

TOM BROWN: CHARTING SCHOOL REFORM

By **MATT KING**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

The first time someone told Tom Brown about Pacific Collegiate School, he asked, "what's a charter school?"

Five years later, Brown is carrying the banner of public school reform in Santa Cruz County. As the head of Beacon Education Network, he is promising to use three new charters to turn hundreds of average and failing

students into college-bound successes and shake up the status quo of public education.

"It's pretty exciting," he said recently. "It gives us a chance to check our assumptions. If we

can't improve student achievement or the student experience, I have no trouble saying we couldn't make it happen, but to

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NEWSMAKERS OF THE YEAR

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Tom Brown's Beacon Education Network is working to establish four new charter schools in the county.

Shmuel Thaler/
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Beacon

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stand back and say this is the best we can do without more money or without this or that does a terrible disservice to our students.”

Charter schools are public institutions, typically created by community members looking for alternatives to mainstream schools, that have more flexibility in curriculum and teaching methods.

The efficacy of charters has been questioned in countless inconclusive studies. But the debate has a unique aspect in Santa Cruz, where Pacific Collegiate has earned national recognition for its academic success and local scorn for attracting students, and state funding, away from other public schools as well as for a lack of diversity.

Brown, who owns a machine shop in southern California, once acted as Pacific Collegiate's treasurer and served as the president of the school's governing board. His children attend the school.

Santa Cruz City Schools Superintendent Alan Pagano has been fierce in criticism of Pacific Collegiate, but he says of Brown that “I have a genuine respect for Tom. We may not agree on every perspective concerning charters, but I believe he moves forward with integrity.”

Brown calls the animosity between traditional public schools and charters “intriguing.”

“I've tried to focus on what it is about charter schools that ticked everybody off and I'm not sure I found any compelling answers,” he said.

“I concluded that we weren't asking the right questions. Instead of talking about academic achievement we were talking about declining enrollment and financial losses. That's what led James (Reinhart, his business partner) and me to start Beacon.”

The plan for Beacon is to

Tom Brown

HOME: Santa Cruz

AGE: 49

OCCUPATION: Owns Adler Mackay, which specializes in computerized panel processing for the wood industry, in Orange.

FAMILY: Married to Cathy, 3 children.

IN THE NEWS: Founded Beacon Education Network to open three new public charter schools in the county.

open three charters in the next three years that enroll students in grades six through 12. Brown wants to attract students who may be doing poorly in school or come from families where they're not expected to attend a four-year college.

What will make Beacon schools different? Brown and Reinhart are tinkering with a program to have college graduates do Peace Corps-like mentoring at the school and a constant assessment model in which teachers would be expected to change their approach to material “on the fly” if students aren't doing well.

With less public funding than traditional schools, Brown expects to have “make sacrifices and cut corners.” Beacon schools are not likely to field sports teams, for example.

“That's not our mission,” Brown said. “I'm not of the opinion that more money will necessarily translate into higher achievement. If we're smart about it, we should be able to make it work. That's the promise of charters.”

And Brown sees Beacon as a chance to put the charter debate to rest. If his school can improve the achievement of low-income and Latino students and graduate students who succeed at four-year colleges and universities, then “you better pay attention and stop knocking charters.”

Contact Matt King at
mking@santacruzsentinel.com.