

Backers say such schools could provide badly needed new ideas

Perhaps it was when a suburban school district laid off Minnesota's 1990 Teacher of the Year. **Joe Nathan**

Or the school board that told parents and teachers there was no money for elementary school field trips while the district spent more than \$85,000 a year transporting athletic teams.

Or maybe it was the anger of parents, students and staff at an award-winning innovative school when the district assigned teachers and a principal who were openly hostile to its philosophy.

These and other examples are reasons why some Minnesota legislators are considering a revolutionary way to offer public education.

They want to let local districts and the state Board of Education give charters to operate a public school directly to groups of certified teachers.

Here's how it could work:

■ Parents and certified teachers would develop a plan for a new public school that would meet all state rules and regulations, unless it received waivers from specific provisions. All schools would have to be non-sectarian.

■ Permission to establish the school (and get state funds for students who enrolled) could be given by either the local or state Board of Education.

■ Schools could not use admissions tests of any kind. If there were more applicants than openings, the schools would have to use a lottery to choose students.

■ Educators would get authority (a "charter") to operate for three years and would have to meet state standards for learning results. Thus, the emphasis would be on what students learned, rather than on how many hours subjects were taught or what textbooks were used.

While controversial, the idea has been endorsed by some public school teachers, administrators and the state Board of Education.

Why do these educators believe the charter school idea would help resolve the frustrations identified above? Here's what they say:

■ Within state guidelines, decisions about budget, policy and personnel would be made at the school, rather than at the school district level.

■ Teachers would have a chance to experiment with new approaches without jumping through the hoops that school districts often create.

■ Creativity, rather than conformity, would be encouraged in school decisions.

And if these schools prove successful, many districts probably would be more responsive and flexible in dealing with their own teachers and with parents.

At a recent state Senate hearing on the proposal, Minnesota's 1990 Superintendent of the Year, Jim Walker of North Branch, told lawmakers: "We are dedicated to becoming more responsive to the owners of the district. We call it putting the public back into public education. This bill is a step in that direction."

Walker noted that educators have a tendency to look for scapegoats. "We blame poverty, single-parent families, class size. This works out fine if you're part of the bureaucratic system, but, from a public point of view, it is virtually impossible to find out who is responsible for what decision."

Some public school teachers — and union members — also have endorsed the charter school idea.

Al Jones of Center City told legislators the proposed legislation suggests "teachers are professionals with tremendous capabilities. Allow them to take control of the learning environment, and we should expect dramatic change to occur. It's tremendously exciting to think that my colleagues and I could have the opportunity to design our own school with unique programs."

What impact would charter schools have on other public schools?

The results probably would be greater responsiveness to the public and more focus on students. A recent survey of Minnesota's superintendents found that one of open enrollment's primary benefits has been compelling greater cooperation among districts.

For a copy of the charter school bill, contact state Sen. Ember Reichgott (612 — 296-2889) or state Rep. Becky Kelso (612 — 296-1072).

A different version of the charter school proposal, sponsored by state Reps. Ken Nelson, Bob McEachern and others, would allow only local districts or groups of school districts to grant charters for schools. (For copies of that proposal, call 612-296-4244).

The plan's potential is summed up by Jones: "The charter school system will provide great support for experimentation and development of non-traditional methods of instruction. Where this variety exists, the potential for student success increases."

Nathan is director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and a member of a presidential advisory committee on improving U.S. schools. You can write to him

State considering an experiment that endangers a proven system

A hoax that could cost millions of dollars and place constitutional guarantees in jeopardy is about to be perpetrated on Minnesota's public education system. **Robert E. Astrup**

Bills in the state Legislature propose to create chartered schools with state money. They would operate independently of existing school districts and free of most state rules and safeguards of quality. The premise behind chartered schools is that our current system is inadequate and change can be achieved only by radically altering the structure. This simply isn't true.

The institution of a chartered school system could threaten accessibility to education — and even result in abandonment of our state's constitutional duty to provide a "general and uniform" public school system.

Chartered schools could be set up by any group that applied to the state and met minimal requirements. Once granted a charter, these "schools" would get taxpayers' dollars to operate. A new level of bureaucracy would review applications. Chartered schools could hire people to teach who are not licensed. They could spend public money for travel and consulting services and have access to money and innovative programs public schools are denied. And they would not be subject to the safeguards that insure quality education for all children.

All of this, contends California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, would "dismantle public education." He has identified six major flaws in arguments supporting chartered schools. They target important concerns and should be part of any discussion of this revolutionary concept.

Honig says chartered schools could create a two-tier system of public education where there will be no guarantees of equity in facilities or curriculum. Students whose parents cannot afford the time or the money to transport them to a particular school will be unable to take advantage of certain education programs offered at chartered schools. If demand for admission to a school exceeds available space, some children will be denied access to a specialized curriculum.

We depend on public schools to teach society's democratic values. This important charge could be thwarted by chartered schools, which would set their own, presumably widely different, standards of curriculum planning and implementation. Honig questions whether public policy interests would be well served by using public funds "to support schools that teach astrology or creationism" in place of science or to support "anti-minority or anti-white attitudes, or prevent students from reading 'The Diary of Anne Frank' or 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.'"

Bills considered in Minnesota prohibit using public funds to support religious education, there are no guarantees people with a particular religious conviction would be barred from getting a charter for a school in which religious education would play a major role. Our traditional commitment to separation of church and state could be jeopardized.

Among the freedoms proposed by chartered schools is lax enforcement of standards, including the right to hire unlicensed teachers. Honig calls "alarming" the "lack of accountability and the naivete of relying on the market to protect children." He cites private trade schools and decentralized school districts as examples of where a lack of accountability has resulted in fraud, misrepresentation and corruption.

Chartered schools are an unproven theory. Establishing chartered schools would play Russian roulette with the future of millions of schoolchildren, as structures and bureaucracies are created to formulate plans for these new schools. As Honig notes and small business owners can attest, there is a high rate of failure for new enterprises. There is no evidence to suggest chartered schools would be an exception to this rule and, with little accountability built into the system, students will suffer and we won't know until it is too late to help.

Finally, the chartered school scheme will be costly. There is no evidence in the education community to suggest competition will produce cost savings. In fact, Honig maintains, "colleges compete, yet costs are skyrocketing." The ability to procure state funds could mean that leaders of private schools will seek charters to obtain public money for their particular institutions — under the guise of a chartered school. Local boards of education would have to approve charters, which will not reduce the number of administrative staff needed, and record-keeping by officials could result in the need for even more bureaucratic staff positions at the state level.

Backers of chartered schools believe innovation in education cannot be achieved under the current system. But, in fact, individual teachers, schools and even entire school districts across Minnesota are engaged in designing new individual programs for excellence that are recognized nationwide.

Innovation and improvement are a real part of today's public schools in Minnesota. Chartered schools, however, are an unproven idea that would obviously siphon valuable resources away from a creative, high quality system of education just for the sake of experimentation — and our children would be the guinea pigs.

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