

Minnesota chartered schools will offer public a real choice

By Dave Durenberger

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In Congress and around the country a political logjam has developed over the question of school choice, which threatens passage of President Bush's education-reform initiative. Breaking the impasse will require not only the usual dose of political compromise but a different understanding of the public interest in public education.

On one side in this debate, the president's toughest critics claim that school choice threatens students who don't change schools and are "left behind." Many critics also charge that choice is little more than a cynical smokescreen used by those unwilling to offer significant new financial support to existing schools.

The most vocal proponents of

choice, on the other hand, sometimes give the impression that choice alone will solve all the tough problems now facing American education.

Meanwhile, there is a third voice in this debate that accepts the value of market forces but insists that choice be confined to public schools. In particular, such people resist the president's desire to let public funds follow parents who choose private schools that teach religion.

This narrower debate — whether choice should include private schools — is now emerging as the single biggest challenge to Bush as he navigates his America 2000 initiative through the Democratic Congress. Unfortunately, by framing the choice debate in that manner, we're ignoring three important principles that have guided education-reform initiatives in states such as Minnesota over

much of the last decade.

The first of these principles is to openly acknowledge that school choice cannot succeed on its own. In particular, school choice cannot succeed without more school choices. Just having the right to choose a school doesn't mean much if there aren't alternative choices to be made.

The reality of this principle is tempered by a second: So long as local school boards have an "exclusive franchise" on starting and running new public schools, we'll never see a substantial increase in the number of school choices that can be made.

This in turn leads to a third principle: that broader authority to run schools will require a new understanding of the public interest in public education. Public education shouldn't be defined by who owns

the building or who hires the teachers. It should be defined by outcomes, by who must be accepted, by who pays the bills.

These three principles for designing choice programs are all incorporated in "chartered schools" legislation adopted earlier this year by the Minnesota Legislature. Here's how the new law will work:

Groups of teachers will start by linking up with parents and community groups to define the type of school they want to start. Some schools will focus just on at-risk kids. Others may place their emphasis on a particular curriculum area, such as math or science. Still others may focus on one age group of children or students who function less well in a traditional academic setting.

Once organized, each chartered

school must find a local public school board to be its sponsor. And the chartered school and school board must reach agreement on a contract that identifies the academic and other outcomes the school will meet.

Beyond these contractual outcomes, the chartered school is exempt from all federal and state rules and regulations except rules protecting the health and safety of students and staff.

Under Minnesota's law, chartered schools are financed like other public school districts. State aid and local property tax revenues are allocated to the school on the basis of student population. So are other federal and state aids, such as Chapter I funding for children needing special help. Public and private grants also may be sought by chartered schools, but the schools may not charge tuition.

Minnesota chartered schools may not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, disability or ability to pay. They must accept all applicants they have room for. And they may not teach religion.

This unique blend of flexibility and the public interest makes Minnesota's new chartered schools law a positive model for tapping creative energies of teachers and empowering parents and communities all over America.

But equally important, the new Minnesota law represents a fundamentally different way of framing the current debate between proponents of public and private school choice.

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