

A Vision of the San Carlos Charter Learning Center

Prepared by Members of the Charter Community
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A Vision of the San Carlos Charter Learning Center

I. INTRODUCTION: WHY A NEW SCHOOL?

The granting of the San Carlos Community Charter is a gift the community has chosen to give to itself. Its implementation has created a new learning system that provides an opportunity to innovate and explore, to be at the cutting edge of educational reform, and to lead our schools and our community into the 21st century.

The establishment of the CLC was made possible by Senate Bill 1448, passed by the California State Legislature in September, 1992. This legislation allows the creation of up to 100 Charter Schools in our state. Members of the San Carlos community, in close collaboration with District personnel, wrote the Charter proposal. It was endorsed by more than the requisite number of our teachers and then submitted to the San Carlos School District Board of Trustees. The proposal was unanimously approved by the Board and, in February of 1993, the state named San Carlos the site of California's first Charter School. Members of the Charter Community are accountable to the Board of Trustees (grantors of the Charter) for meeting the outcomes specified in the Charter.

The gifts the Charter legislation granted, and our community accepted, are freedom and opportunity Ñ freedom from the California code of education and opportunity to create a school under local control and designed to meet local

needs. It is an opportunity to quickly and straightforwardly implement what the local citizens believe to be the best ideas, both new and old, about how to educate children.

The primary focus of the Charter Learning Center is on the well-being of the children of our community. Project designers have created a purposeful, living laboratory which operates in a caring, supportive and closely watched environment. As an integral part of the San Carlos School District, the Charter's successful innovations will be transferable to other schools in the District and to the larger world community, thus benefiting all of our children. The CLC will also benefit adult members of the community. CLC members seek to make education a community passion.

This freedom and opportunity will allow the Charter to be more unique in the following ways:

- additional focus on individual, personalized learning which can provide flexibility for learners who want to help direct their own education;
- parent participation which will challenge parents to be more deeply involved in their child's education;
- community service roles for the learners which intertwine the community and the school in partnership;

- extended school hours to enhance learning and meet the needs of families through the Educare program;
- offering technology opportunities to learners to really push the limit of what it means to prepare for the 21st century;
- encourage educators and learners to be more innovative

The mission described in the Charter is the following: *"Our mission is to create a learning system that develops students who are competent, confident, productive and responsible young adults who will possess the habits, skills and attitudes to succeed in high school, and be offered the invitation of a post-secondary education and satisfying employment."*

II. VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

As members of the San Carlos Charter Community, we share a set of values. We define **values** to be qualities and attributes that are worthwhile and that we seek to have present in all we do as members of the Charter Community.

Individual Values

Personal Responsibility Ñ As Charter Community members we accept responsibility for ourselves as individuals, for how we act, express and react, and are accountable for the consequences of those actions, expressions and reactions.

Personal Mastery Ñ We strive for personal mastery, the process of continual improvement. We continually seek to surpass our previous personal best.

Personal Integrity Ñ As individuals, we seek to understand ourselves, be clear about what we believe and live those beliefs. Our words and, most importantly, our actions are congruent with our beliefs. Children will do as we do, not as we say.

Self-Esteem Ñ Our self-image and vision of our future have a major impact on how we function throughout life. We seek to acknowledge individual achievements, validate personal goals, recognize each member's uniqueness and encourage interpersonal and intra-personal skill acquisition in order to foster development of self-esteem.

Group Values

Shared Responsibility Ñ The Charter Community is a collaboration whose members share goals, responsibilities and leadership. We seek our fair share of the work load, and view ourselves as

accountable for the outcomes produced by the Charter. We acknowledge a global responsibility that is an extension of our personal responsibility. While each of us is responsible for our own actions and accountable for their consequences, we share a responsibility for the well-being of our

group, our community, our country and our planet.

Community Ñ Community is individuals coming together in a spirit of cooperation and fellowship for the purpose of creating something that is out of their reach if they function independently. As we seek to create and maintain community, we recognize the unique worth of each individual. We acknowledge our commonalities and work to understand and appreciate our diversities.

