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EDITORIALS

CHARTER SCHOOLS

New education idea enhances quality

An innovative, worthwhile idea — charter schools — with modest potential to improve the quality of education for a limited number of students in Minnesota is close to becoming law.

Under the proposal, a group of citizens and one or more certified teachers could apply to their local school board to create a new school. The schools would have to be non-sectarian and would have to follow all state rules and regulations, unless they receive waivers from specific provisions.

Charter schools could not require entrance tests. Operators would receive authority to run the schools for three years. They would have to meet state guidelines for learning results.

The idea is attractive for several reasons. It allows teachers, parents and other organizers flexibility to experiment with new learning approaches. In that regard, charter schools are the ultimate in site-based management: all decisions about budget, policy and personnel would be made at the school level. Although the local school board would monitor charter schools, each would be its own district with a governing board.

Amendments approved by House and Senate negotiators on the education bill authorize creation of up to two charter schools for each school district.

Both the Minnesota Education Association and the Minnesota Federation of Teachers strongly oppose the proposal, largely because they fear charter schools would drain resources away from other public schools and that the idea in essence creates publicly funded private schools. They are also concerned that such schools would lack accountability and would not be subject to the same rules as other schools.

Those concerns are adequately addressed by changes in the bill, sponsored by Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope. Open enrollment has already introduced market-driven consumerism to education. That hasn't led to massive school closings or teacher layoffs. Neither would charter schools.

A stampede of folks starting up their own programs is not very likely. It is a formidable task to develop and start a school. But for those who want to test their educational ideas, it is a worthy alternative.

One disappointment remains. The original measure would have allowed either the State Board of Education or local school boards to authorize charter schools. Amendments stripped that power from the state board. So only the local school board would be able to grant permission for a charter, if the measure wins approval as it now stands.

Consequently, if a group wishes to start a charter school because citizens and teachers are unhappy with the local school board, the likelihood of getting a charter is smaller.

Gov. Arne Carlson is reported to be upset enough with other parts of the education bill to veto it. If that happens, legislators ought to restore the power of the state board to grant charters. That would add a dash of improvement to an otherwise sound plan to permit new efforts to enhance education in this state.

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