State's 1st charter school may be in Winona

Rochester 11-19

From staff reports, wire services

WINONA — The Winona School Board has blazed a new state trail by voting to make a private Montessori school the first charter school in Minnesota.

The state Education Department must approve the move to turn the Bluffview Montessori School into a public program run free of district control. The two sides also must draft a three-year contract before it's official.

But barring insurmountable roadblocks, the school will go public at the beginning of school next fall. Peggy Hunter, enrollment options coordinator for the state Education Department, said it will be the state's first charter school.

"I'm delighted. I'm ecstatic," Bluffview Director Michael Dorer said after Monday night's 5-2 vote.

As a charter public school, Bluffview loses its private school status, but will receive about $3,000 per student in state aid. The school is housed in Cathedral Elementary School, and must move because charter schools can't be sectarian or somehow related.

Dorer, several Montessori parents and Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope, sponsor of the charter school bill, defended the proposal before a packed audience.

Most of the questions from administrators and board members centered around student admission.

Dorer said Bluffview administrators have never, and will not, deny any student admission because they think a student fails to meet certain criteria.

"We can't say to a kid, 'We don't accept your application' on a basis of something that could be nebulous, or something that's not nebulous," he said.

By eliminating tuition, Bluffview is now open for everyone, he added.

Joliene Olson, one of the two board members who cast nay votes, said charter schools statewide will be subject to a few less state mandates than regular public schools. That, in part, allows them their creative options, she said.

"I really believe that if the state took away a few of our mandates, we'd also have flexibility," she said. "We have so few discretionary dollars, we don't have the opportunity for people in buildings to be creative, or to bring down class sizes."

State officials estimated that 10 to 15 groups across the state are seriously discussing opening a charter school.

"Certainly schools that already have a base are going to be the first applicants," said Rep. Becky Kelso, DFL-Shakopee.

If Bluffview enrolled its desired maximum of 34 students, Winona public schools would lose about $90,000 in 1992-93 state aid.

Almost 1,200 people in Winona signed a petition supporting Bluffview's move to become a charter school.

The law allows up to eight charter schools, with a limit of two per district. Only licensed teachers can open them.