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This is what the Forest Lake teachers
assoc. submitted to the Board as
arguments against the Montessori
Charter proposal.

Spring 1998

Why MEA Opposes Chartered Schools

Quick Points

- Bills are under consideration in the state legislature (H.F. 773 and S.F. 630) which would create chartered schools with state funds. These schools would operate independently of existing school districts and free of most state regulations and safeguards of quality. Stated goals of the legislation include improving pupil learning and implementing outcome-based education (OBE)—a system which uses student outcomes as the measure of course completion, rather than time spent in the classroom. MEA believes that this legislation does not provide the public accountability, oversight, protection of rights, fiscal responsibility, and benefit consistent with the expectations our society holds for public schools which justify public funding of those schools.
- The chartered school scheme would be costly. Additional layers of bureaucracy would complicate the process of education. There is no evidence in the education community to suggest that competition would produce cost savings. To the contrary, all one has to do is look at the escalating cost of private higher education.
- Among the many freedoms proposed for chartered schools is lax enforcement of standards, foremost of which is the ability to hire nonlicensed teaching personnel. MEA stands firmly behind licensure as a requirement to insure the qualifications of teachers and the protection of students. Teachers need not only be "smart" about a particular subject and have a proclivity toward nurturing; they need professional training. Other professions, from barbers to brain surgeons, are licensed by the state. Minnesota students deserve licensed teachers.
- Innovation and improvement are already a real part of today's public schools. Chartered schools, however, are an idea which would obviously siphon valuable resources away from a creative, high quality system of education—and our children would be the guinea pigs—without the safety net provided by current laws and standards.
- The chartered schools proposal risks creating elite academies for the few and second-rate schools for the many—a multi-tiered system of public education with no guarantee of equity in facilities or curriculum. The legislation under consideration would allow a chartered school to limit its admission to pupils with a specific "affinity" for that school. However, the legislation does not state who would determine this "affinity," nor does it spell out standards this "affinity" would be measured against. The legislation also fails to provide for due process, recourse or redress in the matter of admission policies. Opportunities for abuse and discrimination would be very real.
- We depend on public schools to teach society's democratic values. This important charge could be thwarted by chartered schools, which would set their own standards of curriculum planning and implementation.
- Chartered schools provide an open door to vouchers. The ability to procure funds could mean that leaders of private schools would seek charters to obtain public money for their particular institutions—under the guise of a chartered school.

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MINNESOTA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

An affiliate of the National Education Association

41 Sherburne Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55103
612-227-9541

Why MEA Opposes Chartered Schools

Insulting

The concept of chartered schools implies that beneficial change cannot be brought about within the existing system of public education, and says that it is necessary to create an additional, untested, competing system. It is insulting because it ignores the success of Minnesota public schools.

The real issue is to provide quality education for all of Minnesota's public school students. The discussion of chartered schools diverts our attention. We need to provide the time, talent, and resources to support the efforts of communities and educators state-wide to restructure our schools to meet the needs of our students and the future of our state.

A costly hoax

The concept of charter schools is a hoax that could cost Minnesota taxpayers millions of dollars and place constitutional guarantees in jeopardy. Under proposals which have been presented in Minnesota, charter schools could be created which would then be supported by state funds. These schools could operate independently of existing school districts and free of most state regulations and safeguards of quality. Our state cannot afford to divert resources in this way.

The institution of a chartered school system could threaten accessibility to education—and even result in abandonment of our state's constitutional duty to provide a "general and uniform" public school system. Chartered schools could be established by any group or organization that applied to the state and met minimal requirements. Once granted a charter, these "schools" would receive taxpayers' dollars to operate.

More bureaucracy

Under these proposals, a new level of bureaucracy would be created to facilitate the formation of chartered schools. In addition, these chartered schools would be able to spend public funds for travel and consulting services and would have access to funding and innovative programs that existing public schools are denied.

Six major flaws in the chartered schools concept

Multi-tiered system

First, the proposal risks creating elite academies for the few and second-rate schools for the many—a multi-tiered system of public education with no guarantee of equity in facilities or curriculum. We had such a multi-tiered system here in this country in the 19th century; we don't need to go backward to discover our future.

Democratic values

Second, we depend on public schools to teach society's democratic values. This important charge could be thwarted by chartered schools, which would set their own standards of curriculum planning and implementation. Would public policy interests be well served by using public funds to support schools which might use censorship—on either the left or the right—to keep from their students important ideas, issues or works of literature?

Lax standards

Third, among the many "freedoms" proposed for chartered schools is lax enforcement of standards. It is incredibly naive to expect the market to protect our children in a system with such a lack of accountability. Private trade schools have shown how easily the lack of accountability and regulations can lead to fraud, misrepresentation and corruption when money is up for grabs.

