

Tracy Press

Tracy Unified to offer online charter school

by Jennifer Wadsworth

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Together with a private company, Tracy Unified School District launched an online public charter school last week that could bring in more money for the financially strapped district.

Kaplan Virtual Education and the nonprofit California Virtual Education Partners teamed up with the local school district to start a sixth-through-12th-grade virtual charter academy in time for the new school year.

Any one of 700,000 middle-through-high school-age kids in San Joaquin County, and all contiguous counties, are eligible to enroll in what's called the Kaplan Academy of California, according to Matt Given, Kaplan's vice president for public school development.

For each student who enrolls, Tracy Unified could get about 5 percent of the per-pupil funding. For every student, the state gives a little less than \$5,000 to the school they attend, according to the district.

A virtual school gives the Tracy district a chance to collect students from surrounding districts, which means more money for the local operating budget, said Sheila Harrison, Tracy Unified's assistant superintendent of educational services.

Kaplan expects a few hundred pupils to enroll this coming school year and for enrollment to steadily increase over time, eventually bringing in many thousands of dollars in for the local school district and for Kaplan as a private company. The projected operating budget for the online school's first year may top \$2 million, according to district reports.

Kaplan plans to pay Tracy Unified to help with a few administrative tasks, for a small office space and for a place to store documents.

A virtual charter school is similar to one with a physical campus, Given said. It gets per-student funding from the state and follows the same curriculum and graduation guidelines laid out for other public schools. Only like other charter schools, it's more flexible about scheduling and some of the curriculum.

"We see this as another method, another option available to our students," Harrison said. "We recognize that there are a certain number of students who are interested in pursuing their education virtually."

Kaplan can only set up a public charter school if it gets a public agency to authorize the move. That's why the company approached Tracy Unified