

Origins of the charter idea

By Ted Kolderie, 2002

Someone asked for a quick history.

1. The process was pretty simple.

There's as 'a situation'. People think. Ideas appear, and flow together. Proposals get made. Governors and legislators act. Some states lead. In time other states follow.

2. In Minnesota:

- o Districts wouldn't change. Lots of talk about choice. **Joe Nathan** very important in this. Q: What do, exactly?

- o Minnesota's post-secondary option in '85 first 'withdrew the exclusive'. The charter idea is essentially the state saying "It's OK for more than one organization to offer public education in the community". **Gov. Perpich** (Democrat) was proposing open enrollment. **Connie Levi**, the House majority leader (Republican), said she's support that if Rudy would support her proposal for PSEO. Deal. Done. Somebody else can offer 11th/12th grade.

- o In '86-'87 Perpich gets open enrollment. Quickly, tho, it's clear choice among districts has limited effects. Got to have more good schools for kids to choose among. Q: How create schools new? And: Who?

- o In March '88 **Shanker** makes his National Press Club speech. Picks up **Ray Budde's** notion of 'charter'. Proposes letting teachers start small schools within schools.

- o In Minnesota the **Citizens League** has a committee thinking about 'the situation'. Starts building on 'charter' idea. By late summer the plan almost fully thought-out. Committee chaired by **John Rollwagen**, then CEO of Cray.

- o September '88 Shanker comes to Minnesota for the Itasca Seminar, put on by the Minneapolis Foundation. Again talks about his 'charter' idea. Sen. **Ember Reichgott** was there; got interested.

- o CL helps Ember do a bill for '89 session. House not interested. Bill revised for '90. House still not interested. But Rep. **Becky Kelso** says to Ember: "If you'd like to try that charter idea again next year I'd like to help you". Fall '90 Commissioner **Tom Nelson** pulls together a new bill. In '91 Rep. **Ken Nelson**, Minneapolis Democrat, provides the third vote in House conference. Ember reluctantly accepts his 'conditions'. (Right decision.) 'Charter schools' passes as part of the omnibus bill.

3. The idea spreads

- o It was California acting in '92 that really put the idea in business. **Eric Premack** (from Minneapolis) had followed developments in MN. Set up discussions that spring with everybody. Sen. **Gary Hart** gets his bill through on the last night of the session: One of a number of great legislative maneuvers/stories.

- o (Important, and overlooked) **Will Marshall** spots the potential of public-school choice and chartering for the DLC agenda. Makes it central in the policy-book they do for **Bill Clinton**. Elected, Clinton is a supporter. **Riley** and **Jon Schnur** get active. Very important, politically.
- o In '93 six states act. **Barbara O'Brien** at the Childrens Campaign is key in Colorado; gets Rep. **Peggy Kerns** (D) and Sen. **Bill Owens** (R) as authors. **Romer** makes the bill a 'must'. In Wisconsin **Senn Brown** is important. In Massachusetts **Mark Roosevelt** authors. It's mostly governors and legislators, frustrated by districts that won't do-right. When you ask: "Why don't you get somebody else who will?" you see this big smile spread across the face.
- o Through the '90s there're a whole series of these state capitol policy initiatives. (Strikingly bipartisan, always in defiance of conventional wisdom that nothing can be done that the establishment opposes.) **Jack Ewing** (R) and **Joe Doria** (D) in New Jersey. **Wib Gulley** (D) in North Carolina. **Engler** in Michigan. **Charles Zogby** and **Tom Ridge** pick up the idea while still in Congress. **Joe Tedder** gets his bill through as a freshman Democrat in Florida. **Tom Patterson** and **Lisa Keegan** in Arizona. Wily old hands like **Cooper Snyder** and **Mike Fox** in Ohio. On and on. Congress does a chartering law for D.C., thanks partly to a Wisconsin congressman and to determined effort by the business community through the Federal City Council. In state after state a few local citizens, too, who just wouldn't quit. Amazing outpouring of energy from people, both to get the laws and then to create/operate the schools.
- o The whole thing was mostly word-of-mouth. No master plan; no national 'project'. No foundation grant (at that stage; though lots came in later. Not many of the education-policy groups an advocate. No real national media coverage, in these early stages. The academic community inattentive. I wrote those little memos I sent around. Joe and I were probably in 25, 30 states, one way and another. Lots of telephone calls. The Minnesota bill got sent-around: I could see Betsy Rice's drafting in a number of other states' bills. **Jeanne Allen** and the CER keeping wonderful track of the laws, doing the directory of schools. By mid=90s a new 'infrastructure' appears: The Charter Friends Network, with **Jon Schroeder**. Foundation money begins to come into the charter sector, while some foundations are giving up on districts. The federal grant program goes from \$6 million to over \$200 million.
- o The whole thing, the essential idea, just organic; has an internal dynamic of its own. Keeps unfolding, year by year and state by state. Showing new variations; unexpected. In the laws, new processes; new kinds of sponsors. In the schools, new ideas about teaching, about governance, about teacher ownership. Chartered sector becomes an R&D sector for public education; the principal experiment with school-based decision making, with contracting. Still developing: of the idea now for 'the charter district'; for the strategy of moving beyond district re-form to just building a second system, new, alongside the districts.
- o Clearly, not a pedagogical innovation. A charter school is not a kind of school. An institutional innovation: the states creating new opportunities for educators etc. to try new kinds of schools. And creating new dynamics.
- o Amazing story. We get frustrated with the legislative politics, but the whole thing is really a huge credit to our political system; to the state legislative process. Things that are necessary do tend to happen.