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Innovative charter schools are running into opposition

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Minnesota's charter schools were supposed to free teachers and parents of school bureaucracy.

But the bureaucracy isn't willing to let go.

After fairly speedy local and state approval for the state's first two charter schools, in Winona and Toivola-Meadowlands, proposals for other schools are running into varying degrees of resistance.

In Northfield, the school board defeated a proposal for a chartered middle school last month. The teachers' union in Winona is fighting the already approved school in that city. The St. Cloud school board is still discussing a charter proposal that it first heard about almost four months ago. And in Rapidan, a group seeking a charter for a soon-to-be-closed elementary school was rejected twice by area school boards before finding a sponsor in a district 40 miles away.

"There have been some great examples of what I hoped would happen:

that school boards would open up the system to give children more choices," said state Rep. Becky Kelson, DFL-Shakopee, a sponsor of the charter school law. "But there are also examples of resistance... that demonstrates lack of faith in teachers' ability to run things and in parents' ability to choose for their children.

"I'm afraid there is a trend developing here."

Minnesota is the first state in the nation to allow the charters, which

are supposed to be innovative schools run by teachers. Although free of most state rules and regulations, they receive the same per-pupil payments that public schools get.

Although supporters initially wanted the State Board of Education to award charters, political compromise led to a law that requires the sponsorship of a school district. As some had predicted, that's where most of the problems have developed.

Charter supporters say the purest charter proposal was in Northfield,



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but the school board voted it last month, 5 to 2.

A group of six people had proposed a 100-student middle school center on the idea that students can

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solve community problems while learning. Although five had children in Northfield public schools, the group also had been instrumental in starting Prairie Creek School, a private elementary outside of town that opened a decade ago.

"We had all been involved in starting a school before, and they knew they weren't dealing with fly-by-night folks," said Griff Wigley, one of the parents who planned the charter. "But it brought up a lot of tension in the community. . . . We were seen as a group of Prairie Creek people trying to start a private school with public money."

As many as 175 people attended public hearings on the issue. Much of the discussion centered on money. Many people, who remembered the decade-long budget crisis that ended just three years ago, were frightened that the school district could lose up to \$300,000 in state aid if 100 students switched to the new school.

Superintendent Charles Kyte, whom many credit with stabilizing the district's finances, opposed the charter. His main concerns were philosophical. Taxpayers in public schools have a voice in school governance through school board members, he said, but charter schools "disenfranchise" taxpayers because only teachers and parents are represented on school boards.

Kyte also said he was concerned that the charter school would create a "separate public school experience" that would become elitist, because only certain kinds of students would be interested in the school. Wigley said the charter group proposed that the regular and charter middle schools be equally promoted as choices. "The system we have now is elitist, because only people who can afford to move, pay tuition or transfer out have a choice," he said.

Before the charter surfaced, the district and Wigley's group had discussed starting a similar program in the regular middle school. The failed charter has killed that plan, Kyte said. "The staff at the middle school was quite threatened by this. . . . The implied message was that something was wrong with the middle school," he said. "The bridges have been burned for the time being."

In Rapidan, 6 miles south of Mankato, the charter school proposal started as an attempt to keep the town's school open. In December, declining enrollment and tight finances prompted the school board of the newly merged Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial School District to vote to close its oldest elementary, the building in Rapidan.

Parents proposed a charter school that focuses on agribusiness. When the Lake Crystal board refused in January to sponsor the plan, the group sent letters to surrounding school districts. In nearby St. Clair, a motion to sponsor the group's charter died for lack of a second. Then Rich Luring, a school board member in Truman, 40 miles south of Rapidan, read about the group's trials in a newspaper. He volunteered to take the proposal to his board. Last month the Truman board voted 4-2 to sponsor the Rapidan charter.

State law permits any school board to sponsor a charter, even if the school wouldn't be in that district and the district probably wouldn't lose students or money to the new school.

Lake Crystal board members were not happy with Truman's decision.

"They have no financial responsibility and no educational responsibility for our students, and they're making financial and educational decisions for us," said board member Judy Hepworth.

Said Luring, "I'm sure Lake Cryst-

al's mad. . . . But nobody else seemed to want to do to it, and I feel that anybody who wants to charter a school has the right to do that. . . . I'm proud of it, and I think some of my fellow board members are proud of it, too. Lake Crystal doesn't own the kids."

Patrick Ryan, who teaches speech and English in a Mankato high school, lives in Rapidan. "It's really not an educational issue at this point," he said. "It's political, territorial, it's about power and money. The issue is, who has the most influence on schools, parents or the board?"

In St. Cloud, debate over charter schools has delayed action on a proposal from Joan Riedl, a Princeton elementary school teacher who lives in St. Cloud and wants to start an elementary school that mixes students by age and uses individualized instruction and computers.

Riedl first discussed the plan, which she uses in her fourth- and fifth-grade classes in Princeton, last November. School officials say the board may make a decision later this month.

The pace has been frustrating, Riedl said. "I sometimes question if we're talking about education and concerns about children," she said. "I would like it if the discussion, for once, would not concern money."

St. Cloud board member Linda Peschl said the board has wanted more concrete information about Riedl's plan and has spent a lot of time discussing charter schools generally. "Riedl has a wonderful classroom and proposal," she said. "But maybe we need to make a decision on charter schools before we look just at Riedl's proposal. . . . We're being very cautious. Our logic was that as far as charter school options go, we really want to know what we're looking at, and if we can do this in the system. If so, why go outside?"

A problem of a different kind has surfaced in Winona, where a proposed charter for a now-private Montessori school had already passed the local board and state when the Winona Education Association announced it intended to file a grievance over the opening of the school as illegal subcontracting of teachers.

The Winona school board is undeterred. "We're waiting to look over the contract, and then we'll let it rip," Chairman Stuart Miller said. "We think state law takes precedence."

Such problems have frustrated Kelso and Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope, who sponsored the charter law in the Senate. Both said that it may have to be changed, but that that will happen only after there are eight charter schools or in another legislative session.

"In my view, the statute is not user-friendly," Reichgott said. "Here was a group of parents in Northfield who did everything necessary to communicate their proposal, and then they come up to this block. We have to remove some of the impediments in the law."

Said Kelso, "Already existing schools are having an easier time in working through this process than the totally new, untried ideas are. . . . That's really regrettable, because those are what we had hoped to see."