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The central problem with big, urban school systems like Minneapolis

By Ted Kolderie

A big district like Minneapolis has dozens of schools, and all of them could be innovating. That is, in fact, the strategic plan. But the big brain — the central office — gets in the way.

Not long ago, Minneapolis was Minnesota's largest school district. Now, as the Star Tribune reported in March ("Mpls. fights school flight," March 19), some 17,000 Minneapolis students attend other public schools. Departing board members openly wonder whether the organization can respond.

Fact is, the big urban school district is an endangered species. Harvard Prof. Jal Mehta is not wrong about there being a "replacement strategy" in motion. Openly, now, it is said that there is no successful urban district anywhere in the nation — not one.

The original concept was that there could be only one organization offering public education in a city, no matter how large. That is gone. In Minnesota and across America, state policy has created options for families — options to enroll in other districts, to start college while in high school, to enroll in public education's new chartered sector.

Yet the big-city district continues, organized like the Fire Department, its schools physically dispersed but centrally managed — locked into the old model that gives it little ability to compete with the diversity of offerings appearing around it.

The district needs the state's help. District structure exists in state law. The "home rule" power the state gave communities to restructure their local governments is not available for public education. The state reserves the authority to restructure education.

And in recent years Minnesota's Legislature has acted to restructure the K-12 system — dramatically. But it has left in place the centralized district. And Minneapolis has for years had a hard time responding.

Back in August 1984, the Minnesota Business Partnership invited Minneapolis Superintendent Richard Green (later school chancellor in New York City) to a discussion with its consultant, Paul Berman. Were interdistrict open enrollment to be enacted, Green was asked, what would Minneapolis do?

"We'd compete like hell and we'd be damn tough," Green said. And with seven high schools, Minneapolis might have done just that. But it didn't. Nor did it pick up the chartering option aggressively when the Legislature made that available to districts in 1991.

The district's strategic plan says all the right things — like schools being the unit of improvement — but the central office hasn't carried it out. Directors of "new schools" have come and gone, with little result.

Now, in Congress, the Republican chairs of the education committees — Rep. John Kline of Minnesota and Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee — want to enlarge the role of the states, rolling back the centralization that has so enlarged the role of the national government.

That simply sharpens the question. What is the state's role — beyond mandating rules and tests?

"Send money," districts answer. But asked about that at a meeting of the Achievement Gap Committee, a former chair of the Minneapolis board, Pam Costain, said: "I'm a liberal Democrat; I believe in public spending. But I have to tell you: The problems this district has are not the kind of problems money solves."

Some states took over troubled districts. New Jersey took over Jersey City, Newark and Paterson. Michigan took over Detroit. Congress, as legislature for the District of Columbia, briefly took over the schools in Washington.

Takeover was not a smashing success. Political pressures have quickly pushed the states to turn responsibility back to the locals. Michigan now seems to be moving to return Detroit's district schools to "local control" — which might or might not mean things will then go well in Detroit.

New York state and Illinois turned schools in New York City and Chicago over to former

Mayors Bloomberg and Daley — at their request. That approach breaks with America's peculiar tradition — a separate elected board running the schools. But elsewhere (in Finland, say) the general local authority handles public schools, along with public works, public safety, public parks and public child care.

Some proposals for state restructuring fail the feasibility test. Nothing came of a proposal some years ago to dissolve the Minneapolis district and annex wedges of it to adjacent suburban districts. This legislative session, a bill from Sen. David Hann, R-Eden Prairie, to break up Minneapolis geographically into six sub-urban districts, has not had a hearing.

What might the state usefully do?

If we said the state's job is to create an arrangement in which schools and teachers can work productively to help students learn well, what would that suggest the Legislature do with a district like Minneapolis?

Well, what if instead of breaking up the district, a restructuring broke it down operationally — that is, took the school board, with its oversized central office, out of "running the schools"?