Principles

We consider **principles** to be guides to action. We agree to apply the principles of balance and flexibility as we undertake the work of the Charter.

Balance Ñ In all its activities, the Charter Community seeks to achieve a fair balance between meeting the needs of the individual and the well being of the group, between the quality of the outcome and of the process that creates that outcome, between the need for satisfying work and rejuvenating play.

Flexibility Ñ For the CLC to remain responsive to its members and the community, it must be flexible. We view our values as constant, but we recognize our situation is continuously evolving. We strive to be both self-examining and self-changing while continuing to hold fast to the values set forth above.

III. THE LEARNING PROGRAM: WHAT AND HOW

Foundations

The Charter's **learning program** is built on the belief that all children can learn, but not in the same way, nor equally well from the same sources. It recognizes that children are variously gifted. Based on the work of Howard Gardner of Harvard, there are at least seven different capabilities or "intelligences":

- linguistic

- mathematical/logical
- intrapersonal (self)
- interpersonal (others)
- bodily-kinesthetic
- spatial
- musical

While retaining the traditional heavy focus on the linguistic and mathematical/logical areas ("the three R's"), the Charter's learning program recognizes the worth of and seeks to develop all these areas.

The centerpiece of the Charter's learning program is the **Personalized Learning Plan**. Working together, student, parent and educator seek to identify, for each learner, areas of greatest strength and weakness and to define individual learning styles. The plan encourages the learner to capitalize on strengths and shore up areas of weaknesses. Individual learning goals are set and are linked to personal interests and needs.

The personalized learning plan encourages learners to take personal responsibility for their own learning while encouraging teachers, parents and the community to share in that responsibility. Through the use of personalized learning plans, the CLC ensures that children are not penalized for the rate at which they learn. The faster learner is continuously presented with new challenges, while the slower learner benefits from extra adult help, and all learners benefit from multiple approaches and multiple environments.

The learning program supports the Charter's goal of developing **lifelong learners**. It is designed to stimulate the desire to learn. It is based on the belief that all learners possess an innate and unique creativity that can be developed given the appropriate environment. It allows for the joy of knowledge and self-expression and the thrill of exploration. It is flexible to accommodate the individuality of learners and to evolve as the Charter Community learns and grows, and as the world

around us evolves.

The Partnership Perspective

Interconnectedness and *relevance* are hallmarks of the Charter learning program, and find expression in the analogy of *building bridges over walls*. Our challenge is to identify and surmount: a) the walls that separate people of all ages from a love of learning; b) the barriers that prevent them from preparing for and finding successful and satisfying employment; and c) the barricades that divide individuals from each other and from their local, national and international communities.

Bridges to Learning—A sustained love of discovery is the foundation of lifelong learning. The creativity and enthusiasm for discovery that is natural in young children is nurtured and expanded throughout the Charter educational experience. Real learning takes place when active participants make personal connections to the skills and knowledge available to them.

Motivation is the key to building this participatory, connected learning. The root of motivation is linking new skills and knowledge to personal interests and needs. Special emphasis is given to the relevance each subject has to the learner's own goals.

Unifying themes bridge various subjects and show the impact each has upon the other and the relevance of each to the real world. Sample unifying themes are: a) how mathematics is integrated

into the sciences and the arts; b) the impact of science, the arts, agriculture, etc. on historical trends; c) comparing animal and human division of labor and social structures; or d) sharing scientific results through expository writing.

Bridges between Individuals—CLC members recognize that they are living in a cross-cultural and multi-religious global society. Appreciation of and respect for group and individual differences and similarities is encouraged. Learners develop their own social insights by examining the impact that racial, religious and ethnic divisions have had on local and international communities. They understand the effect individuals can have in our increasingly interdependent world.

Bridges are more easily built when individual and group competitions in sports and other activities are free of hostility. We encourage competition based on personal mastery and a striving to improve one's own best performance.

