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Post-Bulletin

POST-BULLETIN PUBLISHING CO.
ROCHESTER, MINN.

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3/10/92 P.B.

Charter school choice is worth the small risk

Many thoughtful people believe that progress in public education ultimately will depend on the ability of schools to initiate significant change.

That ability, in turn, may depend in part on the ability of students and parents to make choices among a variety of different education methods and approaches.

Creating that opportunity for choice was one of the reasons for passage of the Minnesota law permitting creation of charter schools. Charter schools must be under the direction of qualified teachers, but they are freed from many of the regulations governing other public schools. As a result, they are freer to adopt new curricula and new ways to engage the interest and the commitment of students.

That is one reason why we hope the Rochester School District will ultimately approve the organization of a charter school within the district. At first glance, there is no inducement for the district to do so. After all, it would lose a certain amount of state aid which would follow the students attending the charter school.

However, there are other important considerations. One is that the Rochester district has established its interest in educational reform and in trying new ways to make instruction more effective. Its commitment to outcome-based education and to creation of middle schools are just two examples of that interest.

A generous commitment to aiding the new charter school concept would be consistent with that stance.

Looking further ahead, a successful charter school might help the district succeed in its long-standing goal of being freed from excessive regulation by the state. If the charter school can demonstrate that local initiative and innovation are productive, the argument for reducing state mandates will be effectively reinforced.

The Rochester Education Association has not taken an official stand on the charter school application, but its leaders are concerned that agreeing to the concept might weaken its stand against a subcontracting agreement. Here again, by approving the charter school application, the union would get credit for taking a chance on behalf of school reform rather than pressing its own advantage to the limit.

The charter school would be a relatively small experiment, involving only 90 or so students. The amount of state aid involved would not be enough to make or break the school district. At the same time, a one-time, non-binding concession would not seriously damage the union.

The charter school, if approved, would not necessarily be permanent. It would have three years in which to prove itself. At the end of that time, its performance would dictate whether its charter would be renewed.

The risks are small. The opportunity is great. We hope that school board members will try a reform which has attracted the attention of educators throughout the country.