

# Star Tribune

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## Starting to discuss 'educational perestroika'

Sad to say, almost the last place you could count on a conversation about better education might be your local school board meeting. Even less likely — traditionally, at least — might be the monthly State Board of Education sessions. Discussions in those groups are more apt to deal with maintaining the system as it is than with strategy and structure for future system change.

That's natural enough when everyone assumes that the system as it is, if properly managed, can adequately respond to emerging needs. But when that assumption is challenged from within, interesting talk starts. A burst of such talk erupted this month at the state board meeting. We expect it will spread soon to local boards as well.

One reason is that state board members — urged on by Commissioner of Education Tom Nelson — are discussing such ideas as abolishing school taxes and local school boards. But those attention-getters are on the agenda because board member Douglas Wallace has proposed a Minnesota "educational perestroika" to make room for future statewide school improvement. And there's more at stake than board seats and tax levies.

Wallace is persuaded that the present system is decades out of date, inherently hostile to diversity and innovation, unresponsive to parents and simply unable — despite everyone's good will — to conceive or provide the schools that Minnesota

needs. So he proposes to concentrate attention on schools and students, not on school districts.

For example, instead of 400 monopoly school boards, each with its exclusive territorial franchise, Wallace wants the state to charter schools one-by-one, open to all and accountable for performance. Instead of inequitable, crazy-quilt school financing, he wants state-only funding, with money that follows students to whatever schools they choose. Instead of boxing in principals and teachers with regulations, lest they do something wrong, Wallace wants to empower them by new training to propose and manage independent chartered schools.

In gingerly beginning to debate such thoughts this month, the state board quickly opened some fundamental questions. One is whether responsible school governance can be entrusted to faculties and parents or requires control by people more distant. Another is whether school communities can be defined by interests and connections other than geography. A third is whether teachers value job security above professional empowerment. And Nelson remarked that every question probing "perestroika" should be just as strongly asked about the present system.

That's the most promising official school discussion we've heard in a long time. Minnesotans should look forward to more.