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## Editorial: Sac High turnaround can't be ignored

PUBLISHED SUNDAY, OCT. 25, 2009

Closing a school and turning it over to a nonprofit to run as a public charter school is not for the faint of heart. It requires a strong school board willing to back an inevitably controversial decision. It requires a charter organization willing to withstand withering criticism in its sensitive startup years by those tethered to the status quo.

But it is an option, one among many dramatic actions that school boards and communities can take to turn around their lowest-performing schools.

On these pages over time, we're featuring a number of alternatives for turning around chronically underperforming schools.

We began Oct. 19 with Jonas Salk Middle School in the San Juan Unified School District ([www.sacbee.com/opinion/story/2261956.html](http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/story/2261956.html)). That school closed and reopened as a high-tech academy. Teachers reapplied for their jobs. Some got rehired, but most moved on.

Today we feature the transformation of Sacramento High School into a charter school.

After years of declining student achievement, Sac High faced possible state takeover in 2003. Unable to get beyond an angry impasse between a superintendent urging reform and an inflexible teachers union, the school board voted 4-3 to close the school in June of that year.

Former NBA star and Sac High graduate Kevin Johnson's St. HOPE nonprofit submitted a charter school proposal, which the board approved (rejecting two others).

At the time, Tom Loveless, director of the Center on American Education at the Brookings Institution, told The Bee, "It has never happened before where a large, existing high school closed in June and opened in September as a charter. As such, they'll be under the microscope. There will be a lot of pressure on these people to produce."

Based on the state's Academic Performance Index, Sac High now ranks in the top 10 percent of schools that have a similar demographic (high poverty, high minority), according to the California Department of Education.

In addition to improvements in the API (see chart), Sac High's four-year dropout rate has fallen; more than 70 percent of students in the Class of 2009 have been accepted to a four-year college; more than three-quarters of the school's 10th-graders pass the state's high school exit exam, required for graduation. This is no small feat.

Enrollment has stabilized at 1,000 students in the last two years and the school slowly seems to be getting beyond the intense conflict surrounding its founding. This is a school that could be even more successful if it had something more than a dismissive brush-off from influential parts of the community.

On the scale of turnaround options, closing a school and reopening it as a charter is the most dramatic. It also is the most risky. But, as the Sacramento High experience has shown, it can bring big dividends for students in poorer neighborhoods, who too often are left behind.

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