

In struggle to balance budgets and attract students, charter schools sometimes fail

By Hannah
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Imagine running a school on a bare-bones budget. You get money from the state for classroom basics, but cash for sports, or a reading specialist? No way.

You'll likely have to struggle to rustle up enough money to rent classroom space each year. Teachers' salaries will fall below their city school counterparts. And if you have a bus to take children to and from school, or even a cafeteria to serve lunches, you're lucky.

Welcome to the grind of operating a charter school.

These aren't just growing pains that will be massaged out with time. For many local charter schools, especially the smallest ones, simply keeping afloat is an ongoing challenge.

Some, like [ACEL Charter](#) in downtown Fresno, end up sinking.

"I could literally hit a button and play back the same script I hear over and over again from principals who call me," Jody Thulin said in an interview. Thulin is a financial adviser hired to sort out accounts at the recently shuttered ACEL. "It's 'I'm so frustrated because I don't understand my budget. I'm spending my money blindly.'"

The bottom line?

"The No. 1 reason why charters fail is financial," Thulin said.

Operating a charter is like juggling the demands of both a business and a school at the same time. Traditional schools have a district office with staff to keep watch over finances. But charters often can't afford to hire a business officer, and instead choose to contract with off-site advisers. Such was the case with ACEL.

Sometimes charters have strong parent financial support or a private backer, Thulin said. More often, she said, charters rely only on grants and state money, which is calculated based on student attendance.

In the central San Joaquin Valley the number of charter schools and the students who attend them are growing. Only two local charters, ACEL and New Millennium Institute of Education, have closed in recent years. Yet for schools with low enrollment — ACEL's was 117 students when it closed — affording even the basics can be tough.

Some say success is harder to attain than just keeping books in the black.

Jeff Sands, regional director for the [California Charter Schools Association](#), said charter schools are held liable each year by those they serve. Parents can always choose to send their children elsewhere.

"The choice dynamic itself brings in a level of accountability," he said, adding that parents and teachers vote "with their feet."

"With district schools, often you have to keep them open and you have to try to make change. But with charter schools, there's a lot at stake. If they're not doing well, they close."

Charters also are scrutinized by the agency that oversees them, he said, which is often the local public school district

or county office of education. If a charter isn't doing well financially or academically, its supervising agency can close it.

Some say the overseers should play a bigger role in day-to-day operations.

Dave Childers, who was ACEL's executive director until 2012, said he wishes Fresno Unified administrators would have guided him more closely during his tenure leading the school.

"Whether it's finance, whether it's programmatic, whether it's compliance, all of those issues the district is in a pretty good position in terms of staffing, manpower and expertise," he said.

Charters usually don't have the money to hire all the administrators they need. So they look to their county office of education or consultants they hire for advice. But, he said, "If it comes from the authorizer, it just gives the charter school a much greater chance of being successful."

It's always a balancing act, Sands said.

"If districts are too involved then they're quashing autonomy and innovation. And if they're not involved enough, then schools can run completely off the rails."

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