tate board rejects town's bid for charter school

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tob Hotakainen
Writer

wnspeople in Rapidan, Minn., put a good fight, but they're going to e their school after all.

e State Board of Education voted Monday to kill a plan that would ve allowed a charter school to op- te in the small Blue Earth County own.

The vote, before a standing-room- nly crowd of Rapidan residents, narked the first time the board has ejected such a proposal. State offi- ials feared that the Rapidan plan vas nothing more than an attempt to prevent a small school from closing.

Minnesota became the first state in he nation last year to allow the ex- perimental charters, which are sup- posed to be innovative schools run by teachers. So far, only two have been approved: one in Winona, and one in Toivola-Meadowlands in St. Louis County.

The elementary school in Rapidan, ocated six miles south of Mankato, s scheduled to close at the end of the school year. The plan to replace it with a charter school was offered by a group of Rapidan residents shortly after the Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial school board voted in December to close the school, citing declining enrollment and tight finances.

The idea behind charter schools is to allow public schools to operate independent of school district control, but creating a charter school requires the sponsorship of a local school district.

When the Lake Crystal-Wellcome Memorial board said no, the Rapidan group went elsewhere and found support from the school board in Truman, which is 40 miles south of Rapidan. Its proposal called for a "country school" that would have focused on agribusiness themes. Proponents said it would have enrolled about 70 students in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Parents and community members who packed the state board's meeting room yesterday were saddened by the vote. Some cried as they left the room.

"I'm disappointed and actually surprised," said Nancy Dobson, a Rapidan parent who now intends to send three of her children to a Mankato school next year.

The board's vote came after State Education Commissioner Gene Mammenga recommended that the plan be rejected. He expressed concern about the condition of the Rapidan school building and said the plan lacked support from local teachers.

Mammenga said that those who opposed the school closing had found "an out" in the charter school law. He said that approving such a charter would send the wrong message to other small school districts that are cooperating and combining their operations with neighboring districts.

"This message, of approving this charter, I fear, will be very negative to people trying to do the right thing," Mammenga told the board.

Board members Doug Wallace of Minneapolis and Al Zdon of Hibbing were the only two who supported the Rapidan plan.

Wallace told his colleagues that the board had missed a "wonderful opportunity" to support an innovative and educationally sound proposal. Zdon said he was not bothered that the proposal came after the local board decided to close the school. He said that "crisis often drives positive action" and that the Rapidan plan was better than the other two that already have been approved by the state board.

"We talk the talk," Zdon said. "We want to tear down the walls and tear down the barriers that impede innovation. Maybe it's time that we start to walk the walk, too, to live up to our ideals and what we say year after year."

Eight charters can be granted under 1991 state law. Charter schools must satisfy state rules on what students learn and abide by health, safety and financial requirements, but they are free from most other rules. Although they can't raise taxes, they can hire and fire teachers and plan their own curriculums.