

### 3. THE PROMISE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

BY EMBER REICHGOTT

Some view the establishment of outcome-based charter schools as a revolution in "reinventing public education." Others see them as an inevitable extension of public school choice. Most agree that charter schools are a new approach that reach well beyond the state of Minnesota.

We are trying a new concept that maintains the strong tradition of public education, yet allows the restructuring of public schools and their local school board relationships. Our goal is to create new opportunities for students, teachers, parents and their communities by expanding the principles of public school choice.

We all know the seriousness of the crisis in schools are today. Teachers and principals are burning out. Students are falling through the cracks. Test scores are decreasing, and American students are becoming less and less competitive.

Crisis in education was fundamental to our "revolution" in Minnesota. Our road to school reform began with school choice, which was introduced in 1985 under the strong leadership of Governor Rudy Perpich (D). A firestorm of protest prevented immediate passage of choice in its entirety; but the post secondary options program survived, allowing high school students to take college courses for credit.

Next came "second chance" programs, allowing dropouts and certain "at-risk" students to have a new start at a second school; then came voluntary school choice. Finally, in 1988, legislation passed which allowed every child the chance to attend the public school of his or her choice within Minnesota.

In just four years, the opposition to public school choice turned to enthusi-

astic acceptance by nearly two-thirds of Minnesotans. Even sixty-one percent of the teachers in the Minnesota Education Association now support choice.

Why is there such strong support? Because choice is working. Fifteen hundred dropouts came back to school in just two years. College-bound students in one program increased by 700 percent. Student satisfaction increased threefold in some programs.

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With the choice revolution well under way, we were ready for the second phase, the creation of charter schools. Representative Becky Kelso and I introduced the legislation, which seemed a natural extension of all that had been working in public school choice. It just wasn't enough to provide students more access to choices when there weren't very many choices to access.

So Minnesota authorized the formation of eight charter schools. We had hoped for more, but politics are politics.

Here's how it works. A charter school is for those teachers who think they can do it better. With a proposal in hand, these teachers and supportive parents apply to a local school board for a charter. If approved, these teachers will operate their school with total control of budget, staffing, curriculum, and teaching methods.

The charter schools are open to all and funding follows the student, just as

in open enrollment. This provides a market incentive to provide more innovative education.

The school is exempted from nearly all state and local regulations, with certain exceptions like desegregation and special education. In return, the teachers must meet outcome-based performance standards agreed to in the charter.

It's simple. No results, no charter. Teachers trade regulation for results, bureaucracy for accountability. In short, a charter school is a new kind of public school that rewards innovation, empowers teachers and parents, and meets special student needs without turning our existing school system upside down.

But there are a few things that charter schools are not. First, charter schools are not a voucher system for private schools. Charter schools are an expansion of public school choice. All charter schools are nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory in their admission and employment policies. No tuition may be charged.

Second, charter schools are not a diversion of public school dollars nor do they benefit just the few at the expense of the many. While dollars may not feed directly into the school bureaucracy, their only "diversion" is to follow the very student they were intended to educate.

Charter schools and choice stimulate the entire system. Is it any coincidence that the number of advanced placement courses in Minnesota's high schools have doubled since high school students have had the choice to take college courses?

Third, charter schools are not an indictment of our public school system.

They are a tool for innovative entrepreneurs to do the job better in times of scarce resources and demanding public agendas.

Tom Peters, in his book *In Search of Excellence*, observed that large organizations seldom, if ever, stimulate innovations in an industry. A study found that small firms produce twenty-four times the innovation per research dollar than large firms. So is it with public schools, I believe. Rather than forcing top-down changes from government, which usually just means throwing more money at the problem, charter schools encourage bottom-up innovation and real reform based on local needs and conditions.

**W**ill charter schools work? In Minnesota we are in the early stages of finding out. The first one, a plan to bring dropouts back to school, is scheduled to open this fall. Several other approved charter schools are under negotiation with school boards, including a rural open school with interactive technology and

a school for deaf and hearing impaired students who wish to learn American sign language. In all, about twenty charter proposals have been developed or considered around Minnesota in the last year.

There have been some successes, to be sure, but the road to change is a rocky one. Some excellent proposals just haven't made it. They've been rejected by school boards afraid to take risks and afraid to give up control.

As one superintendent said, "It's hard for me to grasp that what is proposed could be better than what we offer in our own elementary school." Yes, it can be frustrating. One successful charter applicant put it best. "We are truly on the bleeding edge of change."

Being on the bleeding edge is painful, but it is critical for progressive Democratic officials. Why? The public demands it. A recent Harris poll found that education reform has moved to the top of the roster of political concerns in this year's election. We also know that two-thirds of the American public supports public school choice.

Numbers like that should give us pause. If progressives don't move out in front of the educational reform movement, this revolution may move beyond us.

The President and the Republican party platform call for private school vouchers and some Californians are working to place a voucher proposal on the ballot. Meanwhile, many Democrats continue to advocate the traditional answer of increased funding for education, even when resources are scarce. I believe that charter schools are one progressive, albeit partial, answer to the problems facing our schools today and a better answer than vouchers.

Vouchers do not provide opportunity to restructure public schools or administer them differently. Charter schools do. Charter schools give incentive to strengthen our public schools. Vouchers give incentive to abandon them.

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*Majority Whip Ember Reichgott is a state senator in Minnesota. This article is adapted from remarks she made at the 1992 DLC Conference in New Orleans.*

## 4. PROGRESSIVE HEALTH CARE REFORM

BY JEREMY ROSNER

**A**merica's health care system is in crisis. Its costs are too high and rising. Its coverage is incomplete and shrinking. In 1970, what we spent on health care equaled about one third of what we spent on education. Today, we spend more on health care than what we spend on education and defense combined.

The system's expense, bureaucracy, and uneven results have left Americans less satisfied with their health care — despite its high quality — than the citizens of any other industrialized nation. As a result, the health care system has become a flashpoint of

resentment for middle class households frustrated by a decade of stagnant incomes and rising taxes.

Today's health care crisis built up over a generation. But only in the last few years has a serious national debate begun over whether and how to change the way we pay for medical care. The emergence of this debate is encouraging. The direction the debate is taking is not.

Policy makers in Washington appear to be channeling the public's demand for reform down the paths of least political resistance. With one political party entrenched in the execu-

tive branch and the other entrenched in Congress, their focus appears to be not on real solutions, but on avoiding political risk and offense to their key constituencies.

**T**he White House and Republican congressional leaders have proposed incremental changes in such policies as tax credit subsidies for health insurance, insurance regulations, and medical malpractice laws. The Democratic leaders in Congress, meanwhile, have embraced a "pay-or-play" approach, which would use a new federal mandate to make employ-