- The board would remain as reconstructed by state legislation in 2006 — members elected partly at-large, partly by district. It would concentrate on the key policy questions: What learning options do we offer? How much shall we spend? Who should run those schools and programs? How well are they doing? What happens if they do well or not-well?
- The board would have performance agreements with autonomous and accountable schools and groups of schools. Some of the schools or learning programs might be designed and run by teachers, as in fact a task force that Peter Hutchinson chaired for Mayor Don Fraser in 1987 suggested. (Look on the Web for "teacher-powered schools.")
- Legislation restructuring the district could give the board the first option to design the new performance-agreement arrangement. The board might have a single agreement, with its current "administration." Or separate agreements with its 70 schools. Or agreements with some individual schools and some groups of schools — say, those using a particular learning program such as Montessori.
- Should the district not act in the time provided, the state would introduce the new arrangement itself.

The object is to open the way for new approaches to learning. Traditional school would still be on offer in the district. But the restructured arrangement would create a climate of

encouragement for innovation, for new approaches to learning keyed on personalizing learners' work.

Do districts seek help?

Three Minnesota superintendents argued in 1998 for the Legislature to help districts into the future. Don Helmstetter was president of the state superintendents' association. Jim Walker was Minnesota Superintendent of the Year. Tom Nelson had chaired the Senate K-12 Finance Committee and had been commissioner of education.

Their "Minnesota Plan" said: "With inter-district enrollment, the postsecondary option and chartering, with standards and assessments, the Legislature has changed the world for school districts. We accept these changes. But in fairness you need to give us the ability to compete in this new world."

Unfortunately, perhaps unforgivably, the Minnesota School Boards Association and the superintendents' association never took their proposal to the Legislature. The new arrangements that might have developed in districts are developing instead in the chartered sector.

Here and there a big district has been able to introduce the "autonomous/accountable" arrangement itself — or at least has tried.
In Edmonton, Canada, for example, Mike Strembitsky — a discontented teacher turned superintendent — worked over 20 years to get authority into the schools.

In 1993, seeing Massachusetts set up chartering as a state function, Boston — interestingly, at the initiative the Boston Teachers Union — created "our in-district charter schools" — pilot schools, given significant autonomy.

On April 14, the Minneapolis board did approve four schools in the "Partnership" program negotiated with the teachers union to give existing schools greater autonomy: Bancroft, Folwell Middle, Nellie Stone Johnson and Ramsey Middle. But the impulse to centralize and standardize, what Tom Nelson, now superintendent in Stillwater, calls "the pressure for sameness," is tough to overcome.

Prospects

How to introduce the "autonomous + accountable" arrangement is the question Minneapolis and the organizations that befriend it now need to discuss with the Legislature.

For decades the national strategy has been to push improvement into the schools from above, while leaving unchanged the structure of district and school. That strategy is not working well.

It is time to try returning to schools and teachers the decisions about how to improve learning. It should be in the teachers' interest to push that. It is in the public's — the parents' — interest.

Arguably, it is school autonomy more than small district size that makes education responsive to families. Where they can adapt to the needs, aptitudes and interests of their students, schools and teachers usually do personalize learning. Motivated students make schools more successful. You can see this in some of Minnesota's chartered schools. Or in the way Plymouth Youth Center, for example, has adapted its contract alternative high school to its students on Minneapolis' lower North Side.

Delegating professional authority can ease the problem that is developing as Minneapolis and St. Paul, desperate to show they are "achieving" in conventional terms, have been scripting teachers' work in ways teachers dislike and resent. That is dangerous.

Quality people will remain in teaching only where teaching is a quality job, a professional career. Also, a board can effectively hold teachers accountable for learning only when it gives them authority over what matters for learning.

The state ought to test the district on this score; ought to see if Minneapolis wants to restructure into a self-improving system, encouraging innovation at the working level while continuing to improve its existing, conventional, schools.

Surely the Minneapolis district can do that — can't it?