

Charter Schools: What Are They?

A Report on Western Nevada County Charter Schools

Summary

The 2012-2013 Nevada County Grand Jury conducted a review of the 14 schools that have charters in Western Nevada County.

Even after several decades in existence, charter schools still remain a mystery to many in California, including here in Nevada County. Many individuals are not aware that charter schools are public schools. Charter schools have been freed of many requirements and regulations. In return for more flexible scholastic requirements, charter schools are expected to achieve specific academic results within three to five years.

The purpose of the report is two-fold

- to clarify confusion surrounding the purpose, structure, and funding of the county's charter schools,
- to provide the local public with basic information about each specific charter school, highlighting the similarities and differences between the sites.

Using this information on charter schools, the public can understand what charter schools are and are not. Those families personally interested in charter schools will also gain a better understanding of each school and its offerings.

Reason for Investigation

To clarify charter schools' functions and requirements in Nevada County, the Nevada County Grand Jury (Jury) looked into the currently active charter schools to better understand their similarities and differences, their histories and missions. The intent was to present this information to the public. This report's purpose is to educate the community about charter schools, and to help parents make more knowledgeable academic choices for their children.

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933.5, the Grand Jury has the authority to investigate public schools within the state.

Background

Charter schools first emerged in the 1990s as an innovative alternative education reform concept, based on many parents' dissatisfaction with traditional public school systems. Believing that expanding and personalizing teaching methods could result in better educated students, charter schools were started by parents, teachers and community organizations throughout California, including Nevada County. The goal of charter schools was to reinvent and revitalize public education.

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. In California there are currently 1,065 charter schools which have an enrollment of 484,000 students (see Appendix, #1).

A charter school is started with a petition that must contain a required number of signatures and must address sixteen required elements (see Appendix, #2). The proposal must also include four conditions (see Appendix, #3), three prohibitions (see Appendix, #4), the proposed location of the charter school, and a multi-year budget. Within thirty calendar days of receipt of the complete petition, the granting authority board must hold a public hearing. Within sixty calendar days of receipt of the complete petition, the granting authority must either grant or deny the charter, though time constraints can be extended by mutual agreement.

Charter schools are not allowed to charge tuition. Nevada County charter schools receive funding from the state, the Nevada County Office of Education, and their individual school districts based on student enrollment. On average, according to The Center for Educational Reform, charter schools are funded at 61% of their traditional school counterparts, averaging \$6,585 per student per year. This contrasts with the \$10,771 per student per year spent by traditional public schools.

Procedures Followed

Of the 14 schools chartered in Western Nevada County, the Jury visited 11 local campuses:

- Bitney College Prep High School
- Chicago Park Charter School
- Forest Charter School
- Grass Valley Charter School
- Nevada City Charter School
- Nevada City School of the Arts

- Sierra Montessori Academy
- Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School
- Union Hill Charter School
- Vantage Point Charter School
- Yuba River Charter School

The Jury interviewed school staff, viewed the campus locales and facilities, and reviewed documentation regarding each school’s history, development, academic offerings, and budgets. Additionally, for three charter schools without campuses in Nevada County, the Jury conducted research through their websites:

- John Muir Charter School
- Los Angeles Education Corps Charter School
- Sierra Academy of Expeditionary Learning

The Jury also interviewed members of the Nevada County Office of Education (NCOE).

Facts

General Charter School Facts

- F.A.1.** Charter schools are public schools of choice.
- F.A.2.** Charter schools are not allowed to charge tuition.
- F.A.3.** Charter schools use a specialized curriculum with an individualized approach.
- F.A.4.** Charter schools are allowed to be “deregulated” in exchange for a contract for performance-based accountability.
- F.A.5.** Charter schools are schools managed by local educators, parents, and community leaders.
- F.A.6.** Charter school students are required by law to take state-mandated exams.
- F.A.7.** Charter schools are not required to use state-mandated textbooks.
- F.A.8.** Teachers are required to have a credential (or the equivalent) in core subjects:
- English
 - History
 - Math
 - Science

- Social Studies

F.A.9. Charter school teacher salaries are sometimes not as high as those in non-charter public schools, due to

- the teachers in charter schools being more flexible regarding collective bargaining,
- charter school teachers being more flexible in their salary and benefit requirements in order to teach in a more intimate environment or to have a stronger role in the school’s decision-making process,
- charter school teachers being newer teachers than those in non-charter schools.

F.A.10. According to the *National Education Association, National Center for Educational Statistics*, California traditional teachers’ starting salary is \$56,950 and average salary is \$67,871 while California charter school teachers’ starting salary is \$32,830 - \$49,245 and average salary is \$39,865 - \$59,798.

F.A.11. Operating expenses for Nevada County charter schools are lower than those for non-charter public schools.

F.A.12. Some Nevada County charter schools have modular classrooms.

F.A.13. California State Law requires every school district be connected to a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).

F.A.14. “Special needs” classes are offered to all schools, including charter schools, to support students with exceptional needs, as defined under State and Federal Code.

F.A.15. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) assessment is determined by the SELPA “care team” (parents, teachers, and program specialists) for the type of educational plan each student needs, including those with physical, emotional, or mental challenges.

F.A.16. Charter schools are funded by a variety of sources based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA). ADA is defined as the number of days of pupil attendance divided by number of days taught.

F.A.17. Additionally, charter schools are authorized to receive funding in accordance with *The Federal Elementary & Secondary Education Act*, Part B, Sections 502-511 from

- General Purpose Block Grants (ADA Funded),
- Categorical Block Grants,

- Special Purpose Grants,
- Federal Categorical Grants,
- Local Fundraising/Parental Contributions/Donations,
- California Lottery.

F.A.18. Like all schools, mini grants and fundraising are used to supplement elective programs such as art, cultural studies, and music.

F.A.19. According to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) website, 19 schools in Nevada County are accredited by WASC, including Bitney College Prep High School, Forest Charter School, Vantage Point Charter School, John Muir Charter School, and Los Angeles Education Corps (see Appendix, #5).

F.A.20. Charter schools are not required to provide transportation or nutritional services.

Western Nevada County Charter School Facts

Bitney College Prep High School

F.A.21. Bitney College Prep High School is located at 135 Joerschke Drive, Grass Valley.

F.A.22. The grade levels are Grades 9-12.

F.A.23. The staffing consists of a principal, nine credentialed teachers, teaching administrators, and members of the community who teach non-core subjects.

F.A.24. The current enrollment is 85 students.

F.A.25. Bitney College Prep High School was chartered in 1998. It has been at its current site for the past four years.

F.A.26. The school has a record of high state-wide required test scores, advanced placement scores, and student attendance rates.

F.A.27. Bitney College Prep High School designs academic programs to fit the individual needs of the students, offering alternative curricula and methodology beyond that of traditional public schools.

F.A.28. The school offers several innovative activities, such as travel and wilderness experiences, a variety of elective classes, and assurance that students are adequately prepared for their continuing education after leaving the school.

F.A.29. Bitney College Prep High School's curriculum is based on the University of California's *General Education Requirements*.

Chicago Park Charter School

- F.A.30.** Chicago Park Charter School is located at 15725 Mt. Olive Road, Grass Valley.
- F.A.31.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.32.** The staffing consists of a principal, seven credentialed teachers, two special education teachers who offer speech and language resources, and one part-time music teacher.
- F.A.33.** The current enrollment is 21 charter students who are co-mingled with 119 traditional students.
- F.A.34.** Chicago Park Charter School is site-based on a traditional school campus.
- F.A.35.** By site-basing the charter students, the school is able to enroll students without a district transfer.

Forest Charter School

- F.A.36.** Forest Charter School is located at 470 Searls Avenue, Nevada City.
- F.A.37.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 12.
- F.A.38.** The staffing consists of a director and 34 credentialed teachers.
- F.A.39.** The current enrollment is 700 students.
- F.A.40.** Forest Charter School was chartered in 2003.
- F.A.41.** The school is administered by a council comprised of five parents, one community leader, two teachers and one student.
- F.A.42.** Forest Charter School offers “personalized learning,” offering a variety of educational schedules, from home schooling to nearly full-time site-based attendance.
- F.A.43.** To attend the school, students are interviewed to ensure they can meet the school’s requirements for commitment and self-focus ability.

