

April '92

"HOW"S IT WORKING? -- THE EFFECTS OF THE 'CHARTER' STRATEGY

People elsewhere frequently ask what's happening as a result of the choice/charter strategy in Minnesota. Usually they mean: How are the students doing? Are the test-scores improving? On that score there isn't much to say yet: the schools are too new and too small for evidence to have appeared about student performance.

What we are getting evidence about, more quickly, is what the districts are doing -- in response to the appearance of a charter school, or to even the prospect of a charter school, or simply in response to the passage of the charter law. To Minnesota this is much more important because the purpose of the law is mainly to change what districts do so as to improve education for all kids, not just those who enroll in a charter school.

Attached are a few clips, memos, etc. that reflect this response from the districts. The one real study we know of is the one done by people at Northwestern University and presented at AERA in April '93.

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One early case involves Forest Lake; a district northeast of Saint Paul. Parents had been urging district administrators for some years to set up an elementary Montessori option. The administrators were not enthusiastic. Where would we get the teachers? Where would we put it? Space is tight. How could we possibly afford a district-wide bus service just for this one little school?

The parents heard about the new charter law. They said they would ask the board for a charter to set up the school. We understand the problems about teachers, space and transportation, they said. Those will be our problems, and we think we can solve them.

The administrators reconsidered. There're Montessori teachers, they said. Space? Well, there's room at Scandia Elementary. And as to transportation . . . what if we let the kids ride the buses that're going to the high school? Then all we'd need is a one-bus shuttle over to Scandia.

That's wonderful, the parents said. That's all we were after. If you're now OK with a district school we'll drop our proposal for a charter: We're not looking for the hassle of running a school.

So Forest Lake got a district Montessori elementary in the fall of '92. In fall '93 it added another grade. Everybody seems happy -- including the district, whose people it appears hadn't really known much about Montessori and who, now that they know it, kind of like it.

Forest Lake District to start own Montessori program at Scandia

LINDA OWEN STAFF WRITER

The Forest Lake School District will start its own Montessori program next fall at Scandia Elementary School, satisfying parents who had sought to establish a Montessori charter school in District 831.

"We're pretty ecstatic," said Laurel Pittman, one of several parents from Forest Lake Montessori School who had asked the school board in March to sponsor the charter elementary school.

Charter schools, authorized by the Legislature last year, receive public funding but are independent from the school district.

The Forest Lake School Board last week gave unanimous approval to a district program that will start out with a kindergarten classroom and a mixed-age classroom for grades one and two. Other grades will be added later. Students from the entire district will be eligible to enroll.

Parents unsuccessfully pitched the idea to the district two years ago, and school officials said in March there were still major practical problems.

However, parents and district administrators reached a compromise in the past two weeks, Pittman said.

Administrators "never had a problem with the concept itself," she said. "They just did not want it to go into the charter situation. They said they were impressed with the parent involvement to put it through."

"It really has been a three or four-year process of looking" at the Montessori idea, said Beth Sullivan, director of educational services for District 831.

Parents originally favored a program similar to Montessori magnet programs in Minneapolis and St. Paul, she said, but Forest Lake does not receive the desegregation money that funds the inner-city schools.

"While this probably isn't ideal, knowing the financial constraints, we were able to come up with compromises," she said.

Scandia hadn't been considered earlier as a Montessori site because it is so far from the rest of the district, Sullivan said. Eventually Scandia also will run out of room, she said, but by that time the district will have to consider new buildings to accommodate projected population growth.

Information about the Montessori program will be sent to parents in May, Sullivan said.

This is how the program will work:

■ It will be open to Forest Lake students only, unless the program has vacancies.

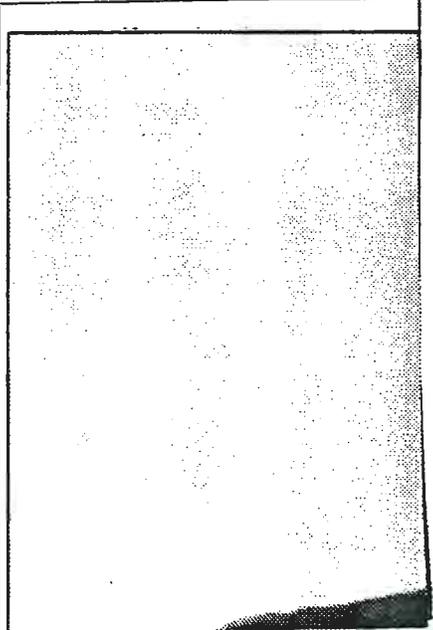
■ Students in Montessori preschools will not have preference for kindergarten slots. While the district has not decided for sure, applications probably will be handled on a first-come, first-serve basis or students may be chosen by lot.

If openings occur in later grades, preference will be given to students with Montessori backgrounds.

■ Class size will be comparable to other classrooms in the district. Montessori-trained teachers will be used, but there will be no aides.

■ The school day probably will begin an hour earlier than other elementary schools to accommodate districtwide busing. Sullivan said the system will be similar to that for busing students to nonpublic schools: students ride the secondary bus to the high school and take a shuttle from there to their own schools.

Pittman said the Montessori parents will form an advisory committee to help inform district residents and to locate consultants who could help in hiring Montessori teachers.



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