

CAN EVERY CHARTER SCHOOL BE 'INNOVATIVE'?

Strictly speaking the purpose of the charter schools law is to produce "outcome based" schools. At various times, however, various of its advocates and supporters have suggested that it will produce "innovative" schools; or, more precisely, that with the freedom provided under the charter law the teachers who have formed the school will be "innovative" with the academic program. This is now beginning to be taken literally; almost to the point where an assumption is developing that a charter proposal that fails to come up with some literally never-heard-of-before idea about learning should not be approved.

This is a problem. It could create another class of proposals, like those for small schools (see separate memo) in which the charter schools idea (presumably) should not apply. We need to think through and be clear just what "innovative" does and does not mean with respect to a charter school proposal.

Clearly the test can't be to come up with something literally never-heard-of-before. There aren't that many good new ideas. **And the system doesn't need all that many new ideas.** Most schools simply need something different and better than what's 'practice' today.

(A hundred years ago cities needed something other than the horse. That didn't mean that in every city there had to be a new, different and literally never-heard-of-before kind of horseless carriage. What worked in one city would be OK in another. The fact that inventors thought up several different kinds of cars appeared was a plus: It provided a choice. But the main idea -- the "innovation" -- was to get from the horse to a car.)

A group that wants to build a charter school around the idea of mixed-age classes, or cooperative learning or computer technology (or the Montessori method, or whatever) ought not to be disqualified simply because somebody, somewhere has done -- or tried, or thought-about -- that idea before. If that change in 'practice' would be "innovative" . . . different . . . in that school that's what ought to count.

It's possible, too, that mixed-age grouping or cooperative learning or computer-based learning will be done better by the next school that tries it than it has been done before. Some things can be done better by some people than by others. The same words on the box don't mean the same thing is inside.

This was the issue after the post-secondary option came in. A number of superintendents tried to persuade the Legislature that kids ought not to be able to transfer for a course with the same title as one the district "offered at home". People pointed out that a student might have quite a different experience in Physics at the University than in Physics "at home", and the Legislature left the option open.