

An Urging to the Ojai Unified School District Board of Directors

Andy Gilman, Director of the Agora Foundation, and a Summit Charter School Board Member

Next month, the Ojai Unified School District will vote on whether or not to approve the Summit Charter School petition for the creation of a new TK-8 public charter school. The proposed location for the school is the former Summit Elementary campus in Upper Ojai, but the location is a separate decision for OUSD. I strongly encourage the OUSD Board to deeply consider the proposal, rise above misleading objections, work with the Charter School Board on any concerns, and to approve the petition.

Fifteen years ago, I worked in Ojai and lived in Ventura. My two younger children attended Open Classroom, a K-5 public parent co-op that was part of Ventura Unified School District. We loved the parent involvement, outdoor teaching opportunities, progressive curriculum, and small community. As time went on, Open Classroom wished to grow the program to a K-8 school and have more autonomy. Also during that time there were changes in the VUSD administration, as well as changes in leadership in the school that housed Open Classroom (Blanche Reynolds). What had been a mutually solid relationship had changed. We strove repeatedly to work with the district but were met with so much resistance that we pursued creating a charter school. VUSD denied approving the charter petition, and the County of Ventura shortly thereafter approved the petition. That effort was the creation of Ventura Charter School, which, 13 years later, continues to serve over 400 students.

Many of the objections heard about the current Summit Charter School petition were voiced during the Ventura Charter School hearings. Let me address them again below:

1. The charter school is really a private school funded with public dollars. They can accept who they want and don't have to do what our public schools have to do.

No.

Charter schools are public schools, funded as all public schools are, and must teach the state standards, implement the standardized tests, and its teachers meet the same criteria as teachers in the district. The school must accept students who apply and, if there are more students who wish to attend than there are available spots, a random, public lottery takes place. What is different is that charter schools, in addition to implementing the state standards, can also have focus areas. In the case of Summit Charter School, the relationship-based curriculum will emphasize environmental science, sustainability, and cultural literacy. There will also be multi-age groupings where teachers have their students for two years in a row, and a strong Spanish language acquisition component. What is also different is that the charter school gets to better control its own finances. What this

allows for is greater responsiveness to challenges and opportunities, and more money can be spent directly in the classroom, due to less organizational hierarchy.

2. Charter Schools are bad, most fail, and there is really high staff turnover.

No.

As anyone who has attended one of Agora's Ojai Chautauqua panels knows, there are many sides to complicated issues, and to get the facts takes time, open mindedness, and a willingness to hear as many sides as possible. If you have a predetermined outcome in mind, you can find a report or an organization who will support your belief. Do some charter schools fail? Of course. Do some succeed? Of course. In the 2017–18 school year, the number of students enrolled in charter schools was approximately 628,849, or ten percent of the public school student population in California. (www.cde.ca.gov). In my view, the state's tightening its restrictions for charter schools have some very beneficial aspects, such as banning for-profit charters schools. But, please be wary of blanket statements, and judge a school by its merits, by what it can offer to its students and the community. Finally, on the staff question, Summit Charter School is already receiving more interest in applying for teacher and administrator positions than we will presumably have spots for. There is real, qualified, and credentialed interest in this approach.

3. We don't need this. Our public schools are doing these things already, and already have this curriculum and whole-child focus.

No and yes.

Over 100 students and their families in Ojai Unified have indicated that they intend to enroll in Summit Charter School if it were to open in fall 2020. This number of students exceeds our capacity! Even at this early stage, it seems clear that there is a need that is not being met now within our District for these families. I believe that OUSD is on the right track, and I have supported these changes and will continue to support them. It seems reasonable to me that almost no one would say that everything is great in our public education system and that nothing needs to improve. It also seems reasonable to support the idea that there are multiple ways to achieve our collective goal of great education in Ojai, and we should explore them. An additional dynamic is that we have an unusually large collection of private schools in our valley. We know that the progressive curriculum Summit Charter School is offering will bring some of those families back to public education. We know because they are telling us.

4. Multi-age classrooms don't work.

Be wary of blanket statements!

As an article in the American Association of School Administrators points out, “Research conducted during the 1980s and early 1990s helped validate the multi-age approach. When it came to the impact of multi-age grouping on student achievement, study results were mixed. While some found students in multi-age classrooms performed better on standardized achievement tests, others found students in single-grade classes performed better.” (www.aasa.org). It’s true that multi-age classrooms are much fewer than decades ago, and the article addresses several possible reasons. Some believe that No Child Left Behind makes multi-age classrooms harder to implement. The article also points out the potential social benefits of multi-age classrooms, which should not be ignored. The better questions seem to me to be: Where does it work best? What teachers have experience making this thrive? Let’s bring them on board so that our students and their families can have greater choice in their education. And that is what we are doing.

5. Charter schools siphon off needed resources from the district.

This is the most common concern, and the response requires some thoughtful inquiry. First, the federal, state, and local funds do not belong to a district. They belong to the student. By default, the public school district administers the funds with the goal of educating the student. The charter school will be fulfilling that mission of educating that student. But of course it’s more nuanced than that. The relationship between the charter and the district it resides in can be really beneficial to both organizations. For example:

- a) The charter school hires the district to help with its back-office services, attendance, pays a small percentage for oversight function, pays a pro-rata share for assistance with supporting students with special needs along with the district receiving all charter special education funding in the first year. All of this and more can be agreed upon between the district and the charter.
- b) The charter can bring more students to the district from local private schools and out-of-district families who want this approach.
- c) Some people move to Ojai for the private schools. We all know that. Some people move from Ojai to Ventura to attend Ventura Charter School. Imagine if people moved to Ojai for our public schools, and that Summit Charter School is just one of the jewels in the Ojai Unified School District’s collection of offerings.

It really can be this way.

Of course, Ojai Unified School District will have to adjust if Summit Charter opens. OUSD is already adjusting to community requests and concerns and I hope that, in the interest and benefit of these families who want something they are not getting now, that the OUSD Board will make these adjustments in the spirit of partnership and community.

I hope you will read about the school on the website: www.summitcharterschooljai.org and judge for yourself, and, if you think this approach should be given strong consideration, let our elected OUSD School Board know. Thank you.