Bridges to the Community —The Charter describes an alliance made up of a "seamless web of educators, parents, businesses, community services and local stakeholders - all dedicated to the learners". The Charter addresses parents' needs with extended school hours and evening and weekend family learning programs (computers, foreign language, ESL, parenting classes etc.) in return for parental participation in the CLC.

The Charter supports interagency cooperation and the sharing of

services. Community facilities and programs are used when possible to deliver learning experiences, for example, in physical education (Parks & Rec Department), health and safety (Fire Department), performing arts (Children's Theater groups). In return Charter students participate in required Community Service programs.

Businesses are important partners in the Charter Learning Center. Those that donate equipment, services and expertise to Charter learners have access to Charter Learning Center programs and facilities. Business partners provide guest teachers, mentors, or field trips, or help learners set up and run their own small businesses. They keep the CLC abreast of requisite marketplace skills and help develop a workforce prepared for the 21st century while establishing links with future customers and employees.

Local schools and colleges will partner with the Charter in cooperative learning programs. Colleges may use Charter sites for teacher training. Projects with area elementary and secondary schools and colleges bring learners of varying ages together in endeavors such as science fairs, foreign language dinners, field trips, etc.

The Charter considers the community to be its classroom. When learning takes place in the world beyond the classroom, the learners understand their connection to that world and their responsibilities as productive citizens. We share a commitment to develop in all learners a sense of responsibil-

ity towards the health of our planet and our cities. Learners will realize they can influence and improve the quality of their total environment.

Approaches

The Charter Learning Center is distinguished by the multiplicity of ways in which it seeks to ensure student learning. Not all students have equally successful outcomes. The Charter uses uncommon means to achieve common ends. Through its multiple approaches, all students are successful, capable of fulfilling their potential.

The Subject Matter Approach presumes that an educated learner needs to know clearly defined skills and concepts that can best be learned in an organized sequential fashion. Traditionally this approach has been predominately lecture-based. The Charter aims to add computer-based learning to increase the efficiency of this approach and provide the opportunity for drill.

The Inquiry and Problem Solving Approach suggests that learning occurs when individuals think critically and solve problems. The predominate premise of this approach is that it is important to know how to retrieve and use the information, not just to have instant recall and possession of the information.

The Individualized Learning Approach attempts to personalize the learning process to the interests of the individual, allowing a

self-directed selection of material to master. The reasons for learning thus become one's own curiosity and personal applicability of the information learned.

The Discussion Approach encourages learning through sharing of information and concepts within a group, with the thinking process playing an important role. A discussion leader is prepared to recognize each learner's level of understanding and can respond at the level most helpful to the learner.

Learning Opportunities

Multiple learning opportunities are afforded Charter Learning Center students. Some are familiar, some are novel, but all strive to make learning relevant and purposeful and to actively engage the learner.

Problem-solving groups assemble multi-age learners to apply knowledge they have acquired and to practice new skills by tackling both real world problems and problems simulated to model the current work-world.

Peer teaching provides an opportunity for learners to become educators and reinforce their own knowledge and mastery of new skills through presentations of their own work and "learning buddy" activities.

Business enterprises established within the Charter offer the opportunity for real-world experiences. Working in partnership with mentors from the business world, Charter learners apply new in-

sights and skills directly to their own enterprises.

Research and development activities abound as students help design, create and field test new learning tools and methods in partnership with business, industry and institutes of higher education.

Assessment

Assessment is used to support and guide the learning process and act as a tool to recognize accomplishment and certify that knowledge has been gained. Assessment also identifies those areas where understanding is still incomplete and enables students to focus their efforts where they will produce the greatest benefit.

Assessment in the CLC is a means of measuring each learner's progress according to clearly recognizable standards. It is a tool for helping students learn more about their own strengths and weaknesses without intimidation, fear, or feeling there are winners and losers. It is a source of motivation for the learners and a guide for helping them achieve personal mastery. It is carried out in a spirit of collaboration and provides positive reinforcement to the learner.