Grass Valley Charter School

- F.A.44.** Grass Valley Charter School is located at 235 Auburn Street, Grass Valley.
- F.A.45.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.46.** The staffing consists of a principal, 17 classroom credentialed teachers, four home study credentialed teachers, and several specialists.

- F.A.47.** The current enrollment is 450 students, including 70 home-study students.
- F.A.48.** Grass Valley Charter School was chartered in 1993.
- F.A.49.** The school has a combination of classroom and out-of-classroom learning.
- F.A.50.** The school focuses on building a sense of civic and social activism in students.
- F.A.51.** Grass Valley Charter School’s mission is to inspire students to achieve high standards, create quality work, and embrace lifelong learning.

Nevada City Charter School

- F.A.52.** Nevada City Charter School is located at 750 Hoover Lane, Nevada City.
- F.A.53.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.54.** The staffing consists of a principal, secretary, and five teachers.
- F.A.55.** The current enrollment is 60 students.
- F.A.56.** The current site is the remodeled “Clubhouse” facility adjacent to the Nevada City School District Office and Seven Hills School.
- F.A.57.** Nevada City Charter School is a home-study support school.
- F.A.58.** On-site classes are offered two days a week with two other days providing tutorial support.
- F.A.59.** Students are not required to attend on-site classes and are provided with individualized lesson plans for home study.
- F.A.60.** Students are encouraged to participate in enrichment courses taught or offered at Seven Hills School.
- F.A.61.** The enrichment courses are offered at no cost.

Nevada City School of the Arts

- F.A.62.** Nevada City School of the Arts is located at 13032 Bitney Springs Road, Nevada City.
- F.A.63.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.64.** The staffing consists of a director and 22 teachers.
- F.A.65.** The current enrollment is 276 students.

- F.A.66.** Nevada City School of the Arts was chartered in 1994 with a curriculum that focused heavily on the arts, such as dance, performance arts, music, art, and art history.
- F.A.67.** The school does not charge tuition, but requests parents donate \$800 per student per year to supplement expenses.
- F.A.68.** The standardized test scores for the younger students are initially lower than those in more traditional schools.
- F.A.69.** By Grade 8, test scores are comparable with scores of students from other schools.

Sierra Montessori Academy

- F.A.70.** Sierra Montessori Academy is located at 16229 Duggans Road, Grass Valley.
- F.A.71.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.72.** The staff consists of an interim director, three Montessori-certified teachers, and two instructional aides who provide Montessori-type instruction for Kindergarten-Grade 4. Grades 5-8 staff includes two teachers whose instruction is based on California core curriculum standards.
- F.A.73.** The current enrollment is 93 students.
- F.A.74.** Sierra Montessori Academy was chartered in 2005 and leases its facility from Pleasant Ridge Union School District.
- F.A.75.** This school offers a traditional Montessori curriculum (see Appendix, #6) for the lower grades, and traditional classes for the higher grades.
- F.A.76.** Pre-admittance conferences assist parents in determining whether Sierra Montessori Academy is the most effective placement for their children.
- F.A.77.** The school does not offer sports programs and elective classes are only available on an after-school basis.
- F.A.78.** Many Sierra Montessori Academy graduates continue their education through a commercial home-school program, rather than attending a traditional on-site high school.

Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School

- F.A.79.** Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School is located at 111 New Mohawk Road, Nevada City.

- F.A.80.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.81.** The staffing consists of a director and seven credentialed teachers.
- F.A.82.** The current enrollment is 109 students.
- F.A.83.** Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School provides students and their families with a blend of home schooling and site-based programs.
- F.A.84.** The school was one of the first schools granted a charter in 1993 by the State of California.
- F.A.85.** The school provides an academic core education and a flexible format for its students.
- F.A.86.** Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School combines home-study and on-site attendance, with 40-50% of its students attending classes two days a week at the campus on New Mohawk Road.
- F.A.87.** Twin Ridges Home Study Charter School offers special needs programs for students. There is also a school psychologist available for students.

