A charter for more schools of tomorrow

In his visit Wednesday President Bush paid tribute to Minnesota schools' open enrollment system, their commitment to innovation and their graduation rate — highest in the nation. Bush wants all those accomplishments emulated elsewhere. Had he seen the education bill just passed by the Legislature, Bush would have found another advance to applaud: an initial commitment to charter schools.

Charter schools are public schools organized by licensed teachers, with school board approval, that can operate unencumbered by the extensive state requirements which dictate everything from how many days a school is open to what must be taught. Charter schools cannot be discriminatory or sectarian, but other than that require only that students meet or exceed the outcomes mandated by the state Board of Education.

In Minneapolis and St. Paul, educational options are often driven by the need to meet desegregation guidelines. But elsewhere in the state, local school boards sometimes have hesitated to innovate. Unfortunately, the final bill eliminated the option that a charter could be granted by the state board as well as the local one. We hope this choice can be resurrected next session.

The bill's opponents feared among other things a loss of support for existing schools. Bowing to this concern, the final bill limits the number of experiments to eight in the next biennium, with a maximum of two per district. Some limit is wise; questions remain about the effect on remaining schools. But even within the limits, the length of the charter — three years — is not nearly enough to achieve meaningful educational results. These are reasons to watch the charter schools carefully, and to make changes as lessons are learned, not to oppose the experiment.

A willingness to "break the mold," as Bush said, is one reason Minnesota has become known for leadership in education. Charter schools are another welcome example.

STAR/TRIBUNE
5/25/91