

Education**Parent innovation leads to unusual solution to school frustrations**

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Founding parents Nancy Baca, left, Duhee Lee and Marian Chen look inside an available classroom at Pasadena Christian Church. The ad-hoc group of founding parents are calling the new school "The Oasis Trilingual Community School."
Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parent Li Huo tours a classroom inside Pasadena Christian Church on Tuesday, March 4, 2014. The space is a possible location for a group of parents launching their own school.

Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parents Dufee Lee, left, Nancy Baca, Tamara Hernandez, Li Huo and Ivee Wong Stassi wait outside Pasadena Christian church before touring the facility. The trilingual school would teach in Mandarin, Spanish and English.

Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parent Duhee Lee, an architect, examines a fence on the property.
Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Pasadena Christian Church Trustee Sylvia Gorsuch helps to lead a tour of the classrooms. In the winter of 2013, the founding group of 14 parents began brainstorming ideas for a new school.
Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Architects and founding parents Duhee Lee and Marian Chen look through a window and discuss possible structure changes to a classroom during a tour at the Pasadena Christian Church on Tuesday, March 4, 2014.
Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parent Ivey Wong Stassi walks into the main office at Pasadena Christian Church before a tour of the facility. The parents are planning for the school to be a non-profit and want to keep tuition to \$10,000 a year.

Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parent Tamara Hernandez begins a tour at Pasadena Community Church. Hernandez had the idea of starting a new school for a while, but only last winter did she begin working on the project with parents. "I just blurted out 'I'm going to start my own school,'" she said. "And then as soon as I said it, it just started happening very quickly."

Maya Sugarman/KPCC



Founding parent Duhee Lee looks at the second floor classrooms and outdoor space at Pasadena Christian Church. The parents, many of them from Pasadena, decided not to go the charter route, in part because the children would still be subject to testing and in part because of the restrictions that come with public funds.
Maya Sugarman/KPCC

Deepa Fernandes | March 12, 2014

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Tamara Hernandez isn't the first parent to be underwhelmed by her local public school. But she's solving the problem in a way not many do: she's joining other frustrated parents to start a new school.

She said the idea had been percolating in her head for some time. But the project didn't get started until one afternoon this Winter, while brainstorming with parents about another way to bring change at the school.

"They wanted me to join their effort, and I just blurted out 'I'm going to start my own school,'" she said. "And then as soon as I said it, it just started happening very quickly."

So far, 14 parents have joined the effort. This ad-hoc group of founding parents came up with a name: [The Oasis Trilingual Community School](#).

They want to create a thematic and inquiry-based school. Students would receive regular classes in art, drama, music, gardening, and PE - all built in to the school day, and all in equal measures of Mandarin, Spanish and English.

What they don't want is what they feel their kids are currently getting in even some of the best-regarded public schools.

"The children sit there and listen to the teacher in a lecture format," said Ivey Wong Stassi. "They're just basically told what they need to know."

Willow Harrington, Managing Director at the California Charter School Association, said these parents are not alone.

"Many [charter] schools come out of a strong frustration either with the quality, or district politics or decisions that parents don't agree with in a specific school," she said.

These parents – many of them from Pasadena - decided not to go the charter route, in part because the children would still be subject to testing and in part because of the restrictions that come with public funds.

There's surprisingly little regulation of private schools in California. According to the state department of education, schools only have to register yearly.

"As a group of parents [we] can get together and keep tuition very low for middle class parents," Hernandez said, "and have a nimble curriculum so that if something is not working then we can adjust it."

The business model the parents are pursuing is Silicon Valley start-up meets parent-cooperative. They're planning for the school itself to be a non-profit, no costly "bells and whistles" that you would find at an expensive private school, Hernandez said. They want to keep tuition to \$10,000 a year and fund the initial startup costs through investors, grants and lots of parent volunteer labor.

They've also got a side-business they hope will generate profits for the school.

Harry Ralston, Hernandez's business partner, said if they develop multi-media Mandarin and Spanish materials, film the curriculum in action at the school and create supporting study guides, they can sell it widely.

Hernandez and Ralston already [create educational DVDs that use music and playfulness to teach complex concepts like geometry and early reading](#). The products are geared toward mass markets and are sold at Costco and other places.

He believes there is a niche in the educational curriculum market.

"There aren't that many things in Mandarin," Ralston said.

He even has his eye on the world's largest market: China.

But for now, there are a lot of other details to work out.

Since late last year, this group of parents has been working in every free moment on all the components of a brand new school. (Listen to the radio feature to hear them touring possible site locations for the school, meeting with teachers and curriculum experts, and hiring someone to build [a website](#).)

They've been busy posting job ads and going through resumes. There is curriculum to develop, promotional materials to create, and a non-profit organization to legally form. They've found a space they like in Pasadena.

One dad runs a PE company and has committed to provide a year of sports instruction for free.

Even if the school opens in September, long-term survival will be challenging.

There are no statistics on how many private schools fail in their first year, but for new businesses in general, it's more than 50 percent.