

Charters in a tight squeeze

LAUSD schools that will house them argue there's not enough classroom space to share

By Naush Boghossian, Staff Writer

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Even as Los Angeles Unified finally boosted efforts last week to give charter schools more space on district campuses, the move has caused dissent that could lay the groundwork for conflict between the district and the popular education movement.

Two months after LAUSD settled lawsuits challenging lagging efforts to share its facilities with the independent schools, the district has offered space on traditional campuses to 39 charter schools - the majority of the 54 that applied.

The placement offers are the most the district has ever made and triple the 13 space assignments it offered last year.

But now some traditional schools that will house the charters are complaining they don't

have enough space to share. And some charters are complaining about having to break up their schools onto multiple campuses far from their current locations, among other issues.

"We received an offer which is absolutely inadequate for the needs that we have," said Tatyana Berkovich, founder and president of Ivy Academia, the highest-performing charter in LAUSD that has been fighting for four years to move into a closed district campus nearby.

The Woodland Hills charter has received a district offer that would require splitting about 1,000 K-12 students among 16 classrooms on three separate LAUSD campuses.

"They're three different locations, very little space, and the most frustrating thing is ... there are six closed LAUSD facilities just sitting there," she said.

Charter schools have until May 1 to decide whether to accept the offers, even as district officials said they are continuing to explore ways to make space available and to try to offer sites to the additional 15 charters that applied for the coming school year.

But some traditional campuses targeted for the charters say any acceptances will create serious problems as LAUSD grapples with aiding 128 of the independent schools - the most of any district in the nation.

Steve Gediman, principal of Pinewood Elementary in Tujunga, said he was told the

district offered 11 of his school's classrooms to Pacoima's Bert Corona Middle School.

While the 470-student, K-5 Pinewood will have some empty classrooms because of declining enrollment, the rooms still are being used to teach lab classes in computer, arts and English.

And Gediman said he is concerned about mixing elementary and middle school students on the same campus.

"Obviously there are some challenges to what's being offered since they are middle school students and this is an elementary school," Gediman said. "Also, we have some good programs here, and I would hate to see those programs negatively impacted."

CHAMPS charter school has been offered 15 classrooms in Woodland Hills' Taft High, but Taft Principal Sharon Thomas said she doesn't have enough classrooms to spare.

McNair said Taft will have to stop the practice of taking new open-enrollment students, which has allowed schools to offer leftover seats to students districtwide.

And that will mean the school loses the funds that had come with each of the new students.

"I really don't have that many classrooms available, so it's kind of interesting the way they came up with that number," said Thomas, who is seeking a meeting with the local district

superintendent.

But Caprice Young, head of the state's Charter Schools Association, said that while some offers might be inconvenient, the district should be commended for its efforts to boost charter facilities.

"On the face of it, this is the most offers they've made ever, and the strongest attempt they've ever made to comply with Prop.39 requirements to ensure that charter-school kids get treated fairly," she said, citing the statewide ballot measure passed in 2000 that calls for districts to share facilities fairly among all students. "But there's still more to go."

Young said she's encouraged by the increased collaboration with charters and thinks the offers will be more appealing in coming years as strategies become more effective.

Greg McNair, associate general counsel who oversees the district's Proposition 39 program, said district officials were able to make more offers this year because they were creative in identifying space and included the facilities department in the process.

"Through discussions, we created a better understanding of what charters would be willing to accept, and they gained a greater understanding of the challenge that Prop. 39 is to a district that is still overcrowded," McNair said.

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He acknowledged that some of the offers are not ideal as some charters are being split up, some placements are miles from a charter's current campus, and elementary, middle and high school students could be mingled on a single campus.

But with more requests for space for secondary students - of 16,000 charter seats requested, just 2,000 were for elementary students - and very limited secondary school space, the district had little choice but to combine schools.

"We had to make difficult choices in making space available," McNair said, emphasizing that a high school was only sited on an elementary campus if district officials were confident they could separate the students.

McNair said the district wasn't able to make any of the six closed LAUSD campuses part of the offers for the 2009-10 school year because there wasn't enough time or money to prepare the campuses.

But school board member Tamar Galatzan said she is creating a policy on how to use the campuses - including for charters - and hopes next year will include options for charter schools in the West San Fernando Valley.

"What we're envisioning for two of the empty campuses is for them to be turned into homes for charter schools," Galatzan said.

"One of the great failings of L.A. Unified in the Valley is that we have vacant campuses sitting

there going to waste while charter schools can't find space and we're renting facilities for other programs."

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From the Los Angeles Times

Turf face-off may be in store for L.A. schools

Ballot provision forces public campuses to share space with charters, and neither side is looking forward to it.

By Howard Blume

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

April 7, 2008

The faculty at tradition-proud but low-performing Fairfax High School has worked for two years on a plan to improve the school while also attracting long-absent middle-class families. Scheduled to start next fall, the new setup includes dividing the sprawling campus into small academies -- each with a different theme, each designed to devote attention to every student.

But there's something Fairfax wasn't planning on.

