



# Grants go to charters and a traditional school to help teachers stay on the job



**Howard Blume**

Julia Guy worried that remaining a teacher might be difficult once she started a family, and staying fit already posed a challenge — so she eagerly filled out a survey seeking suggestions on how to keep teachers in the profession.



*Julia Guy, a kindergarten teacher at Valor Academy Elementary, hopes to benefit from a teacher-retention grant won by her employer, Bright Star Schools. (Bright Star Schools)*

Her employer, Bright Star Schools, reviewed the results, crafted a proposal, and on Friday won a \$250,000 grant to improve teacher retention, which is a major problem in education and can be especially challenging for charter schools.

With the funding, teachers at seven Bright Star schools will get additional family leave as well as fitness activities at school, better snacks in the teachers' lounge and advice from a nutritionist.

In all, six grants, totaling nearly \$900,000, were handed out by locally based Great Public Schools Now, which is best known for its controversial genesis in a confidential plan for a massive expansion of local charter schools.

The organization hasn't abandoned charter growth but says its current goal is to replicate successful schools of any kind.

Holding on to talented teachers is part of the puzzle, said Myrna Castrejón, the group's executive director.

"We know that teachers are the most important factor within a school, and that keeping great ones in the classroom can have an immediate and profound effect on students," Castrejón said.

Charter schools are publicly funded but free from some rules that govern traditional campuses.

Recent, comprehensive data are hard to come by, but an early [study](#) of Los Angeles area charters, published in 2011, found that they were having to replace on average 50% of their instructors every year.

To win a grant from Great Public Schools Now, a charter operator had to have lost no more than 30% of its faculty since last school year. That's still well above the state average of 10.6%. Winners also had to meet certain school performance parameters.

Besides Bright Star, other grant recipients include: Environmental Charter Schools (\$200,000), PUC Charter Schools (\$105,000) and Aspire Public Schools (\$153,000).

Teach Plus, a foundation-funded nonprofit associated with some school-reform efforts, pledged to provide a variety of supports for teachers in the local area and got \$90,000.

Bright Star's revamped, family-friendly portfolio will include time off for teachers to go on field trips with their own children, a \$2,500 stipend for day care and lactation pods on every campus. Bright Star already offered extended parental leave — four weeks paid at 55% and up to eight additional weeks without pay. The grant will now cover those costs.

“It's time to stop perpetuating the myth of the teacher martyr and start creating working conditions that allow instructors to make teaching a lifelong career,” said Melissa Kaplan, Bright Star's chief academic officer.

In all, the successful applicants identified about 150 teachers as irreplaceable to their organizations.

One winner came from within the L.A. Unified School District: the Business Entrepreneurial Technology Magnet at Nightingale Middle School in Cypress Park. Its application had a twist: The magnet coordinator and two teachers who submitted the application identified themselves as “irreplaceable.” It's a description their principal, Rafael Gaeta, wholeheartedly endorses.

The team has worked extended days and weekends to bring a high school curriculum for developing formal business plans down to the middle school level. Their students have done well in competition against high-schoolers.

Their \$65,000 grant will help pay for these teachers to step outside their own classrooms part of the time to support such efforts and to help other teachers and schools set up similar programs.

“We believe that these programs have found creative and common-sense ways to help teachers do what they do best: inspire students to reach their full potential,” Castrejón said of the grant winners.