Standards, not standardization, are the basis of assessment. The quality requirements for given tasks, similar to the quality requirements of business, are demonstrated to learners in such a way that they can envision and creatively improve on such re-

quirements. The assessment of the results is based on meeting or exceeding the utility for which the task was needed in the first place. The goal is not to give a grade, which may be a minor by-product, but to make efforts and rewards similar to those of normal adult living and responsibilities. "Make learning experiences real!"

Self assessment is a unique learning opportunity for Charter students. As active participants in assessment of their own work, learners are encouraged to develop intrapersonal understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and an objective view of their accomplishments.

Performance is assessed on at least three levels. 1) Student progress relative to previous performance is assessed through the Grady profile. 2) Performance is also assessed relative to locally developed standards using exemplars. 3) CLC learners are exposed to some traditional examination methods.

The CLC population must perform in the top 25% of California students from districts comparable to San Carlos.

Content (Curriculum)

The Charter Curriculum defines both the subject matter, the desired outcomes, and the methods of assessment in each learning discipline. The curriculum contains both traditional academic subjects and additional subject areas that make the Charter unique.

An explicit goal of the Charter is to prepare learners to be functional citizens of the 21st century. Such preparation is more than the assimilation of facts. Proficiency in a discipline means that the learner becomes a capable practitioner and has a sufficient foundation to pursue advanced study. The charter emphasizes both the acquisition and application of knowledge. The curriculum defines the knowledge, skills, and achievement levels commensurate with proficiency.

The traditional core curriculum areas — language arts, math, science, social studies — remain strongly emphasized. They are augmented by music, dance, theater, art, environmental studies, health, and physical education .

Language Arts (English and foreign) —The goals are to develop learners who are effective communicators, who love literature, and are lifelong readers and writers. Comprehension skills, vocabulary and grammar are integrated within a literature program. Writing includes a personal journal, and creative and expository writing. Communication skills include speaking and writing, and expand into presentation skills using modern technological tools.

Science — The Charter science curriculum emphasizes hands-on experimentation and functional knowledge of scientific phenomena. While the specific scientific disciplines are the same as presented in the California State Board of Education Science framework, the Charter curricu-

lum differs in several areas. This approach facilitates experiments, field-trips and visits from guest scientists and local experts. Major concepts are re-emphasized as appropriate and relevant to the inter-relationship of disciplines.

Mathematics — The program is based on major mathematical ideas and how concepts and those connections are relevant to the learners' lives. Throughout all mathematics topics the concepts of numbers, operations, logic and graphics are sustained.

Social Studies — The curriculum develops learners who understand that history and social science are about real people, in real places, solving problems relevant to the learners' own lives. Students understand the interrelationships between the peoples of the world and study the past as the background and prelude to the present.

Visual and Performing Arts — A goal is that the learners embrace the values of arts appreciation, and self and group expression in the visual arts, music, theater and dance. The curriculum strives to instill confidence in the learner's artistic self-expression, and the appreciation of the artistry of others.

Each learner will be given the opportunity to participate in music; dance or movement activities; visual art techniques; and art forms as a primary means of expression.

Environmental Studies—Study of the effects of science and politics

on the health of our planet and of our cities. Students will learn the skills and concepts necessary to allow them to influence and believe that they can improve the quality of their local and global environments. Learners will participate in hands-on projects intended to form an awareness of the critical relationships between the built and natural environments.

Health and Physical Education—One of the Charter's stated outcomes is 21st century citizens with a healthy lifestyle. The Charter Learning Center provides an atmosphere that encourages all learners to enjoy physical activity, and to incorporate it into their lives. The program emphasizes "lifetime" or "individual" activities as well as "cooperative" sports to emphasize the concept of lifelong activity.

Unique Aspects

Relative to current California public education, the distinctive aspects of the Charter curriculum include a practical facility in a second language, integration of community service into the learning process, full integration of technology as a learning tool, and the Educare program.

