

# OLD SCHOOLS, NEW CHALLENGES: More students, parents are turning to alternative schooling options

STACY BECKER, Guest Columnist

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Sonia Hernandez refuses to give up. She is demanding more for the students of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Fewer than half graduate from high school. Roughly two-thirds of those who do graduate do not have enough credits to be admitted to California's state colleges.

Certain that LA's 737,000 students deserve better *now*, she and a powerful alliance of business and community leaders — with support from the district's superintendent — are creating a "shadow" public school system.

Through California's chartering law, she has the power to create it. Over the next five years, the alliance plans to open about 100 high quality new schools.

Los Angeles is just one of the places — coast to coast — where new systems of public schools are emerging alongside the traditional system. In Kansas City, 20 percent of the students have transferred to chartered schools in the past four years. Fourteen percent of students in Washington D.C., or about 8,000, attend chartered schools.

Students are moving away from traditional district schools here in Minnesota, too. Led by phenomenal growth in alternative schools, around a quarter of high school students and 15 percent of all public school students are enrolled at least part-time in some type of schooling option.

Alternative schools, legislatively designed for "at-risk" high school students, attract more than 100,000 students at least part-time. Two thousand high school students attend post-secondary institutions full-time and another 5,000 attend part-time.

This year more than 15,000 Minnesota students are being home-schooled and 13,000 attend chartered (independently run public) schools. The numbers of those in home-schooling and chartered schools may seem small, but they are remarkable considering how much effort is required to home-school a child, or to start and operate a new school.

Are these important trends? Fully one-third of Americans has given up on reforming the existing school system and believes that an alternative system should be found.

They are joined by a small but growing group of educators and policy-makers. They imagine a "parallel system" of new schooling options that serves the broad range of needs, interests and learning styles of today's student.

They argue that parallel education systems may be the fastest and most effective way to build a strong portfolio of new schooling options. Not all new schooling options will be a success. But there is too much at stake to continue to rely solely on improving the schools we have.

Opponents will argue that reform efforts must focus on where the bulk of students are — that is, traditional district schools. They suggest that various schooling options are a "fringe movement" and therefore are not worth spending time and money on.

However, new research suggests that the most substantial innovations are often initiated in fringe markets through new organizations. People dissatisfied with the status quo demand change and improvement. But the type of change they are looking for is rarely produced in well-established organizations.

Organizations of all types tend to develop deep-rooted values and operating procedures over time, helping them to operate efficiently and consistently. When something new and different comes along, it is evaluated according to these same old rules, even though the rules may not apply well. The result is a weakened ability to innovate.

New "virtual" or "cyber" schools provide a great example. New York officials recently rejected a proposal for a virtual charter school, saying that a 1998 state law requires all grades at chartered schools to be housed in a single building. As Pennsylvania forges ahead with cyberschools, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and some schools districts have filed suit, alleging that cyberschools are illegal because they were not envisioned in their 1997 charter law.

Small, nimble, new organizations are rarely encumbered by stodgy organizational rules. Their flexibility enables them to gain a foothold by creating new services and products for people who are dissatisfied with the mainstream.

A chartered school teacher in Minnesota tells about the school district official who visited. This official stared in disbelief as a student worked intently at a computer, writing a paper on how societal attitudes toward wolves hinder conservation efforts.

The official asked, "Is that Johnny W.?" The chartered school teacher replied yes, which caused the official to ask, "Johnny W. from the Northside?" Yes, repeated the school teacher. "Hmm" said the official. "We kicked him out of our schools five times."

Across the board, schooling options lead to high levels of satisfaction. According to the Center for School Change, between 75 percent and 87 percent of alternative school students, depending on location, think their alternative school teachers are better than those in their previous school. Seventy-eight percent of students enrolled in post-secondary options say they are learning more than at their high school. Ninety percent of chartered school parents rate their school an A or a B.

Debates about whether students perform better with these new schooling options will continue. But the growing demand for new schooling options is undeniable.

At the heart of this growing demand is the recognition that every single student matters. And when every single student matters, schooling must be organized with a variety of options to serve those individual needs.

*Becker (e-mail: stacymb@attbi.com), an independent consultant, is a former budget director and public works director for the city of St. Paul.*