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Citizens League urges 'chartered schools'

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True integration, better education foreseen

Innovative, semi-independent schools managed at the building level could improve education in Minneapolis and St. Paul, according to a Citizens League report released Thursday.

The report, the result of nine months of committee work, addresses how to maintain quality and choice in city schools that have increasing numbers of disadvantaged students. It says

that such "chartered schools," created by parents, teachers, administrators and students, would move beyond simple numerical desegregation and promote true integration of students as well as quality education.

"A system that merely transports students to sites and counts them to confirm balance is not sufficient," the report says. "The question is not

so much whether our schools reflect society. . . It is whether we can use schools to build a better society. That our apparently weakest efforts show up where our most vulnerable children are is a deeply discriminatory situation that cannot continue.

"Doing better necessarily implies the boldness to do things differently."

If the 1989 Legislature doesn't approve formation of chartered schools, the report says, it should require the state Department of Education to prepare a 1991 plan to reduce concentrations of minority students by methods such as redrawing district boundaries.

"There's a great sense of urgency," said John Rollwagen, chairman of

the league committee that prepared the report. "If this doesn't work we face draconian measures, because we're reaching a crisis point."

"But we feel (chartered schools) have the potential to achieve change rapidly."

He said some legislators have expressed interest in the report.

Superintendents in Minneapolis and

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St. Paul took issue with the report's implication that urban education is often weak. Minneapolis' Robert Ferrera agreed that education is not working for all children, but said schools should get a chance to show what they can do with the proper resources before giving up on the present school organization. He has proposed that next year's Legislature help the district financially so elementary school class sizes are substantially lowered.

"The concept of chartered schools is not something I'm opposed to if the public schools don't work," he said. "But before one says the public school system doesn't work, it has to have the resources it says it needs to fulfill the results the public says it wants. . . . There's nothing magic about chartered schools. There's nothing there that we couldn't do in public schools."

Ferrera and St. Paul Superintendent David Bennett said their districts will probably be using school-based management in the near future. The league report stresses the benefits of letting people in schools have more control over school governance.

Under the league proposal, schools would be granted a charter by committees in the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts. Teachers, administrators, parents and community members would design a school's curriculum and cooperate in its management. The schools would be independent of the school board and would receive funding directly from the state. Start-up costs would be financed by the Legislature.

Schools could be in existing school buildings or at other sites such as corporate offices. While the schools would be in the city, they would also accept suburban students. They would have to be accredited and accept students of different races, family incomes and abilities.

The report suggests that Minneapolis and St. Paul authorize such schools beginning in the fall of 1989. The Department of Education would have the option of taking over that authority in 1992.

Rollwagen said charter schools would have in-school camaraderie, enthusiasm and creativity that present school organization usually doesn't

allow.

Both Minneapolis and St. Paul have very popular magnet or alternative school programs where many students do well on standardized tests. But in some cases, those programs have waiting lists. Curt Johnson, the league's executive director, said chartered schools could bypass such problems because the flexibility of the system would allow schools to expand or contract with demand.

The only major change from a November draft of the report is that it backs away from a proposal to desegregate by income level as well as race. School officials say that while economics play a definite role in school achievement, such a policy would be too cumbersome to work.

The league is a Twin Cities nonprofit public affairs research and education organization.