

Public schools work to remain relevant as options (charters, private, home) grow

By Hannah
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Families in the central San Joaquin Valley have a long list of options for educating their children. They can go to the neighborhood school or choose a less traditional path, like charters, private or online schools, or educating their kids at home. Read the story: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2015/03/20/4437817/public-schools-work-to-remain.html> Read the series: <http://www.fresnobee.com/eye-on-ed> THE FRESNO BEE

- The landscape of education is changing in the Valley, with more parents choosing to send their children to charter schools and other options they believe will best serve their families.
- Some public districts have added less-traditional schools and programs to compete with new options.
- Nontraditional schools are facing challenges of their own, like falling enrollment, tight budgets and low academic performance.

It's an overcast morning at [Fresno Adventist Academy](#) in east Fresno, and teacher Christopher Bispham's fourth-graders are jotting down answers to the question of the day: What does it mean to be an American?

The private school children, clad in blue-and-gray uniforms, are each making their own lists. It means freedom to worship God, one girl says. Freedom to make your own choices, says another. Then it's 10-year-old Rubi Munoz's turn.

"Being an American means you can go to the school you want to go to," she says.

It's a simple answer, but one that has become a quintessential piece of the American education tradition and continues to dust up suspicion among some public school advocates.

From urban neighborhoods in Milwaukee to mountain towns like Coarsegold, for decades parents have cherished their right to decide how best to educate their children — whether it's a private, public or charter school, online or at home.

In California's central San Joaquin Valley, the school choice movement is swelling, with more parents than ever sending their [children to charter schools](#). Enrollment at private schools, which dipped during the recession, is picking up again. And home and online schools continue to attract interest from Valley families.

Having options is attractive to families for a number of reasons, school choice advocates say. But threaded throughout the school choice conversation — whether it's the local parochial option or a home school run out of the family kitchen — is the desire to give students a more personalized education.

"It's important that our kids do well in school, but it's not just about grades, it's about whether they are learning in a way that they understand," said Clovis mother Brandy Freeland, who sends four of her children to charter schools and teaches two at home. "We don't want them to just complete worksheets and memorize information. We want it to be tangible for them."

As the Valley's school ecosystem evolves, those on the other side of the fence — who lead traditional public schools

— acknowledge competition for students is growing. In districts like Clovis Unified, officials reject the suggestion that neighborhood public schools can't do the job the best. Meanwhile, districts like Fresno Unified seem to be taking cues from surrounding schools.

Alternative schools have their own concerns. The financial toll of the recession has forced some homeschooling parents back to work and kept some schools like Fresno Adventist, which adopted a four-day school week, from reinstating a fifth day. Other longstanding headaches, like raising academic achievement at schools with low standardized test scores, continue to slow progress for some charter schools.

A unique academic promise

Fifth-grader Fin Walling sings and bops his shoulders along with his [Kepler Neighborhood School](#) classmates to the "Interjections" Schoolhouse Rock grammar video projected at the front of the classroom.

It takes a second glance at Fin to see he's smaller than the other kids. He's younger too, but that hasn't held back the young brainiac. At Kepler, the 8-year-old was allowed to skip two grades, from third to fifth, and he's already taking eighth-grade science.

"For students who are high-skilled kiddos, they can grow here," principal Christine Montanez said.

It's a typical afternoon at Kepler, where students in grades kindergarten through eight sing and dance their way through the school day. The school, which opened two years ago, has quickly become an example of Fresno's diversity, a haven for brainy youngsters who need a challenge, and a model of how an alternative education can help students become confident young citizens.

The school focuses on the arts, service learning and community involvement. Older students spend class time exploring downtown Fresno with their teachers, then pitch ideas for revitalizing run-down street corners. Younger students create and sell animal magnets to help raise money for Critter Creek Wildlife Station, a Squaw Valley animal education and rescue nonprofit.

The charter school of 248 students has drawn families from the neighborhood, but also from Clovis, Sanger and other nearby communities, Montanez said.

"Some of the comments I have heard are, 'I feel like my child is not being challenged in their current school,' " she said. "(Being a charter) allows us the autonomy to hire the staff we need, purchase the facilities we need and teach in a way we know meets the needs of our diverse student population."

The idea of personalizing education is a message that's being repeated among many charter, private and home-school advocates in the Central Valley.

Students at extreme risk of failing or dropping out are getting a new focus from local charter schools like the [School of Unlimited Learning](#), or SOUL.

Parents of special needs children, like the Freelands who home-school their two special needs daughters and send their others to Kepler and [Sierra Charter School](#), like knowing they can find what works best for each of their kids.

For home-school parent Tina Smith, the idea of customizing education was one of the most attractive aspects of teaching her two children at home. Smith knew early on that she wanted to home-school, a decision inspired by positive experiences she had working at a private school and a residential education program.

Aside from math, Smith rarely uses a formal curriculum to instruct her children. She follows their lead — if they're interested in prehistoric times, she'll plan lessons on the formation of Earth and the evolution of species.

"I'm not interested in putting them in assembly-line education," said Smith, a Fresno resident. "The key is trying to

figure out how to make it fun.”

Competing for students

Some parents prefer to keep their children in their neighborhood public school because of proximity or a connection with the community. Other districts are trying their hand at inventive choices, like specialized high schools and magnet programs.