Nonlicensed teachers

Fourth, foremost among these lax standards would be the ability of chartered schools to hire nonlicensed teaching personnel. As previously stated, licensure is necessary to ensure that teachers are professionally trained and fully qualified.

Costly scheme

Fifth, the chartered school scheme would be costly. Additional layers of bureaucracy would be required to start up and oversee chartered schools. Local boards of education would have to approve charters, which will not reduce the number of administrative staff needed, and recordkeeping by officials could result in the need for even more bureaucratic staff positions at the state level. It could be chaotic. There is no evidence in the education community to suggest that competition would produce cost savings. In fact, although colleges compete, college costs continue to soar.

Open door to vouchers

Finally, chartered schools provide an open door to vouchers. The ability to procure funds could mean that leaders of private schools would seek charters to obtain public money for their particular institutions—under the guise of a chartered school.

Section 120.064
Sub. 11

Innovation is part of today's public schools

Proponents of chartered schools believe innovation in education cannot be achieved under the current system. But, in fact, individual teachers, schools, and even entire school districts all across Minnesota are already engaged in designing new programs for excellence which are recognized nation-wide:

Siphon off resources

Innovation and improvement are a real part of today's public schools in Minnesota. Chartered schools, however, are an idea which would obviously siphon valuable resources of time, talent, money and energy away from a creative, high quality system of education—and our children would be the guinea pigs.

Goes against the grain

The chartered school proposal goes against the grain of several positive trends in Minnesota public education: fewer school districts and bargaining units; less administrative bureaucracy rather than more; higher, rather than lower, standards for teaching and education; and more rather than less integration of students and curriculum.

Bad public policy

The hallmark of public education in our nation and state has been the goal—and largely demonstrated ability—to meet the needs of *all* students. Elitism is contrary to all fundamental American values. The stated goals of chartered schools—including improving education and implementing outcome-based education—are commendable, but they are achievable through the existing public school system. And all students should reap the benefits, not just a select few. Creating an additional side bureaucracy and system is unnecessary and unconscionable. It's just plain bad public policy.

MEA supports real restructuring

Benefits for all students

Minnesota has more than 400 independent school districts, and all are doing the best they can for their students. Some do more than others, but all are committed to their students. Minnesota owes *all* of these students something. MEA backs real restructuring efforts which would benefit all Minnesota students.

Proposals for chartered schools don't really do anything to restructure schools; they would just create a new, small subset of schools. If the differences inherent in chartered schools would really be so beneficial, then all of our students should share in them—we owe them that much.

MEA supports innovation and education reform for all students. Innovation and experimentation can be accomplished within the existing system. The goal of chartered school proponents may be to make an end-run around the existing bureaucracy, which some believe hampers public schools' ability to experiment and implement new policy. Ironically, as we've already shown, they would create even more bureaucracy in their attempt.

Unnecessary duplication

At a time when state and local funding sources are scarce, chartered school proposals would drain away state resources, as well as the time and energy of people. Chartered schools represent an unnecessary concept which merely duplicates that which is possible in the current school structure.

We cannot afford to waste precious resources. It is time to focus on fundamental initiatives which will bring the needed changes and strengthen our public schools. Such initiatives include:

Reorganize

- School district reorganization to aggregate and focus resources, cut down administrative inefficiencies and broaden current curriculum opportunities for all Minnesota students.

Empower

- Empower teachers through site-based decision-making. Teachers are best able to decide how to attain learner outcomes, and must be empowered to do so.

Support quality education

- Provide the time and resources necessary to support quality implementation of outcome-based education.

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M.S. 120.064 OUTCOME-BASED SCHOOLS

PERTINENT ELEMENTS

highlighted
points they
apparently perceived
as problem areas

- * 1. Licensed teachers must be creators of O-B school.
2. O-B schools must be sponsored by a school board and approved by the State Board of Education (SBE).
3. School board sponsor of O-B school must file affidavit with the SBE, which must respond within 30 days.
- * 4. Maximum of two per school district and eight statewide.
- * 5. The O-B board of directors are elected by staff members and parents of children enrolled in the school; a majority of the board must be licensed teachers.
6. A written contract, which may be up to three years, must be signed by the sponsor and the board of directors.
7. A ten person ^{state} advisory committee, of which a majority must be persons of color, shall be appointed by the SBE.
8. An O-B school is exempt from all statutes and rules applicable to a school board or school district except a school district shall meet the same health and safety requirements required of a school district. *discrimination.*
9. An O-B school must be nonsectarian in its programs, admission policies, employment practices, and all other operations.
10. The primary focus of an O-B school must be to provide instruction for at least one grade or age group from five through 18 years.
- * 11. Admission may be limited to pupils having an affinity for the school's learning methods and/or philosophy or a specific subject. The school may not limit admission based on intellectual or athletic ability.
12. Teachers must be licensed as assigned.
13. An O-B school must report at least annually to its sponsor and the SBE.
14. Teachers must be granted a leave without loss of benefits to teach in an O-B school.
15. The board of directors is a public employer. Teachers may form a bargaining unit pursuant to PELRA which are separate from any other bargaining unit.
- * 16. A district is responsible for the transportation of pupils within its geographical boundaries.
17. The board may not levy taxes or issue bonds.