Union Hill Charter School

- F.A.88.** Union Hill Charter School is located at 11638 Colfax Highway, Grass Valley.
- F.A.89.** The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.
- F.A.90.** The staffing consists of a program director and three credentialed teachers.
- F.A.91.** The current enrollment is 65 students.
- F.A.92.** Union Hill Charter School offers three different categories of study, including
- an at-home study program with periodic scheduled meetings with educational specialists,
 - a partial at-home study program with attendance Tuesdays and/or Fridays for block classes at Union Hill School,
 - a hybrid program for seventh and eighth graders, which consists of at-home study, plus daily on-campus classes for either a math-science block or a language-social studies block.
- F.A.93.** The school offers special education programs, along with pre-school and after-school programs.

F.A.94. Union Hill Charter School encourages character building and development of the “whole student”.

F.A.95. Most Union Hill Charter School students transition into Nevada Union High School.

Vantage Point Charter School

F.A.96. Vantage Point Charter School is located at 10862 Spenceville Road, Penn Valley.

F.A.97. The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 12.

F.A.98. The staffing consists of a principal, three credentialed teachers, and one credentialed tutor.

F.A.99. The current enrollment is 60 students, with 45 being high school students.

F.A.100. Vantage Point Charter School was formerly known as Ready Springs Charter School.

F.A.101. An advisory council, usually comprised of three staff members and four parents, has traditionally assisted with the administration of Vantage Point Charter School.

F.A.102. Each student meets weekly with a credentialed teacher for direction, assessment, and planning of a five-day study schedule.

F.A.103. Math tutors are available Monday through Friday at the campus, and on-line support is offered.

F.A.104. Relationships and communications between students and teachers are important, with each student’s uniqueness respected.

F.A.105. Vantage Point Charter School is willing to “take chances” on students, and accepts credit-deficient students or those who have not succeeded elsewhere.

Yuba River Charter School

F.A.106. Yuba River Charter School is located at 505 Main Street, Nevada City.

F.A.107. The grade levels are Kindergarten-Grade 8.

F.A.108. The staffing consists of a director, 11 full-time and three part-time credentialed teachers, and several specialists who offer elective classes.

F.A.109. Teachers remain with their classes from first through fifth grades and sixth through eighth grades.

F.A.110. The current enrollment is 314 students.

- F.A.111.** Yuba River Charter School was first chartered in 1993.
- F.A.112.** Yuba River Charter School offers alternative curricula and methodology based on Waldorf-method curriculum (see Appendix, #7).
- F.A.113.** Yuba River Charter School offers a variety of electives during the school day, such as foreign languages and music.
- F.A.114.** Yuba River Charter School has a record of high test scores, advanced placement scores, and student attendance.
- F.A.115.** Many students remain at the school through graduation.

John Muir Charter School

- F.A.116.** John Muir Charter School is chartered through the NCOE.
- F.A.117.** The NCOE provides business administration services for the school.
- F.A.118.** John Muir Charter School does not have a campus in Nevada County.
- F.A.119.** John Muir Charter School provides educational services primarily to members of the California Conservation Corps (CCC).

Los Angeles Education Corps Charter School

- F.A.120.** Los Angeles Education Corps Charter School is chartered through the NCOE.
- F.A.121.** The NCOE provides business administration services for the school.
- F.A.122.** Los Angeles Education Corps Charter School is located in the Greater Los Angeles Area and does not have a campus in Nevada County.

Sierra Academy of Expeditionary Learning

- F.A.123.** Sierra Academy of Expeditionary Learning is scheduled to open in the Fall of 2013.
- F.A.124.** Sierra Academy of Expeditionary Learning will offer Grades 9-10.

Findings

- F.I.1.** Charter schools do not charge tuition but some schools encourage parents to make monetary donations to fund programs. (F.A.2., F.A.17., F.A.18., F.A.67.)

