

A New Breed of School?

Minnesota's charter school experiment is under way, but the early results aren't quite what supporters expected

BY MARY JANE SMETANKA

When Minnesota adopted the nation's first "chartered school" law six months ago, lawmakers expected it to spawn new break-the-mold schools, designed and run by teachers and parents. That still may well happen, but the applications furthest along so far are from an existing 70-student Montessori school and a small-town public school on the brink of being shut down.

Leading the pack is the Bluffview Montessori School in Winona, Minnesota, where Principal Michael Dorer wants his school to be available to any community child, even if the family can't raise the \$1,600 tuition.

Almost 1,200 Winona residents agreed. They signed a petition supporting the private school's proposal to stop charging tuition and become a public school under the new law.

Last November, the Winona school board voted to support that change, putting Bluffview on the road to becoming the nation's first charter school—an autonomous public school, chartered by the state, operating free of district control.

And in the sparsely settled northeastern part of the state, another kind of charter school is on the drawing boards. In Toivola and Meadowlands, two tiny, isolated towns in a school district as big as Rhode Island, educators see the charter school concept as a way to save a school that otherwise might be closed for enrollment and financial reasons.

The St. Louis County school board agreed to postpone for a year a vote on whether to close the K-12 Toivola-Meadowlands school to give teachers and parents a chance to convert it to a charter school. The district

Minnesota Rep. Becky Kelso, a sponsor of the state's charter school law, thinks it may take some time before the law can result in true, break-the-mold schools.

would give the building to community residents, who are discussing redesigning the school to emphasize ties with the local business and agricultural communities to get more real-life education into the schools.

Having buildings and teachers in place naturally gives both schools a leg up in gaining a charter, but saving small rural schools and transforming private schools into public schools wasn't what state lawmakers had in mind when they passed the charter school legislation.

On the other hand, the two legislators who spearheaded the charter school bill say variety was one of their goals.

"Certainly schools that already have a base are going to be the first applicants," says Rep. Becky Kelso, who sponsored the legislation in the Minnesota House of Representatives. "My intent was that the law would be very broad, it would not exclude any of these kinds of options. I don't want to say that I'm disappointed in these kinds of charter schools," Kelso says. "What we would hope to see in time is groups of people who have new ideas in education, who start from ground zero to build a new school. But I accept that that will take a good deal of time."

The law "redefines the public school," says Senator Ember Reichgott, who sponsored the law in the state Senate. "If you provide public school service, it doesn't matter how you do it, as long as you don't charge tuition. Too many students are falling through the cracks. We can reach these kids through this approach."

A NEW DIMENSION OF CHOICE

Although the real impact of the charter legislation won't be known until charter schools are up and running, the law is expected to add a new dimension to school choice in a state that has been a pioneer in public options since the late 1960s and early '70s, when Minneapolis and St. Paul began to establish alternative schools.

The state has introduced three choice programs in the last six years. Now, policymakers want to give teachers creative control over something totally new. They hope that, freed of bureaucracy and tradition, charter schools will find new solutions to pressing educational problems.

But not everyone in Minnesota likes the idea of charter schools. Teachers unions strongly oppose the law, which permits the new schools to hire and fire teachers. Some school administrators, like Winona Superintendent Ronald McIntire, say the law is unfair to existing schools.

"If the legislature wants to fix the system, why not give all schools in Minnesota the chance to function without the 1,600 mandates that are on the books?" he asked.

The charter bill squeaked through the Minnesota legislature. Opposition forces nearly killed it in the waning hours of the session and they were successful in removing some provisions sought by purists.

But charter school supporters say that interest has risen since the Bush Administration made private school vouchers a cornerstone of his America 2000 plan. Plainly, the spectre of competition from private schools has public school officials worried.

"I feel that we are in sort of a middle ground in the great debate over school choice," says Rep. Kelso.

"The best way we can defend the public school system is to prove that public schools are open to parent and student choice.

People must feel that we can provide real choice within the public schools."

Minnesota law allows up to eight charter schools, with a limit of two per school district. The schools must meet state guidelines on what students should learn, but are free from other state mandates except those regarding health, safety and financial requirements. They can hire and fire teachers, devise their own curriculums and are financially, legally and educationally independent.

LIMITS OF THE LAW

Imagination may be the only limit on charter applicants, but actually opening a school won't be easy. Nothing in the law addresses how schools will find the money to pay for a building or equip new classrooms. The new schools will receive exactly the same kind of funding as other Minnesota public schools: a per-pupil payment of approximately \$3,050 and a very small equipment allowance. More of a shortcoming, in the view of charter hardliners, only licensed teachers can open the schools, and they need permission from their local school district and from the Minnesota State Board of Education. Many who had advocated a technically "pure" charter law had wanted it to allow parents as well as teachers to open schools. Few teachers, they believed, would want to ask their employers for permission to go outside the system. And why, they asked, would school



Michael Dorer, principal of the Bluffview Montessori School, is using the new law to turn his private school into a public one.

boards approve charter school applications when their own district would almost certainly lose students, and therefore state money, to the new school?