The idea of the comprehensive neighborhood school has been the norm in Valley urban education for decades.

It's a trend that went on mostly interrupted until 1992, when the [state allowed the formation of public charter schools](#) run by districts, nonprofits or other organizations.

The landscape of education has changed drastically in the years since then. More than 547,000 California students now attend 1,184 charters statewide, a [February report](#) from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools shows.

In Fresno County, the number of [charter school students has slowly edged up](#) from 8,965 students in 2007 to an estimated 12,788 this school year.

The numbers are still small. Youngsters at charters represent just 6% of all Fresno County students. The numbers are even smaller for private schools. About 5,200 Fresno County students attend tuition-funded schools, state data show.

Even so, the shift has created a tug of war among schools, each trying to capture a market share — and in the case of charter and public schools, the state money that goes along with it. Charter and public schools are funded based on the number and attendance rate of students.

School choice advocates say the options have created healthy competition with neighborhood schools and upped the pressure on public districts to create options of their own.

In the past year, [Fresno Unified School District](#) has laid plans to open a new specialized entrepreneurial high school. The district offers several magnet programs and has long partnered with Clovis Unified on the [Center for Advanced Research and Technology](#), or CART.

The district has taken other creative steps, like lengthening the class day at some elementary schools and redesigning high school-level career programs.

“You can see the district has really made that a priority on behalf of all students in a variety of regions across town, to continue to attract our Fresno families to stay here,” said Holland Locker, assistant superintendent for school leadership.

The moves don't surprise Jeff Sands, Central Valley regional director for [California Charter Schools Association](#).

“To me it seems like now is the time, in fact more so in the past, I think Fresno Unified is looking at every option on how to create, innovate and significantly improve education for the city of Fresno,” he said. “You don't have Fresno Unified trying to take down charters by creating options. ... They recognize what we recognize. Parents want options.”

Other districts are sticking to tradition.

[Clovis Unified](#), which continues to be one of the state's highest-achieving districts academically, has found a model that works, officials say.

“I do see some value in these unique opportunities, but at the same time, I think people don't go out and purposely search for a charter school when they're absolutely pleased with the opportunities that their home school, their public school can offer,” said Ann-Maura Cervantes, director for student services and school attendance.

A menu of options still exists there, officials say. The district operates an online charter school, and high school students can choose to attend CART or one of the district's other career technical programs.

But the idea of the neighborhood school is still the hallmark of Clovis Unified's mission. Few students transfer out of Clovis to neighboring public districts — between 200 and 240 each year, district data show — while more than 2,300 students transfer in. The tradition of neighborhood students moving through elementary, middle and high school together is what keeps families loyal to Clovis Unified, officials say.

"If it was open enrollment and everybody could go anywhere they wanted to, we would not fear that," said Carlo Prandini, deputy superintendent. "People find a way to come to Clovis."

Not without challenges

Alternative schools are facing strains of their own.

Many are still digging out from recession-era financial stresses, like Fresno Adventist Academy, which has seen a recent enrollment spike but continues to operate on a four-day week. [Statewide data show](#) private school enrollment has steadily declined since the mid-1990s.

[Mountain Home School](#), a small charter in Oakhurst that offers part-time classes for students who do most of their schooling at home, is also trying to spring back from the recession.

"More parents had to go back to work that used to be able to be at home to do the schooling," said principal Mindy Klang, noting enrollment has dropped slightly in recent years. [State data show](#) about 45 students left between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years, but overall enrollment increased by a dozen students since 2008.

Other pressures are building, like proving alternatives can compete academically with regular public schools.

Finding a common measuring stick is tough, since private and home-schooled children are not required to take state standardized tests. But some comparisons can be made, especially among public and charter schools, which are both required by the state to test children each year.

Many Fresno charter schools continue to [perform far below their public school](#) peers on state tests. Of schools within Fresno County, [charters on average scored 25 points below](#) noncharter schools on the state's 2012-13 academic performance index. They scored 33 points below the statewide average.

It's a blemish advocates like Sands explain by the area's disproportionate number of charters aimed at at-risk students.

Sands points out that while charter scores overall are lower than local district averages, "statewide and individual school results often demonstrate a higher success rate among historically underserved students."

In some cases, charters do as well or better than regular public schools.

In Kings County in 2012-13, charters [scored an average of 71 points higher on the state's API](#), California Charter Schools Association data show. The [University High](#) college-prep charter on the Fresno State campus was named a National Blue Ribbon School this school year and is continually ranked among the state's best-performing programs.

But it's not test scores that push school advocates like James Bushman, head of school at University High, to extol the worthiness of school choice.

Bushman, who has made himself a fixture in the Fresno charter school community, envisions Fresno someday adopting a ["portfolio" approach](#) to education. It's a model being embraced by districts in states like Colorado and New York, and one that aims to create a seamless network between neighborhood schools and other options. The goal is to manage all schools — public and charter — to ensure every neighborhood has a solid set of options.

It could be the answer to charter-public rivalries, Bushman said.

“How wonderful it would be if there was a clearly understood portfolio of schools and the schools worked in tandem so they weren’t eating each other’s lunch,” he said.

But, Bushman added, “We’re not there yet.”

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