

Citizens League report urges action to improve schools' quality, equality

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11-4-88

School desegregation is such a pressing problem in Minneapolis and St. Paul that the 1989 Legislature either should improve district quality by allowing creation of innovative, semi-independent public schools run largely by teachers, or it should redraw district boundaries to mix city and suburban students.

Those are among the recommendations of a preliminary Citizens League report on school organization in the metropolitan area. The draft version of the report, which could be revised by the league's board of directors, is one of the most forceful calls yet for reform to preserve the educational quality of Minnesota's city schools.

Those schools "are at a crisis point in support of quality and equity of opportunity," the report says. "That our apparently weakest efforts show up where our most vulnerable children are is a deeply discriminatory situation that cannot continue. . . .

"Although the schools in Minneapolis and St. Paul contain many exemplary programs, the cities' demo-

graphic changes are creating a situation where neither city will be able to retain substantial numbers of middle-class families — of all races — who can set the tone for effective school programs. School systems in which poverty is predominant are almost destined to failure."

The report suggests revising state desegregation guidelines to include measures of income as well as race. It says schools must have curriculums that reflect diverse cultures and it says the state should help districts hire teachers of color. And it proposes creating "chartered schools" that are designed and managed by teachers, parents and building administrators. Decisions about how to spend the budget or how to teach would be made in those schools. Such programs could be in a school or in an unconventional setting such as an office building.

The schools would be required to have students from various races, ability levels and family incomes. They would have to meet independent accreditation standards within three years. Although located in Minneapolis or St. Paul, they would draw some students and teachers from suburbs.

Charters would be granted by school district committees or the state Department of Education. The report suggests that corporations or foundations provide planning money for those programs and that the Legislature provide start-up money.

Curt Johnson, the league's executive director, said Thursday that with strong parent and teacher involvement, the chartered schools offer an assurance of quality that takes desegregation beyond the usual balancing of students by race.

"In nearly 40 years of desegregation, we've . . . assumed the quality was there and all we had to do was give minorities access to it," he said. "We must create high quality where minorities are. What minorities told us repeatedly is that it's what happens at the end of the bus ride that's important."

Creating a richer array of high-quality options offers students of minority groups a better education and gives the white middle class a reason to stay in the city, Johnson said. Because of desegregation guidelines, he said, white students in Minneapolis and St. Paul usually are the only Minnesotans who cannot take part in state school choice programs. In effect, he said, they're penalized for living in the city.

"Most people regard that as politically unsustainable," Johnson said. "So we have to build quality where people are."

The draft had its first public airing yesterday at the governor's discussion group on education. School superintendents in Minneapolis and St. Paul apparently have not read the report, but Minneapolis' Larry Harris was at the meeting and had studied the report.

Harris, district director of student welfare and community relations, said that the report was thoughtful, but that it ignores the complexity of balancing student numbers.

Minneapolis, where almost half of district students are minority children, tries to balance enrollment by race and sex, he said. Under the league's plan, chartered schools also would try to mix students by socioeconomic and ability levels.

"The idea is excellent but I don't know how you work that out," Harris said.

He defended school quality but said the district could do a better job if it had more resources. Julio Almanza, a St. Paul school representative who heard a summary of the report, agreed.

"They're asking some good questions," he said. "But what are the standards of measurement by which people are saying we're not doing the job? Before you dismantle something, you better have something better to replace it with."

The report says that if next year's Legislature doesn't take substantial steps to improve quality and increase city-suburban student exchanges through chartered public schools, legislators should ask the state Department of Education to prepare a metropolitan area district reorganization plan for the 1991 Legislature.

Such action should be a last resort, the report says. But "Because of the immediacy and seriousness of the desegregation problem, the Legislature must take steps in 1989," according to the report. "Waiting will only exacerbate an already untenable situation, and make a reasonable solution more difficult to attain."

Options include dividing city school districts among adjacent districts, merging adjacent suburban districts into Minneapolis and St. Paul schools and splitting the metropolitan area into five districts with proportionate shares of students in different races and socioeconomic levels. Or the education commissioner could have an advisory board draw up a metropolitan desegregation plan, the report says. It also suggests amending Minnesota's open enrollment plan to prevent districts from closing programs to nonresident students, if those students would improve the racial balance.

Johnson said innovative school programs offer a "more politically feasible and reasonable" option than substantial district reorganization. Establishing such schools isn't as extreme as it might seem, he said.

Harris said he hoped the state would pursue other options to reorganization, but agreed that such action isn't out of the question.

"I think it would be better for the Legislature and this community to look at that rather than wait for a court to do something," he said. "Because if we don't act, somebody else