"People who strongly supported charter schools are very disappointed in the legislation," says Kelso. "But until I see evidence that local school boards are being obstructionist, there's no reason to change it."

Initial evidence that boards won't block charters comes from Winona, where the school board voted 5-2 to sponsor Bluffview's charter, despite the superintendent's opposition.

Superintendent McIntire told the board that the Winona schools, which have about 4,900 students, would lose approximately \$90,000 in state funds if the Montessori school met its enrollment projections and took in 34 new students who now attend Winona schools.

But the Winona board wasn't buying his argument. "The whole point should be what's good for children, not what's good for the school district or the Montessori school," says board chairman Stuart Miller, a local businessman. "I think the benefits outweigh the risks."

There are more uncertainties than the financial and political difficulties posed by the law. Joe Nathan, director for the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota, estimates that it takes at least a year of intense work to plan a new school.

"Lots of teachers are thinking about this," says Nathan. "People go into education because they're idealistic. But an enormous amount of energy gets squeezed out by schools."

Ronald Jandura, superintendent in St. Cloud, where a teacher approached the school board for informal discussions about a charter, agrees.

"I've got mixed feelings about the charter school, but I believe it has some merit," he said. "It dares educators to be inventive and control their own destiny. I guess I'm a bureaucrat who disbelieves in bureaucracy. The bigger the bureaucracy, the more we discourage creativity. The ability to step outside might be good for people inside the system." ■

Paying the Price for Smaller Classes

BY CHRIS PIPHO

Teachers have always known that smaller classes result in better learning. State-level policy-makers

long suspected this was the case, but believed they couldn't afford the 15-1 student-teacher ratio that research showed was necessary for real gains in achievement. At the same time, they were reluctant to finance half-measures that might not have any effect.

Nevertheless, lawmakers in three states—Indiana, Tennessee and Nevada—have taken action in recent years to lower class sizes in early elementary grades. Making the decision to emphasize the early years of schooling makes state-wide funding of the programs more manageable. This decision also picks up support from teachers and parents who reason that the cumulative effect of early achievement gains could reduce remedial costs and the number of dropouts later.

INDIANA

Furthest along in reducing class size is Indiana, which started its "Prime Time" program as a pilot study in 24 kindergarten, first- and second-grade classrooms from 1981 to 1983. Results showed higher achievement, fewer behavior problems and more

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teacher productivity and efficiency. In 1984, the legislature appropriated an extra \$19 million to reduce first-grade classes across the state to an 18-1 ratio, although the pilot study was based on 14-1.

The Indiana General Assembly followed with \$48 million in 1986-87, \$68 million in 1987-88 and \$76 million in 1988-89. By the 1988-89 school year, classes were down to 18-1 in kindergarten and first grade and 20 pupils per teacher in second and third grades. A 1987 study found a weak—but very consistent—relationship between class size and academic achievement. Indiana currently spends between \$80 million and \$85 million per year on the project. An independent evaluation of Prime Time is due early in 1992.

NEVADA

In its 1989-90 session, the Nevada legislature appropriated \$450,000 for teacher in-service training to prepare for a class-size reduction program in the 1990-91 school year. The first year saw a \$6-million appropriation to reduce kindergarten and first-grade classes to 15 students in the core subject areas. The program is planned to reduce the student-teacher ratio to 15-1 in second-grade classes in 1991-92 and third-grade classes in 1992-93. Long-range plans call for reducing grades four through six to a ratio of 21-1 and grades seven through 12 to a ratio of 25-1. All of these reductions will be for the core subject areas—exempting art, music, physical

education and foreign languages. A task force is developing procedures to monitor benefits.

TENNESSEE

In the spring of 1984, the legislature adopted a package of reforms known as the "Better Schools Program," which included a class-size reduction study in one Nashville-area district.

In 1985, the legislature funded a study of class-size reduction in grades K-3 in 79 elementary schools. Each school had at least 57 pupils in the appropriate grades from which were scheduled one small class of 13-17 students, one class of 22-25 pupils with a full-time teacher's aide and one regular class of 22-25.

When the findings were in, small classes made the highest scores on the Stanford Achievement Test and the state's Basic Skills First test. Small K-3 classes in all locations—rural, suburban, urban and inner city—scored highest during all four years. The greatest gains were made in inner-city small classes and the highest scores were tallied in rural small classes. The classes with teacher aides achieved slightly higher scores than regular classes, but the differences were not statistically significant.

The conclusion, from Jeremy Finn, an external consultant to the project from the State University of New York: "This research leaves no doubt that small classes have an advantage over larger classes in reading and math in the early primary years." ■