

Demand for creative programs creates charter school wait lists

By BoNhia
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- Charters are tuition-free public schools with credentialed teachers open to any student.
- Students undergo the same state standardized testing as their peers in traditional schools but learn in unconventional ways and participate in programs tailored to student interest in subjects like math, science, music, art and leadership.
- Wait lists are on the rise as parent dissatisfaction with traditional schools grow and demand for out-of-the-box teaching increases.

When Susanne Krueger tried to get her three children into [Valley Life Charter School](#) in Visalia two years ago, their names ended up on a waiting list.

The newly formed charter school opened at the corner of Demaree Street and Walnut Avenue in 2011 with 350 students and quickly created a reputation for success with longer school days and a focus on leadership and visual performing arts.

“I figured that would be beneficial for my kids,” said Koch-Krueger, who wasn’t surprised her children had to wait. Everybody was talking about the school, she said.

Her 6-year-old twins were just accepted this school year — at different times. Daughter Jeanna, who was No. 7 on the wait list, started first grade in August. Son Piers was No. 11. He started at Valley Life at the end of March. The oldest, Ella, 9, is still waiting.

“The higher grades are tougher to get into,” Koch-Krueger said. “She has been on the wait list two years now and has not gotten in.”

Ella is one of hundreds of central San Joaquin Valley students waiting to get into a charter school where classes are small and teaching methods are unconventional.

Demand for charter schools that provide a quality education with creativity and programs tailored to student interest has been on the rise despite small budgets, lack of facilities and high-profile failures.

Fresno’s New Millennium Institute of Education closed in August 2013 after it came under the scrutiny of the Fresno County grand jury, which criticized the school for its independent study program and low student achievement.

ACEL charter school in downtown Fresno closed early this month just days after making deep budget cuts and slashing school jobs to keep it afloat amid mounting debt.

“Parents are more selective consumers and in part they are dissatisfied with local schools,” said James Bushman, head of [University High School](#), one of Fresno’s oldest and highest achieving charter schools. “They have choices out there now that did not exist 15 years ago.”

In Fresno County alone, 1,630 students are on waiting lists, according to the [California Charter Schools Associations](#). That number explodes to 91,000 students statewide.

Only two new charters opened in Fresno County in the last two years, while one closed. Kings County lost a school and Madera and Tulare counties have both held steady with no charter school openings or closings in three years.

“We need more schools,” said Jeff Sands, the California Charter Schools Association’s regional director for the Central Valley.

“Momentum is growing,” he said noting that officials can point to waiting lists and the number of students enrolled the first year. “Certainly there is a buzz and dynamism happening.”

Creative focus

Charter schools started in the Valley not long after California became the second state nationwide, behind Minnesota, to pass a charter school law in 1992.

Charters are public, tuition-free schools of choice that are open to any student who wants to attend — so long as there are enough seats. They have credentialed teachers and students undergo the same state standardized testing as their peers in a traditional school.

But charters are unique. The schools are often started by teachers or other educators who want to get away from the bureaucracy of a large school district to work with parents and the community on a specialized education program.

Entire districts can even get in on the act. The [Kingsburg Elementary Charter School District](#) made a bold move in 1996 to become the state’s second charter school district, allowing it to have more local control over its schools.

The movement is an opportunity to “take regulation off schools and experiment to find out how to make students excel,” Sands said.

That means thinking outside the box and creating schools that have a focus or, in many cases, a theme. University High is a college preparatory program with an emphasis on music and science. [Kepler Neighborhood School](#) in downtown Fresno teaches through service learning.

Others like [Hallmark Charter School](#) in Sanger are a hybrid program offering independent studies at home and site-based learning in a small classroom with an emphasis on art and music.

In Visalia, Valley Life Charter is making waves with parents who want their children to learn about leadership while incorporating performing arts like theater and music into their education. The school’s longer day from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. is also popular with parents, said principal Lori Lackey.

Now in its fourth year, the independent school chartered by the [Tulare County Board of Education](#) has 606 students. In February, there were 160 children on the waiting list. The school received more than 230 new applications for next year, but only 65 seats are available.

Krueger, the Visalia mom, likes the school’s small class size of 24 students, its relaxed school uniform requiring shirts with collars, and the emphasis on leadership skills and extracurricular activities that include two years of required dance class and Spanish, she said.

There’s also what she calls a child-centered approach to help children become better students through learning, not just studying to get the highest test scores. Her son Piers had trouble reading but was told his problem wasn’t bad enough to get help at the traditional public school, she said.

