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Power to the people! Revolutionary plan lets public shape own schools

After our discussion the past several weeks of problems and frustrations with the educational system, it's time to consider a revolutionary



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proposal recommended by several hundred California teachers, the Twin Cities Citizens League and a new national study.

They all urge giving public school teachers and parents the opportunity to establish their own new public schools. The state would establish broad guidelines, but educators and parents finally would have the power to carry out their dreams and visions.

The California proposal permits parents and public school teachers to design a new school. If the plan meets state academic and civil-rights guidelines and parents of at least 30 students sign up, the program is established, and state funds follow students. The California Legislature is considering the idea.

A new national study by John Chubb and Terry Moe supports this proposal. Chubb and Moe surveyed 20,000 educators and 500 schools around the country. The schools where students learned most were not identical, so the researchers concluded that there is no one best kind of school for all students.

In their new book, "Politics, Markets and America's Schools" (Brookings, \$10.95), Chubb and Moe explain that the most effective public and private schools

Tell us your ideas

Readers, share your ideas on the best ways to give creative, committed educators and parents the opportunity to design and operate more effective schools. Also, we want to know your suggestions on ways the community can recognize and encourage its best teachers. Call us at our Bulletin Board number of 228-5579 or fax us your ideas at 228-5500.

have a great deal of autonomy: They experienced 20 to 50 percent less interference from central administrations on curriculum, instruction, hiring, firing and discipline.

Expanding opportunity encourages existing schools to respond creatively. Minnesota's State Board of Education and Tom Nelson, commissioner of education, are eager to waive existing rules to educators with a vision.

Ted Kolderie, former Citizens League director now with the Center for Policy Studies, points out: "Today, districts have an exclusive franchise. People who want to start new schools (or replicate successful ones) have to get permission from their district. School boards often are reluctant to grant schools the autonomy they need. The challenge is to find another way to get schools autonomy while keeping them still clearly public schools."

One way, Kolderie suggests, would be to have schools sponsored by other public organizations such as colleges, a city or the state itself. There is precedent for this: Several Minnesota universities

once operated model schools. Today, high-school juniors and seniors can take college courses. More than 15,000 high-school students used this plan over the last five years. High-school students at the University of Minnesota have a higher grade-point average than the freshman class.

School districts responded to the Post-Secondary Option by improving their own programs. Over the last five years, more than 50 high schools have established new cooperative courses offered on campus for both high school and college credit, and the number of Advanced Placement courses has quadrupled.

Giving real power to outstanding educators could produce public schools similar to:

- The new Eugene, Ore., public elementary school where students study Japanese, along with more traditional subjects.
- The California private high school where students spend three months a year traveling, studying geography, history, science, etc., as they explore the country.

No one step will solve all of education's problems. But freeing up educators and parents to create the kind of public schools they think make sense could very well provide students with the opportunities they need, give educators the freedom many are requesting, all while encouraging the responsiveness public schools often lack.

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