

For Release:
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Minnesota Charter School Law Named National Innovations Award Finalist

The first-in-the-nation Minnesota Charter School law was named today as one of 25 finalists in the 2000 Innovations in American Government awards competition. The Finalist designation brings a grant of \$20,000 to Minnesota Charter Schools to assist in public awareness, replication and outreach.

The Ford Foundation and Harvard University administers the Awards Program through the John F. Kennedy School of Government in partnership with The Council for Excellence in Government.

Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge (DFL-New Hope), who developed and authored the charter school law, and Bob DeBoer, co-director of New Visions School in Minneapolis, will make a final presentation Oct. 11-12 before the Innovations National Selection Committee in Washington D.C. The committee will select 10 winners, each to receive a \$100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.

Minnesota also will be represented by another Innovations Finalist, the Board of Government Innovation and Cooperation, passed by the legislature in 1993. The two Minnesota finalists are the first from this state since 1996. They were selected from an initial pool of more than 1,300 applicants.

Charter school parents, teachers and students gathered today at the Minnesota Business Academy (MBA) in downtown St. Paul to celebrate the finalist recognition. That charter school,

a partnership of business leaders and educators, will open next month. Former Lt. Gov. Joanne Benson, who is president and chief education officer of MBA, hosted the celebration. She served in the Minnesota Senate in 1991 when the Charter School legislation passed.

“Our students could not be more excited about opening day,” Benson said. “It was also exciting to participate in creation of the law, and now it is gratifying to see the fruit of our labor come to life in the Minnesota Business Academy, and the many other charter school successes.”

“Charter schools provide choice, encourage involvement and generate new ideas for parents, teachers and students,” said Lt. Gov. Mae Schunk. “They give an extra dimension to public education in Minnesota.”

The authors of the ground-breaking 1991 charter school law are Sen. Junge and former Rep. Becky Kelso (DFL-Shakopee). Sen. Gen Olson of Minnetrista was the original lead Republican author, and Rep. Alice Seagren of Bloomington currently leads Republican efforts on the bi-partisan initiative. Today more than 1,700 charter schools are operating in 39 states, serving more than 350,000 students. This fall, Minnesota will have 64 operating charter schools, serving about 10,000 students. Nine more charter schools are approved to open in Minnesota in the 2001 school year.

As often is the case when an innovative concept swings into action, a few setbacks have accompanied the numerous success stories. Six charter schools in Minnesota have closed voluntarily, or due to decisions made by sponsors.

In May, President Bill Clinton visited St. Paul's City Academy, the first charter school in the nation. Clinton told students and teachers, “The Minnesota law is right. You basically have struck the right balance. You have encouraged the growth of charter schools, but you do hold charter schools accountable for results. That's what every state in the country ought to do.”

The President indicated that he wants to see 3,000 charter schools nationally by 2001. Congress first provided start-up money for charter schools in 1994.

Sen. Junge, who crafted the legislation with four others “on a dinner napkin” at a 1988 Education Reform Conference added, “Charter schools celebrate the energy and commitment of thousands of charter school parents, teachers and students. Their efforts stimulate innovation within American public education from the smallest charter school to the largest school district. Charter schools are the ‘research and development’ arm of American public education.”

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Note to News Directors and Editors: Charter school students and teachers will be featured from the Minnesota State Fair on this Friday's (Aug. 25) "Facts and Snacks with Legislators" on WCCO Radio, AM-830, at 1:10 p.m.