

# Union membership offers charter teachers recourse, protection when they need it

By Dale Martin

Charlene Haney had been a private school teacher when she was hired by the Ocean Charter School in Culver City to train the staff in the specialized Waldorf “whole child” curriculum method.

Now she finds herself president of a fledgling but proactive 22-member CTA chapter, the Ocean Charter Teachers Association, thanks to CTA’s charter school organizing efforts.

“No one wants to work where they have no recourse or protection. CTA has done a great service to teachers in charter schools,” she says. “I’d like to see all Waldorf charter schools unionize.”

The organizing of Ocean Charter School is one of CTA’s early successes. As part of its commitment to organizing charter schools, CTA now has four staff organizers on board — one in each region of the state — whose job is to organize charter schools exclusively. CTA has recently launched a website [[unitedcharterschools.org](http://unitedcharterschools.org)] to support charter teachers statewide and provide an interactive forum for them.

“In CTA, we believe very strongly that all public school teachers should be represented by the union, and we are the best ones to represent them,” says CTA Board member Tom Conry. A member of the State Board of Education’s Advisory Committee on Charter Schools, Conry participates in reviewing new charter applications that go to the board.

CTA has taken an active interest in organizing charter schools since legislation was first passed in 1992. In 1999, CTA won the right to collectively bargain on behalf of charter school employees. Shortly after that, CTA made a proposal to NEA to run a cooperative project aimed at organizing charter school teachers. With that partnership, CTA has developed a comprehensive organizing plan.

The growth of charter schools in California has been difficult for many CTA members to accept, mainly because they feel charter schools are encroaching on resources in districts with declining enrollment as district schools close and charter schools open in their place.

“A by-product of our organizing effort might be more active discussion with charter school organizers,” says Conry. “If we are talking together, we can find ways to solve these problems.

”Currently, approximately 3 percent — more than 180,000 — of the state’s students are enrolled in nearly 600 charter schools. Of the 300,000 K-12 teachers in California, nearly 8,000 teach in charter schools. About 25 percent of those teachers are covered by existing collective bargaining agreements because their schools have remained part of the regular school district bargaining unit. The remaining 75 percent work at independent charters, which are mostly start-up or conversion charters. They are the focus of CTA’s charter school organizing effort.

So far, CTA’s organizers have been looking into strategies that will work in their unique region. For example, CTA’s Region 2, which falls largely in the Central Valley, is giving attention to the idea of

grooming educators to participate in cooperative management of their schools. Two dozen teachers from six chapters met in Sacramento last spring to discuss ideas with activists who have helped create unionized charter schools nationally. “We’re off to a good start. Several groups in the area are already making plans to develop their own teacher- run schools within the next two years,” says Mike Egan, charter school organizer for Region 2.

Geographically, most charter schools are concentrated in urban areas, including Oakland, San Diego and Los Angeles, which just opened its 100th charter. In those places, more traditional organizing is taking place.

All the teachers at the Live Oaks Charter in Petaluma have signed up as CTA members and are now negotiating a successor contract. Employees at the Edison Charter School in East Palo Alto have negotiated their first contract, and teachers at the East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School in Oakland are preparing to bargain their first contract.

CTA also recently organized faculty at the Orange County High School for the Arts, one of the premier arts schools in the nation. Although the administration had aimed for a “memorandum of understanding” instead of a collectively bargained contract with the teachers, the faculty was soundly in favor of joining CTA.

“It wasn’t a hard sell for teachers,” says Stuart Sims, president of the 42-member OCHSA Teachers Association. “We had no representation whatsoever as far as decision-making was concerned. Now we do.”

With the organizing behind them, the OCHSA chapter is now getting down to the business of negotiating its first collective bargaining agreement.

Although Ocean Charter School offers a Waldorf-based curriculum, it really isn’t so different from other charter schools. It was started by a grassroots organization of parents who wanted their Waldorf school to operate within the Los Angeles Unified School District. While the teachers became a cohesive staff, the founders who were so skilled at getting the school off the ground proved to be lacking in administrative experience. The faculty were also concerned that with the lower pay being offered, the school wouldn’t be able to attract experienced teachers from the public schools.

After meeting with Joe Boyd, CTA’s charter school organizer in the region, the faculty decided they no longer wanted to be atwill employees serving at the mercy of untrained administrators. The vote was unanimous. Following a year of bargaining, the members now have their first contract.

“We’re very pleased. Parts of the contract had to be tailored to us since we are a specialized charter,” says Haney, who ended up being the chief negotiator. “And everyone is happy with the new pay scale.”

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