Foreign Language — Study of a foreign language is an integral and distinguishing aspect of the Charter curriculum. An expected outcome is that learners will communicate and interact effectively in at least one language in addition to their native language. The Charter uses local linguistic and cultural

diversity to further the learners' development.

Community Service —Community service is a vital and distinctive element of the Charter curriculum. The community service requirement is designed to instill a sense of individual responsibility, social responsibility and civic responsibility. It enables learners to use newly found knowledge to solve community problems. Specifics of the program are determined by the learners and Charter staff based on current community needs and interaction with community and government leaders.

Technology — Technology includes learning tools such as computers, interactive video equipment, audio-visual aids, scientific equipment and networks linked to local and nationwide resources.

These tools help students guide their own education. They support a child's natural way of learning through individual and group discovery, and through seeking solutions to real life challenges.

Charter Learning Center computers are tools used for activities such as:

- Research: electronic reference books, databases, networks, etc.
- Authoring: Create/illustrate stories and reports in media such as printed documents, videos and digital film
- Drill, Practice, Remediation: Repetitive tasks which offer immediate feedback and help for success

- Computation: spreadsheets and other software applications to practice mathematical skills
- Simulation: Interactive electronic simulations of work tasks.
- Record-keeping and Storage: Databases used as effective tools for tracking school and business records, schedules, inventories, etc.
- Communications: Networks linked to the learners home, the Internet, other schools, and databases worldwide.

Educare - The charter makes reference to learning as a year-long, dawn-to-dusk experience. Educare is the means through which we will move toward that end. Educare contributes to a learning environment that is based on mutual respect of all participating parties, that is learner-directed, recognizes that children learn in different ways and never forgets that learning is fun.

Educare is an all-day enrichment program that provides additional educational opportunities for learners enrolled in before and after school periods. Through fees charged for the before and after-school components, the Educare program, when fully subscribed, supplies extra school-day personnel in the form of Educare interns. These college students and college graduates cover most of the school day and work consistently with the same educators. They plan with

the educators, take over small group supervision, teach lessons when appropriate and give individual help to learners who are ready to move ahead or who need extra encouragement.

The intern staff takes over the classrooms for several hours during the week to afford the educator staff essential planning time. This option is integral to maximizing the capabilities of our staff. It allows trained educators to share their knowledge and their passion for certain subject areas with other educators and non-educator professionals. Non-educators in turn contribute their professional expertise to enrich and enliven the traditional school experience with real-life examples and know-how. The staff itself models our philosophy that "everyone is a learner."

Educare enrolls learners on either a regular or drop-in basis and provides them with learning experiences such as a model-building club, drama club, athletics club, game club, and How Does it Work? club. Homework help, either group assistance or individual tutoring, is available daily. Learners are encouraged to use their time to work on core projects, practice musical instruments, improve their interpersonal skills through group games, take time alone to read or reflect and in general engage in purposeful activities.

IV. PARTICIPANTS: WHO

Some Definitions

Participants — The learner is the central focus of the Charter Learning Center. Initial emphasis is on learners in kindergarten and grades 4-6, with gradual expansion in subsequent years to K-12. An invitation is extended to any learner currently working at these levels and residing in the state of California. The other participants comprise the "seamless web of educators, parents, businesses, community services and local stakeholders" described in the Charter.

Learning Team — The fundamental structural and relationship unit for the learner is the learning team. Learners join a multi-age group for an extended period of time that describe a functional community that can embrace 20-90 learners, one master educator, and other team members to create a 15:1 learner:adult ratio, or less. Other team members include regularly participating parent members, Educare interns, and others from the community and the business world. Functional community is described as a changing/evolving group that can develop the resources that provide each individual essential learning and socialization needs.

Roles and Relationships

In the Charter Learning Center "every educator is a learner, every learner is an educator, every parent is both and everyone is a winner." This belief helps define the

participants' roles and the relationships members have to one another.