The school suddenly is expected to share space with one of the district's privately run charter schools.

A vocal group of teachers, students, parents and community organizations say the charter school will impede Fairfax's rise by taking up needed classrooms and creating logistical headaches.

"I don't think I've ever seen an issue that has brought together teachers in essentially unanimous agreement that this is hurtful to everything we're trying to do at Fairfax," said social studies teacher Mike Stryer.

Variations of this scenario are occurring throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District: at Crenshaw High to the south, at Taft High and Reseda High in the San Fernando Valley, at Selma Avenue Elementary in Hollywood and Miles Avenue Elementary in Huntington Park.

Some 40 Los Angeles schools learned last week that classrooms on their campuses have been offered to charter schools. And a little-noticed provision in a state ballot measure eight years ago requires district facilities to be shared.

Charter operators insist the law is clear but say that, until this year, the district has never tried to meet its obligation.

Only about half a dozen charters currently occupy district buildings, a fraction of the ever-growing population of 129 charters operating within district boundaries. Charter advocates sued and reached a settlement in February.

Even without the agreement, traditional schools have extra room because enrollment is dropping even as new campuses open. All 40 targeted traditional schools have classrooms that are underused.

Both sides look askance at how the other half lives. Charter operators are tired of putting up with substandard conditions in clammy rented church basements. And they worry about being stuck with the dregs on district campuses as well. More than a dozen charter schools that applied still don't have campus offers.

The host schools worry about the arrival of charters, which can offer smaller classes and competitive programs.

New West Charter Middle School, the proposed roommate for Fairfax, operates out of a former Westside furniture

store at a cost of \$20,000 a month. The school's test scores far surpass those of typical district middle schools, and 300 applicants were wait-listed after coming up short in an admission lottery. The school draws students from 52 ZIP Codes, despite lacking funds to provide transportation.

New West has a contentious history with the district, which refused to approve or renew the charter, partly because of allegations that the school's application process discourages lower-achieving students. The state Board of Education authorized the school.

The school's leaders now must decide if Fairfax is worth the move; it's miles from their Pico Boulevard campus, and the offer is only for one year.

"They make these offers so you can't accept them," said New West co-founder and governing board member Judith Bronowski. "Why would you turn your whole world upside down for one year?"

Not to mention the issue of not being wanted.

"We will fight this," said Erik Travis, lead teacher for the nascent Academy of Media and Performing Arts at Fairfax.

Travis had planned to house his program in the bungalows apparently slated for the charter. The Fairfax academies are supposed to be self-contained, with their own offices. The bungalows offer such a setting, but that also makes them well suited for a charter.

"It would be a shame to derail our plans, of which hundreds of students and families are very excited and supportive," said Travis, who also challenges the district's estimate of available space.

In the Valley, charter school operator Norman Isaacs hopes his struggle to find classrooms is over. Isaacs, a longtime district principal, opened a charter after the district resisted his idea for an arts high school. Now in its third year, his CHAMPS charter started off at Valley College, then moved to Sherman Oaks midyear before setting up in a Lutheran church in Van Nuys.

Last year, he thought he would get space at Woodland Hills Academy.

"The school district offered 15 rooms," Isaacs said. "Then it went down to 13, to seven, to five. And we ended up with two non-air-conditioned rooms."

This year, he's been promised 15 rooms at Taft High for his popular, high-performing charter.

"I'm probably the most optimistic person in the world," Isaacs said. "It just seems, sometimes, when you get to the school, things change."

In fact, Taft Principal Sharon Thomas said she has nothing close to 15 available rooms. And the school has its own performing-arts academy, so she doesn't appreciate the possible arrival of a competitor. Adding to her problems is a freeze on new enrollment permits -- even though more than one-third of her students live outside the school's official attendance boundaries. The district has halted new applications until it's clear how many seats the charter would occupy.

Crenshaw High parents and teachers aren't any happier.

"This is a slap in Crenshaw's face," said Rhonda Adway, whose granddaughter is a senior there. "We worked so hard. Why would we want to have a charter school on our campus when we're doing reform?"

The charter slated for Crenshaw is Frederick Douglass Academy Middle School, which is linked to a high-performing charter high school that has attracted public and private school students.

"Here, on our campus, is an opportunity for students in our area to be pulled away from our school," Adway said.

Crowding is the concern at several year-round schools. Though enrollment is declining -- which opens up some classrooms -- the student count is still close to 1,800 at Miles Avenue Elementary, for example.

Wadsworth Elementary teacher Robin Potash was dismayed when she heard about plans to provide a set of bathrooms for the exclusive use of three classes of charter students at her South Los Angeles campus. More than 1,000 students in the regular school must get by with only one set of bathrooms, she said.

There is another set of bathrooms, she added, but they're usually kept locked until the regular bathrooms flood, which happens periodically.

"It will set up a situation of haves and have-nots," Potash said. "They will probably look like they have new things and more things and more money. . . . There are many times when we don't have enough chairs and desks."

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Times staff writer Evelyn Larrubia contributed to this report.

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