

# State seeking more regulation of charter schools

July 9, 2001  
SF Chronicle  
DH20010353  
E)

## Homeschools face 30% funding loss

By Nanette Asimov  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

As state lawmakers consider whether to reduce funds to the booming business of public homeschooling, practitioners will defend their programs in Sacramento tomorrow against allegations that they waste millions of taxpayer dollars.

At issue is whether the state should continue to pay thousands of dollars per pupil to charter schools that help parents teach their children at home, or whether 30 percent of the funding should be diverted to help classroom-based charters pay for scarce building space.

Charters are autonomous public schools free of many state regulations, but which operate by a contractual agreement — the charter — with a sponsoring school district.

Intended to inspire innovation within the public system, roughly one third, about 90 statewide, are so innovative that their students rarely set foot in school.

Half a dozen Democratic lawmakers, supported by state Board of Education President Reed Hastings, say homeschooling charters have little overhead and don't need as much money as schools with buildings, classrooms and full teaching staffs.

The six legislators have co-authored Senate Bill 740, to be considered tomorrow by the Assembly Education Committee. It says that funding for "nonclassroom-based instruction" can be authorized only by the state Board of Education, and no longer by school districts.

If adopted by the full legislature, the bill would also lower funding for homeschooling charters by 30 percent over three years and shift about \$10 million per year to school-based charters with large enrollments of low-income students. Waivers would be granted if a homeschooling charter could show it needed full funding.

The main author, Sen. Jack O'Connell of San Luis Obispo, said the bill was prompted by reports some homeschool operators may have pocketed hefty profits or failed to deliver on educational promises to parents and students.

Recently, a couple who ran the HomeSmartKids homeschooling charter in Contra Costa County resigned, weeks after The Chronicle reported their for-profit company stood to make large profits and the couple would not disclose how they spent tax dollars.

But charter advocates say current laws are strong enough to weed out bad apples.

"This is another piece of an ongoing movement to put charter schools under state control," said Randy Gaschler, who heads the nonprofit Innovative Education Management Inc., which runs seven homeschooling charters from Humboldt to Ventura counties with a total enrollment of nearly 7,000 students.

Gaschler said he is confident that even if the bill passes, his schools "won't lose a penny" because he can show they spend far more money than regular schools do on books, software, computers and other instructional supplies.

Currently, homeschooling charters get about \$5,000 per pupil from the state. Most, like Gaschler's schools, say they spend 25 percent on school supplies.

By contrast, the state Department of Education says a typical school spends 8 percent of its budget on books and supplies.

And it is without irony that many homeschooling charters offer another justification for full funding: They offer classes taught by certificated teachers.

"We've got almost 1,500 classes available to our students," Gaschler said.

Pat Golding, director of the Hickman Charter School with 700 homeschoolers scattered about Stanislaus and neighboring counties, said, "We have probably 100 class offerings in all subjects."

Homeschoolers become indignant at the suggestion that their charters have no real teachers.

"The funds ... pay for the teachers' time that she/he spends with us," said parent Shannon Milner of Camptonville Academy, with nearly 3,000 students in seven Sierra counties.

Milner is referring to teachers who serve not as classroom instructors, but as advisers to homeschooling parents. They typically visit children at home periodically to check on progress and collect work samples required by state auditors.

"Parents want to have some control over what students are learning, but they also want support," said Karri Smith, director of the Fort Ross Elementary and West Sonoma Secondary homeschooling charters.

Smith's charters hire the nonprofit Charter School Resource Alliance to order school supplies, run a Web site and handle employee services. The nonprofit charges fees of 25 and 27 percent.

By contrast, Gaschler's nonprofit Innovative Education Management charges his seven homeschooling charters 7 percent. Gaschler's salary is \$108,000.

"I'm not happy with the 25 and 27 percent we're being charged," Smith said. "When I have the opportunity, I'll see what I can do to provide those services myself."

Smith plans to tell the Assembly Education Committee that students benefit from the individual attention of parents, help from qualified teachers, and schools with enough money to provide books and materials to match children's specific needs.

Assemblywoman Elaine Alquist of Santa Clara County, a co-author of the bill who sits on the education committee, called homeschooling charters a "legitimate alternative."

"If they're using the money properly," Alquist said, "they have nothing to worry about."

E-mail Nanette Asimov at  
nasimov@sfsfchronicle.com.