Why start a charter school in the style of a military college-prep academy? Put simply, Oakland’s public high schools are a disaster. Citywide, the freshman class totaled 3,757 in 1996. Four years later, the graduating class of 2000 was only 1,630 students strong. A mere 377 students successfully completed the courses required to enter a public four-year college.

Such a daunting educational challenge requires solid alternatives that will engage children in exciting and powerful learning environments. I chose to establish two charter schools, one for the performing arts, the other a military academy. Both were to be rigorous and unapologetically committed to excellence.

I thought back to my high-school days at St. Ignatius in San Francisco, where we had good teachers, solid discipline, a college-prep curriculum, and two years of ROTC training. I was determined to create a similar program at a public charter school. The California law is quite expansive in this regard. It allows anyone, including the mayor, to start a school based on a specific vision.

I knew that the Ignatian style, circa 1950, could not be replicated, if for no other reason than the strictures of the First Amendment. So I chose the perfectly legal alternative of affiliating with the California National Guard, with its emphasis on ceremony, discipline, inspiration, and leadership training.

The commitment of the Oakland Military Institute (OMI) will be to assist each student in mastering the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), achieving proficiency in a foreign language, and taking Advanced Placement classes in English, math, and science. OMI intends to perform among the best schools on quantitative measures of educational performance. Nevertheless, it recognizes the exaggerated emphasis now placed on standardized outcomes and is even more committed to fostering an environment where creativity, leadership, and intellectual curiosity are deeply respected. Nothing will be done to interfere with or harm the student’s capacity to learn. We plan to start this August with a 7th grade of 162 students, adding one additional grade each year thereafter.

Opponents of the Oakland Military Institute, including school-board members and union representatives, said the California National Guard, as part of the United States military, was unacceptable in Oakland. Some said the charter lacked community support, noting that opponents outnumbered supporters at public hearings.

In my mind, neither concern carries weight, especially given the extreme educational neglect prevailing in Oakland. Besides, California law does not allow for such reasons in denying a charter-school application. Families have every right to choose a school that is to their liking, even to form a charter school of their own. The principle at stake here is the constitutional freedom of parents to educate their children as they see fit.

As the United States Supreme Court declared in the 1925 case of Pierce v. Society of Sisters, “The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only. The child is not the mere creature of the State.”

The continuing crisis in Oakland’s public schools has forced thousands of parents to choose private schools or leave the city. These families and countless others who want an outstanding education for their children have every right to choose among a wide array of educational philosophies, including an academic school operated in collaboration with the California National Guard.

—Jerry Brown is the mayor of Oakland, Calif.

Readers are invited to send their telling tales from education’s front lines. Please mail your submissions to Education Matters, 226 Littauer North Yard, 1875 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, or e-mail Editor_EM@latte.harvard.edu.