

Minnesota Lawmakers Renew Efforts To Allow Creation of 'Charter' Schools

By Liz Schevtchuk Armstrong

Some Minnesota lawmakers are launching a renewed effort this year to make their state the first to authorize autonomous "chartered" schools that, while publicly funded, would operate largely free of outside control.

Bills pending in the legislature would allow governmental jurisdictions, including local school boards, to authorize parents, local citizens, teachers, or public institutions such as zoos or museums to establish their own nonsectarian schools.

While eligible for public funding and subject to some state education laws, chartered schools could be, to a great extent, independent. They would operate under a charter or contract with the sponsoring agency and their faculty members would not necessarily be licensed teachers.

Backers of chartered schools say they would be laboratories for innovative educational ideas and strengthen the shift to an outcome-based approach to overseeing the schools.

But critics warn the proposal could lead to religious indoctrination in the schools and drain money from public education.

Chartered-schools bills have passed the Senate in the past two years, only to die in the House. This year, however, there are signs of increased support for the idea in the House, and backers say it could become law this session.

"I think we've got a chance at it," said Representative Ken Nelson, sponsor of one of the two House chartered-schools bills.

In addition, the state board of education this year for the first time endorsed the chartered-school concept.

Still Public Education

An information brief from Representative Becky Kelso, sponsor of another chartered-schools bill, describes the idea this way: "The school gets to organize and run the program. [It] really does get waived clear of most all the 'rules.'"

The document adds, however, that a chartered school would not be entirely free, for it would be required to operate under agreement with a sponsor. "The state cannot let just any group simply declare itself a school, enroll kids, and receive public funds," it argues.

"We're trying very hard to unlace schools" from needless strictures, Ms. Kelso added in an interview.

"It's just allowing parents, teachers, and the community to begin innovative schools and teaching methods using state money," she said.

Said Mr. Nelson: "What I'd like to do is start new schools without the old encumbrances" that stymie reform.

The goal is to let teachers "start a new school in collaboration with parents," he continued. "It still is—and totally remains—within the public-school system."

In fact, Mr. Nelson's proposal defines a chartered school as "an outcome-based public school."

Limiting the jurisdictions that could sponsor such schools, Mr. Nelson's bill would restrict the total number of chartered schools to eight.

Ms. Kelso's proposal and a companion Senate bill, by contrast, would allow state university and college officials, plus local boards and the state board of education, to "authorize as many" chartered schools as they "see fit."

The public must understand that chartered schools cannot be used to avoid affirmative action, exclude racial groups, or harbor religious institutions, Mr. Nelson emphasized.

A 'Hoax' and a 'Siphon'

But Robert E. Astrup, president of the Minnesota Education Association, said the proposals give "no guarantees that persons with a particular religious conviction would be barred" from setting up "a school in which religious education would play a major role."

Mr. Astrup also blasted chartered schools as "a hoax that could cost millions of dollars" and "siphon" re-

sources from existing schools.

"It does drain resources just when we were making headway" in increasing community support for education, said Sandra Peterson, president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers.

"I'm the first to agree" that excessive regulation is harmful and that, "obviously, we need to do better" in education, Ms. Peterson said.

Even so, the M.F.T. remains wary of chartered schools, she said.

"It's kind of an interesting concept," Ms. Peterson acknowledged, while warning that chartered schools could become "a system with a whole lot of open holes and no safety nets."