

Charter schools hold promise

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Why not encourage inventive and talented people in society to launch new public schools? What of giving universities, corporations, social-service or neighborhood organizations a crack at starting schools?

The idea is percolating around the country. On Chicago's West Side, a group of more than 50 corporations has been running a tuition-free model elementary school for three years. In Portland, Ore., and other Pacific Northwest cities, the YWCA is running schools for homeless kids under contract with school districts. Boston University runs the Chelsea (Mass.) public school system.

And now, in Minnesota, birthplace of the public-school choice concept in the 1980s, the Legislature has just passed a bill that may get around the issue of public dollars for religious instruction — the potentially fatal flaw of the Bush administration's school-choice plan.

The Minnesota measure would permit groups of teachers and parents, if they can get a school board's approval, to set up public "chartered" schools. Passed over direct threats of political retaliation from teacher unions, it was pushed by Sens. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope, and Ron Dicklich, DFL-Hibbing, and Reps. Becky Kelso, DFL-Shakopee, and Ken Nelson, DFL-Minneapolis.

The new schools would have to meet some basic state standards. And they'd have to be nonsectarian. The idea, say its backers, could overcome a critical weakness of standard school choice: lack of alternative quality public schools for parents to pick.

President Bush would solve the quality problem by allowing private schools into the mix. But including religious and parochial schools could well smother the promise of school choice in its crib.

Could the Minnesota plan, or some variant, turn out to be the answer? Perhaps. But first some thorny issues about public-charter schools need to be resolved:

Could an ideological group unacceptable to the community start one? The chartering board would have to exercise discretion in deciding which applications to accept.

At the heart of the charter-school idea is the lifting of many onerous regulations that so often hamstring creativity in the public schools. The schools could be more free-ranging, because parents would have freedom to choose them or not.

Even so, some basic rules would have to be observed by any school receiving public funding. Racial or ethnic discrimination would be forbidden. So would "creaming" — selecting only the highest-performing kids. Applicants would be accepted first-come, first-serve. If schools had a surfeit of applicants, choice would have to be by lottery.

Basic rules ought to resolve the first argument leveled at charter schools — that they'd quickly fill up with kids from middle-class, motivated families, leaving poor and uninformed kids mired in the worst public schools. That charge ignores the fact that, in most places, the poorest kids are now congregated in terribly deficient schools. Are inner-city parents so callous and uncaring they wouldn't, given real choices, switch their kids to better schools? The market opportunities for charter schools may well be strongest in depressed

neighborhoods. Wealthy parents have always had choice. Fancy private schools are one result. Many middle-class people simply move to better school districts. It's the poor who've been stuck in the most dismal classrooms.

What we know now is that innovative schools can reach poor kids, and increase their academic performance dramatically. The problem is one of supply. As long as innovative schools for poor children have to be privately funded, there'll never be more than a handful.

What about violent kids, or ones who refuse to do their homework? Would charter schools have to keep them? The answer seems straightforward: The same rules that govern keeping or expelling kids from regular public schools would apply in charter schools.

What about curriculum? The state could still set minimums on what subject matter gets covered. And charter schools would be subject to the same periodic testing, and public reporting, as all public schools.

What about teaching qualifications? The answer could be a bachelor's degree and three months of intensive teacher training — but not the whole nine yards of teacher college courses required by school bureaucracies.

It's easy to envision charter schools populated to a significant degree by refugees from the public-school system: teachers and administrators who want a fresh chance, unencumbered by a million regulations, to reach and motivate children and to prove their skills.

Charter schools, instead of a threat to the talented people working in public education today, could be an exciting opportunity for them.