

Winona vote may lead to first charter school

By Mary Jane Swankula
Staff Writer



A Montessori education shouldn't be limited to the children of the wealthy, Michael Dorner says. That's one reason Dorner, the principal of Bluffview Montessori School in Winona, Minn., wants to turn the private school into a public school.

If the Winona school board approves that plan today, the school will be the first in the United States to take the initial step toward being a charter school.

Five years after the issue of school choice focused national attention on Minnesota, politicians and educators around the United States again are watching as the state pioneers efforts

to set up public schools that operate like a school district control.

State officials estimate that 10 to 15 groups around the state are seriously discussing opening a charter school. But the proposals that are furthest along are for schools that already exist. Bluffview is the first to go to a school board for sponsorship. On the Iron Range, the St. Louis County school board has agreed to postpone the possible closure of the Tolvola-Meadowlands school for a year to give parents and teachers time to redesign it as a charter school.

Saving small rural schools and transforming private schools into public schools weren't what state legislators

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and maintain when they approved the nation's first charter school bill in May. But the bill's sponsors say flexibility was one goal, only practical schools can't participate.

"Certainly schools that already have a base are going to be the first applicants," said Rep. Becky Kelso, DFL-Shakopee. "I would be very alarmed if we had charter school proposals put together hastily. ... Starting a charter school is a whole lot of work."

The law doesn't make it easy. There's no provision to pay for school buildings or to cover other start-up costs. And in a requirement that many compare to the fox guarding the chickens, teachers seeking to open a charter school first must get permission from local school boards. That approval virtually guarantees that the school boards' own school districts will lose students and state money to the charter school.

In Winona, the School District could lose almost \$90,000 in 1992-93 state aid if Bluffview enrolled about 34 new students, the maximum Dorner thinks it could comfortably take. Superintendent Ronald McIntire opposes sponsoring Bluffview's charter partly for that reason. But he also

questions the premise of the law.

"If the Legislature wants to fix the system, why not give all schools in Minnesota the chance to function without the 1,600 mandates that are on the books?" he asked. "I'm not a cum laude person who is doing anything he can't to thwart change. But I think it's poor legislation and fraught with problems."

Winona school board Chairman Stuart Miller, however, supports the Bluffview plan and hopes that the board approves the school's application. "I think the benefits outweigh the risks," he said. "The whole point should be what's best for children, not what's best for the School District or the Montessori school."

The law allows up to eight charter schools, with a limit of two per district. Only licensed teachers can open the schools, and they need permission from their local school board and the State Board of Education.

The idea is to spur creativity in schools. Charter schools have to meet state rules on what students should learn, but are free from most state laws except health, safety and financial requirements. The schools can't raise taxes, but they can hire

Definition of charter school

What's a charter school?

- It's educationally, financially and legally independent and run by an elected board of directors.
- It can be started only by licensed teachers who get permission from the local school board and the State Board of Education.
- It hires and fires employees, including teachers.
- It receives regular school aid.
- It cannot screen students, charge tuition or have a religious affiliation.
- It has to meet state education standards on what students must know.

and fire teachers, devise their own curriculums and are financially, legally and educationally independent.

An elected board of directors with a majority of teachers would govern the schools. Funding would be the same as open enrollment, with per-pupil state monies following students to their new school. After approval by local and state school boards, charter schools have to work out a contract with their local school board.

Purists objected to the law, which squeaked through the Legislature at the last minute, because it allows only teachers to start a school and because local school boards have to give initial approval. But the bill's sponsors, Kelso and Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope, say legislators will be watching to see if school boards reject charters. If so, legislators could remove the local option.

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who were among the most supportive of the legislation and pleased to make one of their public schools a charter school, have decided to head back for a year until the law is drafted. But in St. Cloud and New Ulm, teachers have spoken to school boards about starting charter schools. The Minnesota Waldorf School, a private school, has had exploratory discussions with school officials in two cities. People connected with the Tivoli-Meadowlands school south of Hibbing are discussing making it a charter school that has close ties to business people and senior citizens.

Almost 1,200 people in Winona signed a petition supporting Bluffview's move to become a charter school. The school now has 70 students in preschool to sixth grade, but Dorner said that if the charter for a kindergarten-to-grade-six school is approved, the school would hope to accept up to nine new kindergartners and 25 new elementary students.

Elementary school tuition is \$1,600 a year. Dorner, who also teaches at the school, said he has wanted the school to drop tuition and go public for some time. He has two reasons: to serve more students and to become more competitive in hiring and retaining Montessori-trained staff.

While Bluffview's tuition isn't excessive compared with other private

schools in Minnesota, Dorner said many parents have told him it's out of reach for them. "Income should not be a barrier," he said. "The concern about gift funds below that of access," Dorner said, "but Bluffview finds it difficult to compete for scarce Montessori-trained teachers. The school is debt-free and has no financial problems," he said.

He doesn't see a conflict in turning a private school into a public one. School board chairman Miller, who has a child attending Bluffview's preschool, said the charter idea "gives parents a real choice."

McIntire, however, has raised a number of objections to the proposal, including how special education services would be provided and what happens to the school if the law is repealed. Winona schools had to cut \$900,000 from this year's budget and already are losing another \$335,500 this year because students are leaving the district under other choice programs. "Anything that tampers with the fiscal integrity of our system, I take issue with," he said.

McIntire's biggest objection to the Bluffview charter, he said, is that it would allow the school to choose its students. He points to a section of

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The law that says "the school may limit admission to... pupils who have a specific affinity for the school's teaching methods," learning philosophy or other characteristics. The law later says schools cannot exclude students because of intellect, achievement, aptitude or athletic ability.

But Peggy Hunter, the state Department of Education's enrollment operations coordinator, said charter schools cannot select students. They can advertise the philosophy and expectations of their program, she said, "but once the child applies they have to take them." If too many children apply, admission is by lottery.

Dorner said that his school would stress to parents the kind of commitments they need to make for a Montessori program. But he said the school agrees with the Education Department's interpretation of the law.

Pioneer charter school advances in Winona

By Kevin Duchscherer
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A private Montessori school in Winona is on its way to becoming the nation's first charter school, a public school run by itself rather than a school district.

By a vote of 5-2, the Winona school board approved a plan Monday night that, if passed by the state Board of Education, will allow Bluffview Montessori School to receive state aid while retaining the authority to hire and fire employees and administer its own budget and curriculum.

Supporters of the plan said last night that they are reasonably confident that the state Board of Education will also approve it, probably in January.

"We're delighted and challenged at

the same time," said Michael Dorner, principal of the 24-year-old school. "We're a little bit awed by the amount of work to be done, but we're going to do it. We're feeling great that we got this far."

While they must meet state rules on what children should know, charter schools are free to determine how and what to teach. They cannot screen students or charge tuition and must meet state safety, health and financial requirements but otherwise are legally independent.

If the state Board of Education approves the plan, Bluffview officials would negotiate a contract with school district officials. Bluffview rents space in a Catholic school, but Dorner said Bluffview will move to avoid confusion; by law, parochial schools cannot receive charters.

Winona School Superintendent Ronald McIntire had said he opposed the plan, partly because the district could lose almost \$90,000 in state aid next year if Bluffview enrolls the 104 students its officials think it can handle.

But Board Chairman Stuart Miller, who voted for the plan, called that argument specious. "If we lose students to the charter school, we don't have to expend the revenues to service those students... I think we gain a new way of delivering the public school to people and we give them choice."

Sen. Ember Reichgott, DFL-New Hope, who sponsored the charter school bill, passed in May, said Bluffview will complement Winona's public schools, not compete with them.

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