

# The Charter School Movement Washes Out in California

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A Los Angeles school board race reveals the waning power of charter school supporters.



AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez

Demonstrators hold signs during a rally in favor of charter schools at the Los Angeles Unified School District headquarters.

**C**harter school politics in California have been changing very quickly.

On Tuesday, Los Angeles held a special election for a school board seat that had been vacated in 2018. Ref Rodriguez had been elected in 2015 with the support of the charter school movement, and in 2017, two more pro-charter advocates won seats on the seven-person school board, giving charter supporters a slim majority for the first time. Their victory was short-lived, however, because Rodriguez was soon **charged with money laundering**, and eventually pled guilty to conspiracy and resigned.

The contest to fill Rodriguez's seat was, thus, high-stakes: Would someone like Rodriguez replace him on the board, and thereby keep the board's pro-charter tilt?

While the election is not over, the answer increasingly looks like it will be no. In a crowded field of ten candidates, 74-year-old Jackie Goldberg emerged **with 48 percent of the vote**, and heads into a May runoff with a strong likelihood of winning. The next-highest challenger received only 13 percent.

Goldberg, who was endorsed by United Teachers Los Angeles, **did not hide that she was running** for the seat mainly to prevent charter advocates from controlling the board. "I don't want four votes for the charter people," she told me in January. "I'm not anti-charter, but I'm anti the current charter law."

Goldberg has been a well-known figure in local progressive politics for decades. A veteran of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley and later a public schoolteacher, she was elected to two terms on the Los Angeles school board from 1983 to 1991. After that, she served six years in the state assembly and eight as the first openly gay member of the Los Angeles City Council, where in 1997 she authored and passed what was effectively the nation's first living-wage ordinance. This earned her the reputation as a real darling of the progressive left in the city. Goldberg was also a strong supporter of the recent Los Angeles teachers strike, and the teachers union spent roughly \$660,000 to elect her.

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In late December, before the strike, UTLA called for a moratorium on new charter schools. (L.A.

has 224 charters, more than any other city in the country.) California's new governor, Gavin Newsom, and its new state schools superintendent, Tony Thurmond, have also both said they support temporary moratoriums on new charters.

Following UTLA's six-day strike, where opposition to charters was a central point of the teachers' advocacy, the L.A. school board approved a nonbinding resolution **in support of an eight-to-ten-month moratorium** on new charter schools, pending a study on California's charter laws. The vote was part of the bargaining agreement between UTLA and Los Angeles Unified School District chief Austin Beutner. Getting the board to even take such a vote was a huge win for the union, let alone receiving a near-unanimous vote, including from all but one of the board's charter supporters.

A **public opinion survey of Los Angeles County** residents taken during January and the first two weeks of February found that 75 percent of respondents said they wanted to focus on improving

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existing public schools, and just 25 percent said the focus should be on giving families more school choices. The results were similar when broken down by race, though black and Latino families were slightly more likely to favor school improvements than other groups.

Further north in California, teachers in Oakland went on strike in late February, ending with an agreement that included, among other things, **a moratorium on charter schools**. Oakland currently has 44 charter schools, enrolling more than 15,600 students.

Keith Brown, president of Oakland Educators Association, said teachers will push for further regulation of charter schools on the state level, and already some bills have gained traction. Last week, the California Assembly **approved a bill** that would subject all charter schools in the state to the same open meetings, public records, and conflict-of-interest laws that traditional public schools are subject to. The transparency bill passed on a 63-to-9 vote and Governor Newsom is expected to sign it.

And that's likely not all. Other bills that have been introduced would place a cap on charter schools, limit where charter schools could open, and create new ways to deny charter school applications. About 10 percent of the state's 6.2 million public-school students currently attend charters.

Eric Premack, the executive director of the Sacramento-based Charter Schools Development Center, **told CalMatters** that the new bills are "the policy equivalent of an extended middle finger."

California's charter advocates are still reeling from two major political losses last year. In the gubernatorial primary, charter supporters spent **\$23 million** backing Antonio Villaraigosa in a failed bid, and **more than \$36 million** on another candidate's unsuccessful run for state superintendent of public instruction.

After losing those statewide races in 2018, the California Charter Schools Association, the movement's main political arm, took a gamble, **announcing in late December** that it would not be endorsing a candidate in the school board special election in Los Angeles. (The lobbying group declined to answer questions in January about whether it would run any independent expenditure campaigns or financially support any pro-charter school board contenders despite not giving an endorsement.)

Given the many candidates vying for the seat, most political observers suspected the CCSA would jump into the fray with an endorsement for the anticipated runoff, where they had been successful in the past.

But now it looks like their strategy failed, and their prospects to take back control of the board are slim. Not only did Goldberg command a formidable lead, but the next two candidates to trail her aren't reliable charter advocates either. The most outspoken charter proponent in the field—Allison Bajracharya—finished fifth, earning less than six percent of the vote. That catastrophic mistake by the charter school movement could precipitate its further slide into political irrelevance.