

Testimony of:

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Concord, California

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*Raising the Bar: The Role of Charter Schools in K-12 Education*

Before the:

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Chairman Kline, Congressman Miller, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to tell the transformative story of Clayton Valley Charter High School, a secondary school in Concord, California.

Charter schools allow for critical autonomy in decision-making compared to the bureaucracy and red tape of the local districts. In traditional schools and districts, it often takes years to make important changes with obstacles at every turn. This is different for charter schools, as we have the capacity to make school-based decisions regarding curriculum, supports, interventions, and more in a timely manner. A charter schools is a *speedboat in contrast to The Titanic* of district decision-making. Those in the trenches typically understand what changes need to occur to meet the needs of the students and the school as opposed to those farther removed. Charter schools allow opportunity for improvement, innovation and site-based decision-making. And with timeliness of implementation, comes better understanding of which strategies lead to academic improvement and actually benefit students. This understanding leads to transfer of best practices – even to our traditional, non-charter school neighbors.

Clayton Valley has undergone a remarkable transformation since converting to a charter school in July 2012. After years of frustration and neglect by the local school district, the teachers' turmoil reached a boiling point. This led to a vote, by the teachers, to convert the school from traditional to charter school, utilizing the state's charter conversion law.

The mission was clear – the teachers and the extended community of parents, community leaders and the City Council banded together in support of making a better school. They wanted to bring the school out of its complacency of underachievement, decline in facilities, low staff morale and student apathy. Parents had been disengaged for many years and teachers had no voice in decision-making. Professional development was nearly completely absent and the school had reached a low point in statewide student achievement, earning a ranking of 1 out of 10 in their similar schools scale.

Despite opposition from district leaders, Congressman Miller, along with other key leaders, took a stand in support of CVCHS' desire to become a charter school. Following the school district's vote to deny authorization of the charter, teachers appealed to the Contra Costa County Office of Education who unanimously approved their charter petition. Now the real work began.

The key hiring decision by the newly elected governing board, which was comprised of teachers, classified and administrative staff along with parents and community members, was to hire an experienced Executive Director who could galvanize the school into a common vision, one embraced by staff, parents and students alike. As a successful former superintendent of schools with charter school leadership experience in urban Los Angeles, I was honored to be unanimously appointed by the CVCHS governing board. I then hired a quality administrative team and in just six weeks we opened school with 1900 students, the same students who attended the year prior with their feeder incoming students.

The difference was immediate and astonishing. Much to the amazement of the staff, parents and students, the school was transformed almost overnight with the instructional framework of *rigor, relevance and relationships*, as developed by Dr. Willard Daggett. I spent nearly a week with the teachers discussing what quality instruction looks like, how application makes learning relevant and how nurturing relationships between teachers and students lays a foundation where students want to learn and perform academically. Professional development became the constant theme and as a founding charter teacher (now administrator), Neil McChesney stated, "I received more professional development in one year at CVCHS than I had in ten years prior in the school district." Nearly every teacher embraced the professional development opportunities along with the feedback from administrators who visited classes regularly. Innovative intervention programs were implemented to support struggling students in the summers, after school and even on Saturdays. There was an all-out focus on improving student achievement and teachers caught the vision and the passion.

In addition to my past experience as a school superintendent, I had also served as Chief Academic Officer for The Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools in Los Angeles. While at the Alliance we, with the help of external supports and thought-leaders, developed some of the most successful academically focused urban charter schools in Los Angeles. I then took the very same strategies implemented at my former charter schools to CVCHS and the teachers and administrators quickly implemented many of them. These innovative practices included:

- Powerful intervention programs using summers, after school and Saturdays to close a year of learning in math and language arts;
- Benchmark assessments that measured individual student learning, which teachers used for targeted intervention and tutoring;

- Failure free zone policy where teachers required students to perform at an acceptable level or stay after school to do the work over or even come to Saturday School to receive additional instruction so they could learn and perform;
- Focus upon relationships between adults on campus and students so students knew they were respected, nurtured and treated with dignity. This foundational key transformed students desire to attend school;
- Innovative instructional approaches – teachers were encouraged to go *outside the box* to create, learn new strategies, and reach students with project based learning ;
- Extensive professional development was offered utilizing differentiated professional development opportunities met teacher’s diverse needs and interests;
- Parental involvement became a key theme with a 24-hour response policy to returning phone calls and emails;
- Instructional software programs to enhance teaching in the classroom and make learning more relevant; and
- Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program implementation across the curriculum.

While no single “best practice” is unique to Clayton Valley, the buy-in to these strategies by staff and the blend of all of these strategies has resulted in a whole new culture on campus as there is an academic focus with rigorous teaching and high expectations for student performance. The desire by the teachers to be better and do more for students, bolstered by our school’s unwavering dedication to professional development and support for our teachers, has transformed the campus.

## **Results**

This autonomy is paying off quickly. Clayton Valley Charter High School received tremendous recognition in the local press for their high achievement results, with the top academic achievement gains in California last year for large comprehensive high schools. Their 62-point jump on the State’s Academic Performance Index (API) took them from a score of 774 to 836 in a single year, ranking them a 9 out of 10 on the statewide ranks. The celebration is still continuing and the entire community of Clayton knows of the significant transformation that has occurred. There is great community pride in our school.

CVCHS grew by 100 students in our second year with a wait list of more than 130 students and now has a waiting list of nearly 400 students for the fall of 2014. Administration is reviewing all options in the effort to accommodate students near and far who desire to enroll in a great school.

## **Educational Benefit to Local Schools**

Without becoming a charter school, the CVCHS transformation would never have occurred. The support from the California Charter Schools Association was integral to our success as was the PCSPG startup grant provided by the Federal Government. Most charter schools would not be able to open their doors without this federal grant. School choice is

absolutely critical to creating alternatives to a student or parent's zip code. Choice creates competition, which the traditional district must now engage and which causes them to improve as well.

The great success of CVCHS and the tremendous API gains has caused the local district to meet with administration and discuss the various strategies of the transformation and the instructional innovations that resulted in high achievement. They are borrowing from the list of CVCHS best practices in the effort to become more competitive and improve their achievement results.

While I am the Executive Director of Clayton Valley, my ultimate desire is to see academic success for all students in my community – those attending CVCHS and those in neighboring schools. I believe that the successes we are experiencing, and will continue to experience, are driven largely by not only our autonomy as a public charter school but also our accountability for improved outcomes. I also believe that our success will drive district improvement, both through competition introduced by our charter and through transfer of best practices. Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions.