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Minnesota's Choice

In Congress and around the country a political logjam has developed over the question of school choice that threatens passage of President Bush's education reform initiative. Breaking it will require not just 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 which 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 President 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 those principles—in response to the harshest of the president's critics—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.

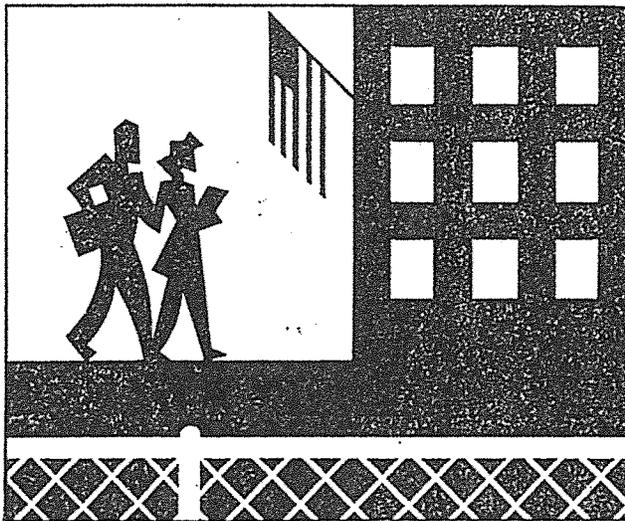
The reality of this first principle is tempered by a second: As long as local school boards have an "exclusive franchise" on starting and running new public schools, we'll never see a substantial increase in the number of school choices that can be made. Few Americans would accept a situation in which A&P insisted on an "exclusive franchise" to operate every grocery store in Washington. So why do we insist that only the local school board be allowed to start and operate public schools inside the boundaries of its district?

Why not also allow parents to start new public schools? Why not allow teachers or community groups to do the same?

That in turn would force a third principle: that broader authority to run schools will require a

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 those 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, like Chapter I funding for children needing special help in the classroom. Public and private grants may also be sought by chartered schools, but they may *not* charge tuition.



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 the Constitution, by who must be accepted, by who can't be excluded and 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 state legislature. The chartered schools proposal was authored by Democratic legislators and enjoyed broad bipartisan support. Here's how the new Minnesota chartered schools 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 Minnesota chartered school must find a local public school board to be

Because they're more autonomous and allowed to set their own rules, Minnesota's chartered schools don't fit a narrow and traditional definition of public schools. But at the same time, the new Minnesota law requires chartered schools to retain the underlying values of American public education.

For example, 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 debate now raging in Washington between proponents of public and private school choice.

The writer is a Republican senator from Minnesota and a member of the Labor and Human Resources Committee.