

New charter schools to open this fall despite efforts to curb growth

The schools received approval despite the contentious climate around charter schools.

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It took Tiffany Gilmore 14 months, two failed petitions to the Moreno Valley school board and two appeals to the Riverside County Board of Education before she secured approval to open her charter school.

The Garvey/Allen Visual and Performing Arts Academy, which will open in August, will mix STEM and arts education and will prioritize closing the achievement gap between white and black students, as well as white and Latino students.

Gilmore, the school's founder and CEO, is one of several charter operators who will open schools in California this fall despite an increasingly contentious climate surrounding the charter sector.

Charter school growth in California has slowed over the past five years, although last year saw an uptick in the total number of charter schools. According to the California Charter School Association, the total number rose by 48 last fall — from 1,275 to 1,323 charter schools. That compared with a jump of only 21 additional schools in 2017-18 and 24 the previous year.

Like Garvey/Allen Academy, there are several other charter schools across the state scheduled to open in the fall, including Sycamore Creek Community Charter School and the International School for Science and Culture — both in Orange County — as well as Imagine Schools Hemet in Riverside County.

The four schools share a common element: They were rejected by their local school boards before ultimately being approved by their county offices of education, as permitted by the state's 27-year-old charter school law.

Gilmore called the petition process for the Garvey/Allen school "heartbreaking." The school was rejected twice by the Moreno Valley school board and once by the Riverside County Board of Education before the county education board eventually approved the proposal in April.

The Moreno Valley school board rejected the Garvey/Allen's petition after the school district raised concerns about how to serve special education students and gifted students. Katelyn Trottier, the attorney who helped review the petition for the district, also said at a board meeting in September that the district had fiscal concerns about the school. She said the school's revenue projections seemed too high and the expenditures too low.

The Riverside County Board of Education initially rejected the school's appeal in December and cited concerns over the school's high school program, according to the Press-Enterprise. The board unanimously approved the school in April after it eliminated its high school program from its petition. The Garvey/Allen academy will serve grades five through eight when it opens in August.

"One of our pillars is perseverance. So I can't expect our [students] to persevere if I don't set that tone," Gilmore said. "I just used that as my motivation and my momentum to just persevere through it four times."

Discontent with the growth of charter schools was a prominent theme in both the Los Angeles and Oakland teachers strikes earlier this year, though it didn't stop the approval of new charter schools.

Los Angeles Unified School District, which has the highest concentration of charter schools of any district in the state, has approved at least seven new charter schools since the end of the Los Angeles teachers strike in January. One of those schools, the Gaspar De Portola Middle School, will open in the fall, while the other six are scheduled to open in 2020.

Following the strikes, the teachers unions backed legislation that would have placed a moratorium on new charter schools.

Senate Bill 756 would have imposed a two-year moratorium on any new charter schools. Assembly Bill 1506 would have capped charter schools at the number operating on Jan. 1 of 2020. Both of those bills have stalled in the Legislature.

Legislation also was introduced this cycle that would have made it substantially more difficult for schools like the Garvey/Allen Academy to get approval, by restricting the ability of charter schools to appeal to county boards of education. However, the bill (AB 1505) was amended July 5 based on requests from Gov. Gavin Newsom's

office. In its current form, county boards would still be able to hear appeals, but the bill would strengthen the authorizing authority of the local school boards.

A majority of members on a statewide task force convened by State Superintendent of Public Instruction at the request of Gov. Gavin Newsom earlier this year supported a proposal that would prevent counties from hearing appeals of charter school denials, except in cases where the school board committed an error.

Such a rule would have prevented Garvey/Allen and other charter schools from receiving the green light to open this fall.

Despite those efforts to restrict charter schools, Gilmore said she was comfortable moving forward with the Garvey/Allen school because she trusted that Riverside County's Board of Education was "pro-charter."

The Sycamore Creek charter school and the International School for Science and Culture also faced roadblocks before receiving approval to open. They were rejected by the Ocean View School District and Newport-Mesa Unified School District, respectively, before the Orange County Board of Education approved the two schools in March on appeal. The Ocean View School District serves cities including Huntington Beach and Fountain Valley, while Newport-Mesa serves Newport Beach and Costa Mesa.

