

ESSENTIAL POINTS ABOUT CHARTER LAWS AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

What is the 'charter' idea?

It's a centrist idea: to stay within the principles of public education and yet have school in a very different form. It is neither writing checks to parents (vouchers) nor writing checks to superintendents.

* The state, by statute, 'charters' some public body other than the local board to offer public education in the community. This sponsor (or a local board) then charters teachers or others to operate a school outside the district framework.

* It is public education: No teaching religion, no charging tuition, no picking-and-choosing students; and accountable to public authority for student performance.

* 'Control' switches from rules to results. The school is chartered for a term. Its continuation depends on demonstrating it has met the standards it is required to meet. Also, it has to persuade teachers, parents and students to come and to stay. In return it is cut clear of most of the regulations and statute law that govern district schools not accountable in these ways.

* The school is a discrete entity. Teachers belong to the school. The school gets its financing from the state, directly, as if it were a district. The money moves with the student.

* It is not, like many improvement ideas, design-based. The charter school is purely an opportunity, for someone to bring in (or to create) some instructional (or organizational) design not now offered in the community.

The object is not simply to produce schools. The object is to give districts a reason to change and improve. Currently, for the district, improvement is optional: The incentives are in fact to avoid changes that would generate internal stress. A strong charter law makes improvement necessary.

What's happened nationally since 1991?

Minnesota enacted the first law, in 1991. There are now programs generating schools, and dynamics, also in California, Arizona, Colorado, Texas, Illinois (Chicago), Michigan, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina and the District of Columbia. There are new laws that may yet generate schools in Florida, Connecticut and South Carolina.

The map attached shows charters issued as of the end of last school year; about 300-350. Today there are probably about 500 charters issued, with other action still in process. There is no 'typical' charter school. They do tend to be small. More are

elementary than secondary. There are more new starts than conversions of existing public schools. As a group they enroll roughly the same proportions of minority, low-income and special ed pupils as the district system.

The politics are confounding. In almost all cases the laws are state policy initiatives, which generate broad popular support after they are enacted. The state actions have been strikingly bipartisan. In all cases the strong laws were enacted despite opposition from major education groups.

Schools are increasingly buying-in strong, research-based learning programs available nationally. In most states with strong laws the schools are now organized into a statewide association. And "friends' groups" have appeared to support the effort to improve and expand the schools and the program.

Districts are now clearly responding with improvements in their own programs. Michigan, from Detroit west to Lake Michigan, is currently the major case; with some districts now moving quickly to bring in successful and popular new learning programs before they appear in a charter school.

'Charter schools' has become one of the nation's major restructuring networks; unexpectedly one of the most watched new strategies for general system improvement.

A major evaluation has been commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education. A two-year study by the Hudson Institute, on a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, will be released this summer.

Where does Minnesota fit in?

Our law was the first. But it was quite restricted. Our program is small. It has developed slowly. Other states now have much larger and stronger programs.

We currently have 18 schools operating. Another eight have been approved for start in September. Other proposals are in preparation. A study done by the University for the Legislature shows Minnesota charter schools enroll a higher proportion of minority, low-income and special ed pupils than district schools.

Even though there are few charter schools aimed at 'regular' kids the districts are beginning to respond here, too. The most important case by far is Duluth; where the board solicited the creation of a charter school; a K-8 elementary to enroll about 500 students as a citywide choice program. The school, to open next fall, will use the program developed by the Edison Project. Duluth apparently means to challenge its own schools.

An "operators' association" was formed in 1996. There is as yet no "friends' group" providing private-sector support.