Charter school for deaf will be approved today by state education board

By Rob Hotakainen
Staff Writer

Katie Spiegel, 10, has two dogs, Max and Heidi, and a 12-year-old brother named Fritz.

She lives in Marine on St. Croix, where she'd just as soon stay. The last thing she wants to do is go to a boarding school for the deaf in Faribault, Minn.

"If my brother is alone, what would he do?" she asked Monday, using her mother as an interpreter as she spoke with reporters.

Not to worry.

Today the State Board of Education will approve a plan to create an experimental public school, the first of its kind in the Twin Cities, for Spiegel and other deaf and hearing-impaired students.

Metro Deaf School, a charter school already approved by the Forest Lake school board, will open in the fall of 1993, under a plan that passed the state board's Education Standards Committee yesterday on a 7-0 vote.

The school, which will promote deaf language, history and culture, has enough votes to guarantee final passage by the full board today.

The only similar school in the state that caters exclusively to the deaf and hearing-impaired is the Minnesota Academy for the Deaf, a boarding school in Faribault. Despite the support for the metro school, some officials conceded yesterday that it might

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take students away from the Faribault academy.

But for many supporters of the new school, Faribault is just too far away. They want their children to go school closer to home, avoiding the overnight stays at the state boarding school.

"I don't want to do that," said Spiegel, who appeared before the committee yesterday. "I really don't like that idea."

Marcia Passi, a teacher of deaf children, told the state board's committee that the new school will be "of, by and for the deaf." A majority of its teachers and board members will be deaf. Students will learn both American Sign Language and English.

School officials have yet to decide on an exact location for Metro Deaf School. It will begin as a middle school for students in grades six through eight, but school officials want it to expand later, serving students all the way through 12th grade.

"We want to start small," said Scott Haskins, cochairman of a group of parents that came up with the plan.

With more than 1,500 deaf and hearing-impaired children in Minnesota, Haskins said, Metro Deaf School should not be fighting over students with the state academy. But state officials acknowledged that the Faribault academy could lose students currently enrolled from the metropolitan region, leaving it with mainly outstate children. The academy, which expects to enroll about 190 students this fall, draws roughly half its students from the metropolitan region.

Al Zdon of Hibbing, a member of the board, said he feared that the new school ultimately could mean less operating money for the state academy. Despite their fears, committee members gave their unanimous support to the plan, after asking that "reasonable efforts" be made to contain costs.

Metro Deaf School is the first charter school approved by the state that's aimed solely at handicapped students.

Last year, Minnesota became the first state in the nation to allow the experimental charters, which are supposed to set up innovative schools run by teachers. At Metro Deaf School, officials are promising to promote academic excellence by using and encouraging innovative teaching methods.

The idea behind charter schools is to allow public schools to operate independently of school district control, but a charter school requires the sponsorship of a local school district before it can be considered by the state board.

Charter schools, which are financed by the state, must satisfy state rules on what students learn and must abide by health, safety and financial requirements. But they are free from most other rules. They can't tax but can hire and fire teachers and plan their own curriculums.

The idea of segregating deaf students is controversial because it pulls them out of mainstream public schools, but proponents say the new school will add a needed choice to Minnesota's educational menu.

Doug Wallace, the Minneapolis representative on the state board and chairman of the Education Standards Committee, said the new school represents "an important opportunity" for Minnesota.

"It seems to me that the case for this school has been well made," said Wallace, adding: "It's going to stand as a bellwether for other states and other parents and other students in years to come."