

Parents seek charter status for school

LINDA OWEN STAFF WRITER

Parents at Forest Lake Montessori School are seeking approval to open a charter elementary school, a new form of independent public school created by the Legislature last year.

The proposal is the latest in a statewide spate of charter plans, most of which have yet to gain support from local school boards. In the metro area, charters also have been proposed in Mounds View, St. Paul and Minneapolis.

The Forest Lake charter school would grow out of an existing Montessori school and would initially serve about 40 children in kindergarten through second grade. It would be expanded to a K-6 program, parents told the District 831 School Board last week.

But the proposal has some rough sledding ahead. Superintendent Gerald Brynildsen says he opposes the charter school concept on principle because charter schools are governed by appointed boards that are not accountable to the public.

The Forest Lake Education Association also opposes the plan, because it would divert public money to the new school, president Kathy McMorrow said.

And before considering a charter school, the District 831 School Board has asked administrators to take a second look at the feasibility of a district-operated Montessori grade school — something parents proposed unsuccessfully two years ago.

The charter proposal comes from about 22 families with children in Forest Lake Montessori, which now offers only preschool and kindergarten classes, parent Laurel Pittman said. Parents of former Montessori students are also involved, she said.

The group wants to continue the Montessori approach into the elementary grades because "the learning methods and style of instruction are so significantly different," said Sandra Chaussee, another parent. "It's very child-centered. Each child works at his or her own pace.

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and there's a lot of peer interaction with mixed-age grouping."

Parents have discussed a privately operated grade school, but concluded it "wasn't financially feasible," Pittman said.

The charter proposal has a precedent in Winona, where a private Montessori school recently won approval to operate as a charter school. Winona teachers have objected, however, and critics have pointed out that the charter law was intended to encourage brand-new educational ideas.

Though Montessori is not a new concept, "it's definitely new and innovative for our district," Chaussee said. The Forest Lake

charter school would also be the only public Montessori grade school in the St. Paul suburbs.

Parents would not object to a district Montessori program, Pittman and Chaussee added, but they don't want to compromise Montessori ideals. "We want to keep it to a true Montessori philosophy and not see it watered down," Pittman said.

A district Montessori school could substitute for a charter school, but it faces several obstacles, including the fact that it would require more classrooms at a time when "we're busting at the seams," said Beth Sullivan, director of educational services. Financial and equity issues also need to be resolved, she said.

A program similar to St. Paul's Montessori magnet school would require instructional aides. Forest Lake has none, and in fairness, the district could not hire aides for just one school, Sullivan said. Putting aides in all schools would cost about \$400,000, she said.

If the school board decides to sponsor a charter school, that raises issues of fairness and access, Sullivan said. Forest Lake Montessori would retain its private, tuition-based preschool program, and those students would have preference for admission to the public charter school.

"Children from families with financial resources would have a leg up on getting in," she said.