Study: Teachers like charter schools

Freedom cited, teacher union says

By ROBERT GREENE

NEW ORLEANS — Charter schools draw most of their teachers from traditional public schools, and teachers like the freedom that these independent, experimental public schools provide, preliminary research done for the nation's largest teacher union suggests.

Although still in draft form, the examination of charter schools for the National Education Association, released Thursday, will help the union further refine its stance toward the growing charter movement.

The NEA, preparing to open its annual convention, has given conditional, cautious support to the charter movement, and it began a detailed analysis of the movement three years ago while opening a few charter schools of its own.

The union of 2.4 million members, most of them classroom teachers, is anxious to be seen as on the side of educational reform and flexibility, and views charter schools as an alternative to the direct government subsidies — or vouchers — to support private or religious schools sought by some states and Congress.

"I think what we have to do is be accountable, and we recognize that you have to provide a form of choice," said Sheila Simmons, an NEA specialist on charter schools. "The form of choice we want to provide for families is choice within the public schools."

Yet the NEA worries that too much public money going to the generally smaller charter schools will drain money and attention from regular public schools.

The number of the publicly supported charter schools is small — 800 out of more than 87,000 public schools — yet that's nearly double the number two years ago. President Clinton has set a goal of 3,000 charter schools nationwide by the next century, and the union wants to influence how those schools are run.

The California Legislature this year overhauled its charter law to make it easier to open 100 new charter schools each year. The compromise law followed bitter opposition from the California Teachers Association, the largest NEA affiliate.

Although the expansion will continue and teachers at the schools won't have to be covered by labor contracts, the union won agreement that the teachers would have to be credentialed and the schools subjected to outside audits.

And in Rhode Island recently, the Legislature overhauled its charter law over union objections, allowing people other than public school employees to operate the schools.

Simmons said the research done for the union found that teachers liked the charter environment.

"They went to charter schools to have that freedom, freedom to teach, freedom from bureaucracy and freedom to be a part of a changing world around the delivery of education," she said.

The schools tend to be smaller and custom-designed. Under charter laws, depending on the state, parents, community activists, teachers or even private companies may set up schools under a special agreement or charter.

The schools might stress a particular curriculum, such as arts or technology, or more traditional teaching methods using repetition and drills, or experimental methods that let children learn at their own pace.

The movement still has skeptics in the union.

In Connecticut, an NEA-sponsored charter opened over objections from the local union and school district. In East Point, Ga., an NEA-sponsored charter project was dropped for lack of teacher interest. And in Colorado Springs, Colo., the support of the local's president for an NEA-sponsored charter became part of the reason for an unsuccessful recall drive against her.

Some charter school supporters, in turn, are skeptical about NEA support, believing it is too hard to give up salary schedules and detailed contracts.

Says Bruno Manno, an analyst for the conservative Hudson Institute: "The unions still consistently do whatever they can to keep the shackles on these schools."