“I was very concerned ... English isn’t my first language so I really can’t help him with reading,” said Koch-Krueger, whose first language is German. “I’ve already talked to the teacher and she said we’ll get him help.”

Filling up

In central Fresno, [Valley Preparatory Academy Charter School](#), chartered by [Fresno Unified School District](#), has a waiting list with 71 names. The school, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, is nearly maxed out with 360 students on a 4 1/2-acre facility that used to be home to a private school run by Grace Nazarene Church.

“We are looking to open another site in the next couple of years,” said director Shelly Lether. “The location we will target is where the need is for quality access.”

School leaders want to go into areas where districts have schools with low test scores so youngsters can have access to a rigorous and high-quality education.

Valley Prep, which is often mistakenly identified as a private school, started out targeting homeless and foster children in an area of town with high poverty. It teaches character development and leadership in small classes and works hard to create a campus where all students can feel safe.

“Parents want smaller classroom size and access to rigorous and high quality academics,” said Lether, who knows every student by name.

The founders of Kepler Neighborhood School saw a need for a school based on service learning, or community service, in an area of downtown where half the families live in poverty and existing schools are struggling.

Kepler, chartered by Fresno Unified, opened its doors at the [Cornerstone Church](#) in August 2013 with 210 students. Its education plan integrates visual and performing arts with technology, the Common Core curriculum that sets new academic standards in math and English, small group learning instruction and community projects. A wait list with 100 names formed after only one year.

In February, 50 students were on the list and 311 students were pre-enrolled for next year. The school will enroll 330 students.

“For a second year, that’s huge,” said director Christine Montanez. “We knew it would be a challenge, but the community has been receptive. We’re really satisfied with how the community has accepted what we’re doing.”

When enrollment reaches about 396 students, school leaders hope to expand with a preschool first, then a second Kepler school wherever the need is in the Valley, Montanez said.

Margie Upton didn’t expect a wait list when she tried enrolling her daughter, Jackie, 12, into sixth grade early last year.

“I was disappointed since it was a newer school,” Upton said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

But the short wait was worth it. Jackie, formerly a student in [Clovis Unified School District](#), started at Kepler in January and has not looked back.

“They are able to fine tune and meet the needs of the students more than large districts,” said Upton who wanted a school that could focus on her daughter’s academic needs. “They really serve the children well. She is excelling and her self-esteem has hugely increased.”

In Sanger, Hallmark Charter School has operated for 16 years. The hybrid program, which combines home schooling with on-site classes, has 420 students enrolled in kindergarten to 12th grade.

The school sends teachers to a student’s home once a week to create lesson plans and check homework. Students can attend class on campus, near [Sanger High School](#), one to three times a week for science, math, Spanish, computer, art and music classes — subjects not easily taught at home by a parent, said director Alfred Sanchez.

Because Hallmark is a hybrid program, it does not have a wait list. But this year is the first the school ran out of high

school teachers, Sanchez said.

“People are looking for another option,” Sanchez said. “It’s been great to see the growth in charter schools because they offer another option.”

Fresno parent Sarah Ellis wanted a school that would accommodate her daughter’s health needs. Susannah, 13, had spinal fusion surgery in the summer of 2013 that limited her physical ability to carry books. With a doctor’s note, schools would typically provide an aide, Ellis said, but Susannah’s traditional public school would not help.

Ellis enrolled her daughter at Hallmark after hearing about the school from some friends. Hallmark told Ellis that Susannah’s “limitations are no problem.” When Susannah is at school, her mother helps carry her books.

“Charter school is a great asset to the community because it allows for kids who don’t necessarily fit in at other schools,” Ellis said.

Wait lists are perhaps synonymous with University High. Many parents are trying to get their kids into the rigorous school where students learn Latin, take music classes and can enroll in Fresno State courses — for free.

“We are the boutiques in the big mall kind of world,” said Bushman, head of the school.

The school opened in 2000 with 100 students and now serves families that live in 45 different ZIP codes and nine cities, including Visalia, Oakhurst, Sanger and Caruthers. This application period, 10 students applied who are American but are attending schools overseas.

Carolyn Plunkett’s three daughters attended magnet schools in Fresno Unified before moving on to University High. The oldest two have graduated and the youngest is a freshman.

“It’s a college prep school that does music and Latin as a foundation, but also incorporates the performance piece so kids are in choir,” said Plunkett, who also sits on the school’s board of directors. “We liked that approach, that it was a comprehensive way of learning and it was a small school, and that it just was very innovative.”

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