F.I.2. Core subjects are not always taught at the same grade level in charter schools as in traditional schools. (F.A.3., F.A.4., F.A.7., F.A.72., F.A.75., F.A.112.)

F.I.3. The lower operating costs of charter schools can be attributed to several factors.

- lower payrolls
- lower operating expenses
- electives often offered by community volunteers at little or no cost
- active parental involvement of time and donations
- use of modular classrooms
- fewer amenities, such as playground equipment
- lack of organized programs, such as sports or music

(F.A.9-12, F.A.18, F.A.20, F.A.67, F.A.77)

F.I.4. Since transportation is not available to and from charter schools, compensatory options are available.

- potential cross-county enrollment
- full or partial independent study at home
- scheduling flexible meetings with teachers or on-site classes

(F.A.3., F.A.4., F.A.20., F.A.42., F.A.49., F.A.58., F.A.59., F.A.83., F.A.85., F.A.86., F.A.92., F.A.102., F.A.103.)

Recommendations

R.1. Charter schools should continue to find creative methods to supplement their financial resources through grants, fundraising and donations. (F.I.1., F.I.3.)

R.2. Charter schools should continue to collaborate with traditional public schools, private schools and faith-based schools in order to facilitate smooth curriculum and social transitions for students who change schools. (F.I.2)

R.3. Ensuring positive charter school atmospheres, each charter school should ensure that staff is trained and ready to respond to new charter school proposals (see Appendix, #8) (F.I.2.)

R.4 Parents should thoroughly investigate and compare charter schools to ascertain what best suits their children's needs (F.I.1.-F.I.4.)

- R.5** Parents need to be aware that due to flexible core class curricula, changing from a charter school to a traditional school might prove challenging to a transitioning student.
(F.I.2)

Responses

None Required

Appendix

1. For more information on California charter schools, including charter procedures, refer to the following
 - California Department of Education www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cs
 - California Charter Schools Association www.calcharters.org

2. Sixteen Elements for Charter Schools must contain a comprehensive description of the following (*in accordance with the Education Code Sections 47605(b)(5)(A-P)*)
 - education program
 - measurable pupil outcome
 - method by which student outcome will be measured
 - governance structure
 - employee qualification
 - health and safety
 - racial and ethnic balance
 - admission requirements
 - independent financial audits
 - student suspension and expulsion
 - employee retirement system
 - student attendance alternatives
 - return rights of district employees
 - dispute resolution
 - collective bargaining
 - procedures for closings

3. Four Conditions for Charter Schools:
 - shall be nonsectarian in its programs, admission policies, employment practices and all other operations
 - shall not charge tuition
 - shall not discriminate against any pupil on the basis of ethnicity, national origin, gender, or disability
 - shall admit all students who reside in California who wish to attend, up to the school's capacity based on space, staff or charter school policy

4. Three Prohibitions for Charter Schools:

- employees of a school district cannot be required to be employed in a charter school
- a pupil in a school district cannot be required to attend a charter school
- no charter school shall be granted that authorizes the conversion of any private school to a charter school

5. Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is one of six regional associations in the US that accredits public and private schools, colleges and universities. WASC's goal is to review schools on multi-levels, then accredit those that function well and prepare students well. Accreditation is usually for six years, though some schools initially get a one year probationary accreditation.

Aside from colleges and universities, WASC accredits schools from K-12, though it appears the majority of schools it accredits are high schools, technical schools or special academies.

6. For more information on the Montessori Method, refer to

The Montessori Foundation www.montessori.org

7. For more information on Waldorf education, refer to

Why Waldorf Works www.whywaldorfworks.org

8. There are currently four State of California bills in process of being passed and implemented that potentially impact the state's charter schools.

- **Assembly Bill 86:** Changes petition signature requirements of establishing charter schools
- **Assembly Bill 1172:** Allows school districts to deny a charter school petition based on a negative fiscal impact to the district
- **Assembly Bill 2032:** Expands the current public school student suspension and expulsion requirements to include charter schools
- **Senate Bill 1290:** Establishes new renewal standards for charter schools