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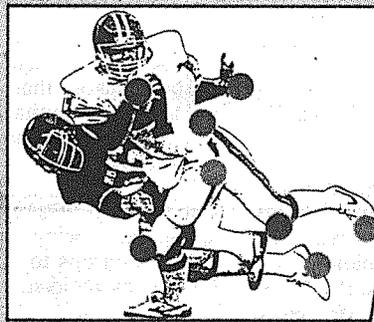
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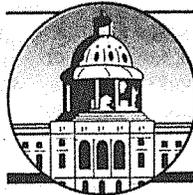
## 'Chartered schools' getting more support

By Dennis J. McGrath  
Staff Writer

Some legislators who led Minnesota's past decade of education reforms now want to try something completely different: semi-independent, public schools run autonomously by parents and educators.

Key legislators are promoting bills that would create these so-called "chartered schools," which would be unlike magnet schools, open schools and other types of schools that are under the direct daily control of school administrators and school boards.

Instead, chartered schools would be granted a "charter" to act indepen-



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innovative teaching and learning programs.

The concept of chartered schools is not new: It was promoted by the Citizens League in 1988 and has been passed twice by the Senate. But now it is finding favor among more of the legislators who shape education laws.

The idea will be fought by the powerful teachers unions — the Minnesota

the Minnesota Federation of Teachers (MFT). School superintendents and principals also have expressed opposition, although some favor the idea and already have designed plans for such schools.

Advocates of chartered schools said they grew out of the philosophy that the public school bureaucracy — despite recent attempts to be more responsive — has failed too many children.

"The system of education we have now is providing kids with a second-rate education compared to their counterparts in Japan and Germany," said Doug Wallace, a member of the state Board of Education.

describe the current educational system as a factory, where students are molded to the institution's specifications. The new concept recognizes that students learn at different speeds and in different ways. They start kindergarten with different levels of preparation and ability and receive varying levels of parental support. Chartered schools would adapt to the different needs of different students, its advocates say.

"We need to start anew, and not carry any of the old ways into these schools unless we choose to," said Rep. Ken Nelson, DFL-Minneapolis. "What we should do is bust open the old forms and let the teachers and students engage in new ways in a

# SCHOOL PLAN: Local control in, bureaucracies out

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totally new structure, governed more by the learning opportunities than by the traditions of the past."

Chartered schools also would enable legislators to implement new approaches they've been discussing for years, such as shifting management control from central bureaucracies to local schools. Another key concept is "outcome-based education," which is an approach to teaching that requires establishment of clear goals for what students should learn.

A chartered school could be built around a certain type of curriculum, such as math and science or the arts, or it could be centered around a method of teaching. It could also be used to help disadvantaged students or minorities, who typically do not fare as well in school as middle-class, white students.

One example of a chartered school is already operating.

The PEASE (Peers Enjoying a Sober Education) Academy is a private, nonprofit school that opened in Minneapolis in February 1989. It receives money from Minneapolis Public Schools under a contract to serve students between the ages of 13 and 18 who have completed a chemical dependency treatment program. There are 26 students enrolled in the fully accredited academy, which doesn't charge tuition. Under the proposed legislation, the academy would fit the definition of a chartered school.

Educators across the country are acknowledging the different needs of students by establishing programs

such as PEASE and the Afrocentric Educational Academy, another Minneapolis school that opened in January and that emphasizes black history and culture for students in grades six through eight.

The fact that these types of programs are already being created leads the teachers unions to question the need for the chartered schools.

"I don't understand why there's so much excitement on the part of some policymakers to want to introduce chartered schools. If they put the same kind of energy into thinking how to make public schools better, the opportunities for improvement would increase," said MEA President Robert Astrup.

To a certain degree, Education Commissioner Gene Mammenga agrees. He said the state Board of Education has shown a willingness to waive rules that might inhibit innovation.

"There's a way of innovating and experimenting in the public school system that's available now," he said. But he also said that he wants to encourage new approaches, so while he won't help pass the legislation, neither will he try to torpedo it.

The provisions allowing unlicensed "community experts" to teach in the chartered schools also upset teachers. The use of unlicensed teachers devalues those who undergo years of training, they argue.

Sandra Peterson, president of the MFT, said chartered schools would drain resources from traditional schools. "It's just vouchers in a disguised form," she said, referring to the idea of providing state aid for

students to attend private schools.

The authors of the bills said there are safeguards to ensure that doesn't happen. The legislation would prevent the schools from being more private than public and would make sure that they aren't elitist. Those who operate a chartered school could not use race, gender, academic achievement, family income, proficiency in English or several other potentially discriminatory criteria for choosing students.

No charters would be given to religious schools. The schools would receive public funding and would not be allowed to charge tuition.

But Astrup said that if innovation and "learner-outcome" education are good for chartered schools, they should also be encouraged in regular schools.

"What we need to do is figure out how we're going to create opportunity for innovation to occur in regular public schools, not in special settings," he said.

Advocates of chartered schools said that attempts at innovation within traditional schools have met only limited success. When Barb Schmidt conceived the idea for the PEASE Academy, for example, she found some support, but lots of suspicion among school administrators because of the school's "whole mind" teaching techniques. The academy's curriculum includes math, science, social studies and other traditional subjects, but the teaching methods include "multisensory learning, 'hands-on' experiences, cooperative groups, guided imagery (and) relaxation," according to the school's pamphlet.

"We have a very innovative education," said Schmidt, a former chaplain for the Hennepin County Juvenile Court system who spent eight months building support for the school before it opened. "We had to downplay that for fear people would think it's too weird."

Said Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope: "Sometimes you can be more innovative on a smaller basis. It's hard to move a whole school district."

It has been hard to move the Legislature toward this idea, too. Although chartered schools have been approved by the Senate in each of the past two years, they have not found equal support in the House. This year, however, House Education Committee members are promoting the issue, suggesting that the concept has a good chance of being passed by both chambers.

There are differences between the chartered school provisions in the House bill authored by Nelson and the Senate version, which Reichgott has introduced. But in general, a new school could be chartered by a school board or district for a period of several years. The charter would be granted to a group of educators and parents who submit a proposal that describes the innovative teaching methods they would use and establishes goals for what the students would learn.

Once the charter is granted, the school board or district that granted it would have no daily authority over the school, except for the power to revoke the charter for such infractions as failing to live up to goals established in the charter.