

## SOMETIMES IT'S 'OK' TO CHARTER A SMALL SCHOOL

Minnesota has been on a policy of 'consolidation' in its K-12 system. In 1991-92 some of the early proposals for charter schools were for small rural schools proposed for closure. The opponents of charter schools have seized on this to attack the law as subverting the consolidation policy. Sensitive to the political implications supporters of charter schools have tended to agree that proposals involving small rural schools should not be approved. This narrows the applicability of the law (which pleases its opponents) and will turn away a significant element of grass-roots political support for the charter schools idea.

This is a dilemma for the people who are supporting charter schools. Fortunately there may be an escape.

### **What Minnesota is mainly trying to consolidate is districts.**

The essential effort is to create a larger local tax base. A small district usually can't finance a full program or pay high salaries. For obvious reasons people would rather highlight its inability to offer the academic program (for high school kids especially). So what's really a problem of small district-size gets represented as a problem of small school-size. And the public comes to think of small schools in general as a problem, even in already-consolidated districts. This confusion is now appearing in the debate where the district is a 'rural' district.

Some charter proposals may involve a small schools in a small district. In this situation preserving the school would preserve the (small) district. It's this situation consolidation advocates worry about, especially when it involves a high school.

### **A small school in a consolidated district is different.**

Other proposals involve a small school (almost always an elementary) in a large district whose boundaries reflect the prior consolidation of one or more districts. Preserving a school in this situation may or may not be a good idea: That depends on the school and on the specifics of the charter proposal. But it clearly does not represent a threat to the state's program of consolidating districts.

More than one superintendent has wanted to close a small school and bus the kids to one building at one location, to minimize cost-per-student. But that kind of 'closure' raises a different issue . . . a legitimate issue about values.

If people in a small school in an already-consolidated district -- Crosby-Ironton or Saint Paul -- feel they can operate with the funds available under the charter law, and can find a sponsor as permitted by that law, the State Board should be open to their proposal on the merits even if the local board does not like it. After all, a local board has sometimes approved a proposal even though its own superintendent has not liked it.