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California charter school association gets \$15-million grant

The grant is the largest yet to the California charter schools group and the biggest of its kind from the nonprofit set up by the founders of the Wal-Mart Corp.

By Howard Blume, Los Angeles Times

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The state charter school association has received a \$15-million grant from the Walton Family Foundation to add 20,000 more charter school students in Los Angeles and 100,000 statewide.

The grant, scheduled to be announced Tuesday, is the largest by far to the California Charter Schools Assn., and also the largest of its kind from the nonprofit established by the founders of the Wal-Mart Corp.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has more charter schools — 183 last year — and more charter-school students than any school system in the country, and that growth spurt is poised to continue despite countervailing pressure from reduced education funding and political resistance from teacher unions and other critics.

The charter association "has been very effective in a very difficult political environment where there's very well-organized opposition to the growth of charter schools," said Jim Blew, who heads the foundation's education efforts. "And creating this growth with the restricted funding levels of schools in California also is very difficult."

Charters are independently managed and free from some of the restrictions that govern traditional public schools, including having to abide by a district's union contracts with teachers and other employees.

Wal-Mart has opposed unionization in its own operations, but the Arkansas-based foundation does not require charters that it supports to do likewise, although most charters are non-union. The foundation also supports providing government funding to allow low-income students to attend private schools; such publicly funded vouchers are not legal in California.

"We are most concerned about low-income areas where the education system is not working," Blew said. "The goal is explicitly to create competition to incentivize all public schools to improve.

"The growth of charter schools in Los Angeles has created a different dynamic," he said.

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The foundation for the first time is funding initiatives within L.A. Unified itself, contributing about \$2 million over the last two years toward developing a teacher- and school-evaluation system that includes student performance on standardized tests.

The three-year charter growth targets, if successful, would result in up to 18% of L.A. Unified students — about 110,000 — attending charter schools. As charters have hired more teachers, the membership clout of United Teachers Los Angeles has shrunk, with an increasing number of union-contracted teachers losing work at traditional schools.

About 60% of the charter association's \$15-million budget derives from philanthropy, including from the Michael and Susan Dell, Bill & Melinda Gates, Fisher and Broad foundations. Member schools pay \$5 per student, and the association also charges fees for some services.

The association helps entrepreneurs start charter schools, lobbies government bodies and provides ongoing support to charters in such arenas as legal defense, increasing funding and demanding public facilities for charters.

Equally important, said Chief Executive Jed Wallace, is either improving or shutting down low-quality charters. "We're very serious about this issue of quality," he said.

The Obama administration has praised the group for supporting the closing of low-performing charter schools.

More charters, however, need to reflect the association's rhetoric, said Dean Vogel, president of the California Teachers Assn. He said too many charters are not equally accessible to disabled students or those learning English, a problem that still needs to be resolved.

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