Learners, in their multi-age level learning teams, are afforded the opportunity not only to learn, but to help others learn. The assessment process which stresses student presentation of projects, provides opportunities for students to learn from one another. Many learning activities are undertaken in cooperative learning groups creating additional avenues for students to teach each other.

Staff at the CLC includes credentialed and non-credentialed educators, community educators and support personnel. Their role is to directly provide and/or provide for the means and the atmosphere that enable students to learn. Their relationship to one another is non-hierarchical in the sense that every staff person (with learners) shares in the responsibility for the educational process. The governing procedure is flexible, maximizing opportunities for consensus decision-making, and assuring that those most responsible for specific aspects have the authority and resources needed to carry out their mandates.

Credentialed educators bring expertise in methodology, knowledge of effective teaching and presentation strategies, understanding of how children learn and capabilities to help identify student's learning styles. Non-credentialed educators are professionals from outside the education establishment (or community) who bring their expertise

to enrich and enliven the learning experience with real life examples and know-how. All of these educators are responsible for the design of the curriculum and the coordination of learning activities.

Community educators include parents and community members who bring their knowledge and passion for various areas to supplement the efforts of the CLC educator staff. Thus the CLC uses native speakers to help teach foreign language, physicists to help teach mathematics, professional artists to create the art program and local business owners to teach fundamentals of business.

This model affords CLC learners exposure to scientists as well as science educators, historians as well as history educators, poets and authors as well as language arts educators and artists as well as art educators. The CLC educators partner with community educators who bring content expertise and real-world experience to the learning arena. CLC educators en-

sure that the community educators can effectively interact with the learners, while these community educators ensure a broader base of up-to-the-minute knowledge and skills than might otherwise be possible.

All staff partner with parents, who bring an in-depth understanding of their children's personalities, learning styles and strengths and weaknesses, to create and revise at regular intervals, a personalized learning plan. Each student will be paired with an adviser who serves as counselor and friend and who remains with that student on a long-term basis. The adviser meets regularly with the student and his or her family to review the learner's progress.

The educators also work with parents to implement effective strategies whereby parents can support the children's learning efforts. Training is provided to better equip parents to meet their children's learning-related needs.

V. THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: WHERE AND WHEN

"It takes a whole village to raise a child." Recognizing the wisdom of this African proverb, Charter community members not only reach out to the community for educators, mentors and advisers as described in the previous section, but also view the entire community as the classroom. Learning activities are coordinated and orchestrated from a central site which also provides a home-

room for each learning team. Under supervision of staff, mentors or parents, learners are encouraged to take advantage of the diverse resources within the extended community, including other schools, institutions of higher learning, community service, and cultural arts programs, and programs developed with local businesses and corporations; all with the intent of immersing the child in a culturally

enriched and useful educational experience.

The Charter Learning Center intends to meet the needs of families by eventually providing year-round, dawn-to-dusk learning opportunities. The Charter Learning Center will comply with the equivalent of the California-mandated minimum number of school days. These periods of time will serve to establish the basic organizational structure of the school year, to schedule all

activities for participants, and to insure the personal and learning needs of all learners are met.

The child's home environment offers new learning opportunities including interactive video through cable interconnects within the community, and also through the use of available educational computer software. This not only allows a child to view and interact with fellow learners at all times, but enables parents and children together to benefit from evening telecourses.

VI. IN CONCLUSION....

The Charter Learning Center has opened at a size appropriate for a pilot project. Initial enrollment is 85 students in the kindergarten and fourth through sixth grade.

The CLC will provide a research and development function for the San Carlos School District. By practicing and testing the ideas set forth in this document, we will develop new ways of educating youth and partnering with the community and provide a fertile ground for the growth and development of both new and experienced educators.

The Charter has been granted for a K-8 operation but the vision is for a K-12 learning center that serves the community as well as enrolled learners and extends itself to provide both adult education and early childhood care and educa-

tion.

