

Public schools use bill to quash a charter



Albert Einstein Academy students.



By **Steven Greenhut**

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When the Legislature isn't trying to solve outside problems — e.g., reversing climate change or [calling for the Washington Redskins to change names](#) — it often meddles in local affairs by passing bills that target specific situations in a legislator's district.

For instance, legislators are moving forward a bill ([SB 1263](#)) that would shut down a new Santa Clarita Valley charter school, run by a charter-school operator with a successful track record throughout Southern California (including San Diego) and elsewhere.

The dispute is not on the radar screen of many people outside that area, but it has statewide implications. It highlights a potential flaw in California's law authorizing charter schools — publicly funded schools that operate independently from local school bureaucracies.

Unlike in some other states, California relies on school districts to approve new charter schools. But charter-school operators sometimes run into districts that just don't want such schools. It's a potential conflict of interest.

The purpose of the charter-school movement was to provide competition and choice. Yet "average daily attendance" dollars follow students, so it's no surprise that school administrators aren't always thrilled with approving their competitors.

After being rebuffed by the major area school districts, the operators of the [Albert Einstein Academy for Letters, Arts and Sciences](#) turned to a small district, [Acton-Agua Dulce Unified School District](#), to gain approval for a new elementary school. State law allows charter schools to locate a single school outside of the district but within the same county if an appropriate site isn't available within the district. So they opened their school in the neighboring Newhall district.

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Newhall officials and other nearby districts have joined forces to stop Einstein. They are sponsoring the bill, which allows schools to only temporarily locate outside the district that chartered them.

[Einstein officials complain](#) that the school districts first pressured the local city council to refuse to grant permits to the school. The districts filed a lawsuit, called on state education officials to investigate the charter school — and then turned to the Legislature to close the supposed loophole.

Recently, Einstein's main opponent, Superintendent Marc Winger of Newhall sent a letter to the parents of students attending the Einstein elementary school, warning that the school might close because of a lawsuit and encouraging them to "re-enroll" their kids in his district schools.

That seemed provocative given that it is Winger's efforts that threaten the school's existence. When I asked Winger about it, he said charter-school operators are big fans of competition and that he's simply competing with the school for its students.

Winger complained that Acton-Agua Dulce is abusing the system by sponsoring many charter schools and that the small district mainly is after the money. Charter supporters claim the small district believes in school choice — and that it's the bigger districts that fear losing money. The Newhall and other area districts have rarely approved charter schools, leading to allegations that they simply don't want such schools to exist.

Winger denies being dead-set against charters, but admits that he is no fan of the concept. In a local newspaper article, [Winger was quoted saying](#), "It's a mistake to bring any charters into the Santa Clarita Valley." He told me, "Charter schools like Einstein are siphoning off white middle-class kids" and threaten to re-segregate the schools.

"All of our schools are as or more diverse than the communities they are in," responded Einstein CEO Jeffrey Shapiro. Students of all backgrounds choose his schools because they are dissatisfied with large class sizes and

the lack of language and arts programs, he added. And so the back and forth continues.

“It really does seem like the districts have denied the charter because of the financial effects it will have on the districts,” said Eric Premack, executive director of the Sacramento-based [Charter Schools Development Center](#).

Premack suggests that the Legislature reform the charter-school law to create a more fair and independent process for approving new schools. That strikes me as a better idea than taking sides with local school administrators who are trying to shut down the competition.

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