatic changes would result to charter school law:

- denies charter school petition, if there is a negative financial impact on school district,
- decrease charter schools' appeal rights,
- completely restrict charter schools' ability to serve students.

The Grand Jury feels this bill is not conducive to serving our children's best interest.

Requested Responses

Redwood Academy of Ukiah Principal (Findings 1-23; Recommendations 1-3)

Accelerated Achievement Academy Principal (Findings 1-12, 24-25, 32; Recommendations 1-3)

Eel River Charter School Principal (Findings 1-11, 26-34, 43; Recommendations 1-3)

River Oak Charter School Principal (Findings 1-12, 35-48; Recommendations 1-3)