

# Board action saps morale

**W**hy do so many committed, talented teachers become bitter and cynical? Why did the national Twentieth Century Task Force last week



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call many school boards "an obstacle to — rather than a force for — fundamental educational reform"?

The Mounds View School Board helped answer those questions last week, when it rejected the request of more than 30 teachers to establish a charter school, a contract available under a new Minnesota law in which they would take responsibility for student results in exchange for the power to run the program.

Administrators and school boards often adopt a "Father Knows Best" attitude, refusing to try new ideas that aren't their own.

Several weeks ago, the award-winning Mounds View teachers presented 22 new approaches they wanted to incorporate into the school. But Glen Winchell, school board chairman, reacting last week to their proposals, told them, "I heard nothing that evening that merited further consideration."

The school district's Area Learning Center serves some of the north suburban area's most challenging young people ages 16 to 21. The center's several hundred students have a variety of academic and/or social problems that range from simple boredom with traditional programs to experiences with alcohol, other drugs, abuse or pregnancy.

After a December visit to the ALC, Superintendent Bert Nygren wrote, "I give every member of the staff much praise and thanks" for his or her work.

ALC staff members say he even suggested applying for charter-school status. But since then, he has presented a six-page statement opposing it. Nygren says that "any unmet needs now or in the future can be accomplished under the current structure."

The teachers disagree.

Nygren says that the charter plan would cost at least \$150,000 to implement. But staff members say that the charter school would free up money now allocated to the ALC, so more funds would be available for the remaining students in the district.

ALC staff members say that at least three of their proposed program improvements previously had been denied by the administration. Further, the administration wants to remove the principal, John Sedey, who helped found the program and has enormous staff support.

ALC staff members voted 32 to 2 to seek a school charter. Peggy Hunter, school-choice coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Education, described the ALC proposal as "outstanding."

The Mounds View Education Association had remained neutral on the request. How did Lee Porath, the association's president, describe the board's action? "The whole thing," he says, "is over power and authority."

School board member Mary Witucki supported the teachers, explaining that "it's just endless what we can learn from this."

Fellow board member Dave Stimpson agreed, adding, "If they've done such a wonderful job so far, think of what they could do if we knock down some walls."

Joellen Johnson agreed that "what they do is very, very good." But she urged rejection of their request, believing that the teachers could be successful without it.

The proposal lost on a 4-to-3 vote.

Many entrepreneurs live in the school district, which includes sections of North Oaks, Shoreview and Mounds View. But entrepreneurial teachers appear to be a bit much for the superintendent and board.

After rejecting the teachers' request for accountability and authority, the school board passed a resolution saying that it is "proud of the ALC programs" and supports the ALC staff because of its "dedication and commitment."

Did that resolution have much impact? School counselor Dan Daly believes that the board "discounted the professional judgment of 32 people whom they praised." Another staff member said that the board's "praise is so hollow. It feels like we've been kicked in the teeth."

ALC teacher and adviser Julie Wikelius wanted to know: "If we're so great, why not let us take the risks we're willing to take?"

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