In rejecting the International School for Science and Culture, the Newport-Mesa board cited several concerns over the school's educational program, including its plans for English-language learners and its match curriculum.

Members of the Ocean View School District board expressed concerns over Sycamore Creek's revenue projections and staffing plans when they rejected that school's petition.

The Riverside County Board of Education also permitted charter school operator Imagine Schools to open a new campus in Hemet, despite opposition from the Hemet Unified School District.

Proponents of limiting the appeals process argue that decisions on charter schools should be left to local school boards because they best understand the needs of the communities they serve.

“The school boards are the ones that are responsible to the community. And really, that’s where the authorization should be taking place,” said Erika Jones, a member of the California Teachers Association’s board of directors (CTA), who also served on the statewide charter school task force. “They know the schools they need, they understand the community they serve.”

Jones also noted that school board members are elected officials and that if a given community isn’t happy with the school board, the public “can speak with their vote.”

But several charter school advocates say that appealing to county boards is necessary because some school boards, they argue, have an incentive to deny charter schools because of concerns that school districts may lose funding as they lose students to charter schools.

“Having the district be in charge of approving the petition for a charter school — it’s somewhat like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse,” said Padmini Srinivasan, founder of the International School for Science and Culture, one of the new charter schools in Orange County. “Every time a charter school takes a certain number of students to educate them, that district is going to lose those students and the associated dollars.”

Sarah Bach, one of the founders of the Sycamore Creek school, agreed, adding that if she “was in the school board’s position, I would also be extremely protective of

bringing in any charter schools that were potentially going to be taking my students because those funds follow the students.”

Bach said efforts to impose a moratorium on charter schools were “scary” but added that she pushed through with opening the Sycamore Creek school because she thinks it is important for parents to have options for their children.

“I support traditional public schools, great traditional public schools. But I also support the parents’ right to choose,” she said. “We deserve more choices.”

The operators of the new charter schools said their schools will offer curricula that are otherwise unavailable at traditional public schools. Students should have alternative education options, they argue.

At Sycamore Creek school, students will explore the visual and performing arts and participate in activities such as painting, drawing, singing and instrumental music. The school also is committed to the emotional growth of its students, Bach said.

That was appealing to Rebecca Hendricks, whose son will be entering kindergarten in the fall at the Sycamore Creek school in Orange County. The school’s curriculum will be guided by the Waldorf education model, which among other things emphasizes arts integration in traditional academic subjects. Sycamore Creek, however, is not officially recognized by the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America.

Hendricks said she and her husband always imagined that their children would attend a traditional public school in Orange County’s Garden Grove Unified School District.

But when they visited their local elementary school, they felt that the school put too much of an emphasis on academic rigor, which they thought would put too much pressure on their son, Hendricks said.

“That’s sort of why we landed with Sycamore Creek Charter because, at least in the regional landscape that we surveyed, it seemed to be the only school that was going the direction that prioritized things other than academic rigor,” she added.

Mary Baldrige, who has three children who will attend the Sycamore Creek school in the fall, was similarly attracted to the school’s arts-integrated curriculum.

“With (Sycamore Creek) opening, it was just a really wonderful opportunity for us to step into that culture at this point in our lives,” Baldrige said.

The School for Science and Culture in Orange County also will feature a nontraditional curriculum, combining a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) focus with a language program that teaches students English, Chinese and Spanish. The school also will feature a program that develops students’ soft skills, or traits such as people and social skills that enable individuals to work well with others.

The Garvey/Allen school, meanwhile, will focus on eliminating the achievement and opportunity gaps for black and Latino students, Gilmore said. The school is open to all students but has focused its programs on the success of minority children.

For example, the school will implement restorative justice practices for discipline, which are programs that encourage students who misbehave to reflect on their actions and work with other students to resolve conflicts, rather than be punished. Some research has indicated that such practices can reduce the racial discipline gap between white and black students in schools.

“The contentious relationships that districts are taking with charters is not necessary, because we’re all basically saying the same thing. Or we should be saying the same thing: that we want to do what’s best for kids,” Gilmore added. “And so until districts can close these gaps, ... charter schools will continue to be here.”