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Charter schools continue to grow in Sacramento region, state

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The number of charter schools popping up across California continues to increase, including in the Sacramento region.

The California Charter Schools Association reports that the state added 100 charter schools this school year – bringing the total to 982. Last school year the state added a record 115 charter schools to its rolls – a big jump over the previous year's 88.

"A grass-roots bottom-up demand for charters is driving things," said Jed Wallace, president of the CCSA.

A majority of charters that opened this school year are in the Los Angeles area, but the Sacramento region also added eight – three more than it did last year.

The new local charters vary greatly – from a school in a Roseville business park that focuses on the teachings of the nation's Founding Fathers, to the first of a system of schools that proposes to take on the achievement gap between African American and white students.

Sacramento Valley Charter School joins a cadre of new charters statewide that cater to one race or ethnicity. The school in West Sacramento teaches the language and culture of Punjab, a region in northern India and Pakistan.

There are also schools that stress a particular area of study, like the Camino Science and Natural Resources Charter School near Placerville and the Woodland Polytechnic Academy.

Other schools like the newly chartered Paragon Collegiate Academy in Marysville emphasizes healthy food, as well as academics. The charter contracts with Revolution Foods in Oakland to provide preservative-free school meals low in fat and sugar, said Principal Lisa Reese.

Wallace said this "unparalleled growth" of new charter schools comes in the face of a year of adversity.

Reductions in federal startup funds to the state for charters and a change in how categorical programs are funded by the state are leaving charter schools in the lurch, he said.

State payment deferrals to schools are particularly troublesome to charters, he said. Charter schools can't obtain the low-cost loans most school districts can get to pay their bills while they wait for state funding.

They must borrow money at interest rates of 18 percent to 20 percent, Wallace said.

Then there are "a number of districts refusing to grant charters for quality programs," Wallace said. Charter schools must be authorized by local school districts. If denied, they can appeal to the county Office of Education or the state Board of Education.

"Put all this together and it's a very daunting challenge," Wallace said. "We thought this would equate to a reduction in charter schools."

But it didn't. California charter schools serve 412,000 California students at 982 schools – the highest number of schools in the country, according to the CCSA. In Sacramento County, there are 39 charter schools serving 21,000 students.

Wallace said schools that couldn't land startup grants are finding funding from their communities.

"I'm constantly impressed and moved by the gestures that people will make to get schools started," Wallace said.

He said there are stories of school operators who pledged their inheritance to open a school and directors who took out second mortgages to pay bills until state funds arrived.

The Fortune School was one of the lucky ones. It received a state startup grant – albeit delayed.

Principal Susan Nisonger said the biggest hurdle in launching the school was "getting the families to trust it."

She understood their angst. "It's in a strip mall and we moved in within days of the school opening. But it all worked out excellent for us."

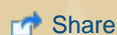
She said school officials spent a year getting the word out about the charter, holding community round tables and visiting local Head Start preschool programs for low-income families.

The result: four kindergarten classes and one class each in first through third grade in a new strip mall at Stockton Boulevard and 65th Street.

The biggest selling point was class sizes of 23 to 25 students, she said.

"You have to get out and let them know about it opening," Nisonger said.

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