Keep Schools Open to All

BY JERRY ELLSWORTH

Picture this: an American public-school classroom in which the children are eager and ready to learn. The students are well disciplined, neat, clean and sitting in rows. Our day opens with prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. Everyone has homework completed and there are no arguments about the assignments given. Parent helpers are present and ready to work with students. This scene can be the result of school choice.

Many Americans on the national, state and local levels are calling for parental choice or open enrollment as a way to improve the educational system. The argument is that when our schools are forced to compete for students, the quality of education will improve. Parents will be able to choose from among schools, both private and public, and funding will accompany the child through some sort of voucher system. The school that best sells its program will reap the profits of the highest enrollment. The parental-choice approach calls for applying American competitive business practices to our schools. In the business world the profitable businesses will succeed while those who cannot attract customers will go out of business or change.

Choice is a good idea, and just as doctors, lawyers and other professionals can choose their clients, so also I, as a public-school teacher, want some choice for my school. If parents can choose which school will educate their children with public funds, teachers should be able to choose which students will attend their schools.

I will choose the child whose parents are professionals. Children whose parents are unemployed or in service jobs might not be as eager to learn. Those parents might be shift workers, and that causes scheduling confusion for children.

I will choose the children who are well dressed. The kid whose clothes are dirty or whose clothes were purchased at yard sales or thrift shops won't fit in well here.

I will choose the healthy, well-nourished children for my school. Those marginal kids, such as the child with fetal alcohol syndrome or the child who was a crack baby, can't perform well and will bring down our test scores.

I will choose the child from the family in which only one parent has to work outside the home. I want that mom who is at home to be able to be a room mother, to be able to volunteer in class, to be able to accompany us on field trips, or to be able to come to PTA meetings.

I will choose the child who is white. Those black, brown, yellow and red kids are often underprivileged and can't learn as well. If we have them in our school, our test scores will go down, and we can't tolerate a decline in SAT scores.

I will choose the children without handicaps. Kids who have physical or mental disabilities need special schools or institutions. It's too expensive to educate them.

I will choose those children who come from homes with strict discipline. Those permissive parents can take their kids somewhere else. In our school we want to know that parents support our decisions.

I will choose children from families who will take a turn serving on our book-selection committee. We want control over what our children read. Those other schools can have those liberal kids with their wild ideas and their free-thinking parents. No New Age ideas will be allowed in our school. We will have prayer every day!

I will choose those children from families who limit TV watching. Kids whose entertainment and babysitter is a television have a severely limited attention span. Let other schools educate those TV kids.

I will choose those children who have not moved for at least two years. I don't want a high turnover rate of students. That's upsetting and it negatively affects our test scores. Children from unstable families won't be able to keep up with our curriculum.

I will choose those children who have a home computer. We can make such great progress in computer literacy when children can do computer homework. Those kids

who are computer ignorant won't fit well into our progressive school or our progressive society.

I will choose to teach those children who show no sign of physical or sexual abuse. Those abused kids need help and counseling and they can get it somewhere else. Our school needs its money for the basics, and we can't spend our money on counselors. Those

kids can't concentrate on their studies and, besides, they are often troublemakers. We don't want them here.

I will choose those children who go home to caring parents. Latchkey kids who go home to empty houses are an embarrassment. Another school can take them and provide after-school activities to keep them busy each day.

I will choose those children who live pretty close to school or whose parents can drive them. If we take many of those bussed students, our transportation budget will get too high, and we might not be able to afford our computer center.

I will choose those children who are very fluent in English. In our school we won't tolerate any of this bilingual nonsense. The American way is best, and that means English. Those other schools can teach those foreigners. We're going to keep our schools American.

I will choose those children who went to a good preschool. Those Head Start kids can be so difficult. They can go to the other schools. Besides, those kids will be happier with their own kind.

Yes, school choice will solve our problems. It will surely make schools accountable to the taxpayers. I'm certain our school will have those high test scores which measure success in the educational world.

Oh, incidentally, the name our school has chosen is Southwest Aryan School No. 1.



A teacher argues that the concept of school choice could be taken too far

Ellsworth, a public elementary teacher for 18 years and a freelance writer, lives in Prescott, Ariz.