

CHARTERING IS SUCCEEDING, EVEN AS SOME CHARTERED SCHOOLS FAIL

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Chartering - Minnesota's principal strategy for restructuring K-12 public education - is going well, heading into its 14th year.

Most often when you hear about 'charter schools' people are talking about the schools themselves. These are growing in number as parents and students select them. But 'charter schools' also means the strategy of chartering, the state's creation of an 'open sector' in public education. This is less visible. But the opening-up of K-12 is more important than the schools.

The record of the schools is mixed. Some are innovative and thrive. Some fail and close. But the states' strategy of chartering is succeeding; can be succeeding even though not every school chartered is succeeding.

To see this we need to go back to the reasons why legislators and governors acted to open up the old public-utility arrangement of public education.

Here as in other states the policy leadership had long been frustrated by the difficulty of getting change and improvement from organizations made inert by an arrangement that guaranteed them their students and their revenues.

So in a series of actions beginning in 1985 - the Post-Secondary Enrollment Option, inter-district open enrollment and chartering - the state withdrew the local district's 'exclusive franchise' to offer public education. It has let entities other than the districts also offer public education and has let students choose where they want to enroll, crossing both geographic and institutional boundaries.

This opening-up of K-12 was a radical change. It remains controversial. But efforts to improve existing schools within the traditional district arrangement were neither so successful educationally nor so sustainable financially that the

state could risk standing pat. Prudently, legislators needed an arrangement that would generate schools to serve - successfully - the students never well served.

It is taking some time for our thinking and our language to catch up with what the state has done. News reporters are not the only ones struggling to talk comfortably now about 'district public schools' and 'charter public schools'.

The open sector that is appearing with chartering creates new dynamics. Currently this is most visible in Minneapolis, where a significant shift in enrollment is under way from the district sector to the open sector. In the inner-city neighborhoods district public schools will likely close as new chartered public schools open. Around the edges of the city, where parents and neighborhoods seem happier with the district program, district schools will and should remain open.

A few numbers profile the change in Minnesota.

- o The 18 new schools opening in September brought the number of chartered schools to 105. These enroll almost 18,000 students. Another 33 schools are to open in September 2005.
- o Almost half (50) are in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. These enroll about 10,000 students. With perhaps another 10 schools next fall the chartered sector will be serving about 15 per cent of students, putting Minneapolis and Saint Paul on a par with several other large cities.
- o The open sector - chartered schools plus the open-enrollment and post-secondary options - are disproportionately serving students who are low-income and of color. The proportion of low-income in chartered schools is twice that in district schools statewide and even 10 per cent above the proportion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The proportion of color is almost triple the state average.

So, how's it coming?

As to the schools, that's complicated. The impulse is to ask, "Are kids learning in charter schools?" But that's probably an inappropriate question. Kids don't learn anything from charters. A charter is an empty structure; as a building is an empty structure. What kids learn probably is going to result from the teachers, the teaching, the curriculum, the pedagogy, the books and materials and the learning-technology that its organizers put into it.

And what they put into it varies - which of course was part of the idea. Some use a proven model of learning; some try a new model. Some have teachers talking to kids in groups; some have kids working independently. Some are low-tech; some are high-tech. The culture varies. In some kids wear uniforms; in some they dress as they please. Some have principals and employ teachers; some are run by professional partnerships of teachers. The open sector is a kind of R&D program. Some schools are not innovative, but some are: the state's only Montessori high school; schools for the deaf in which a student can live at home where she can play with her dog and go to school where she can talk to her friends in the language deaf kids use; schools run not by a principal but by a partnership of teachers.

The only sensible approach to evaluating the schools, then, is first to identify and describe what kind of a school it; then relate achievement to what's studied and how it's studied.

Unfortunately research has made little effort so far to describe the schools in that sense. Most of the discussion tries simply to compare achievement in 'chartered schools' with achievement in 'district schools'. This is like comparing achievement in one-story buildings with achievement in two-story buildings; leaves out what really matters; fails to connect learning to what most affects learning. These 'studies' are not really about evaluating learning: They are really part of the continuing political controversy about the states' decision to create - and to expand - the open sector.

The strategy of creating the open sector is a clear success.

Traditionally K-12 was arranged as a public utility with its operating units set up as public bureaus; in the cities, on almost the model of the fire department. The institution built on these principles was having more and more difficulty in responding to change, in generating innovative methods of learning, in taking up new technologies, in motivating students, in securing professional effort from its teachers and in containing its costs.

The question was: Might a different arrangement for K-12 education make it easier to create different schools and better learning?

With the open-sector, new-schools, strategy the state has been testing a new arrangement. In this new arrangement education is under political control but individual schools are not. Substantially autonomous schools make the key

decisions about teaching and learning, budget and staff. Enrollment is choice-based, and accountability is real rather than rhetorical.

From the progress during its first 13 years in Minnesota we can see that this new and different arrangement is feasible; that it can meet the need for different schools more successfully.

In this new arrangement the schools that appear are smaller, often with a far healthier culture. Schools appear that are innovative, both in their learning methods and in their governance, and that perform well. Different learning designs appear, that do motivate students better; that secure greater professional effort from their teachers. We see schools that reallocate resources so as to contain their costs. Some schools in this open sector seem to adopt new technologies quickly and to use them effectively. In short: The new arrangement does have the capacity to produce, as state leadership had hoped, different and high-quality schools. And it seems to contain dynamics that make it 'a self-improving' system.

The states' strategy of opening public education is challenging old ideas: the notion of ever-larger schools, the notion that schools must be units managed by a large and politically-governed entity; the notion that teachers cannot be trusted to be responsible as professionals for learning and must be employees directed by principals.

Chartering - now the principal method for starting new schools - is challenging the notion that money is the only variable, that education can do more or do less but cannot do-different. Schools in the new sector are showing the potential for reallocation, by challenging the notion that students learn mostly by listening to teachers talk and by showing that students can be directly in contact with the world of information that search engines increasingly make accessible on the web. It is stimulating districts themselves to think increasingly about how to make chartering work for them, as boards realize that they have choices too.

But while the open sector has greater potential than does the old public utility to produce different and better schools, not all the schools that are created realize the potential. Schools still have to be built right and run right. The automobile is a better mode of transportation than the mule but to work a car still has to be built right and operated right. This is the distinction between the success of the strategy and the success of the schools; between 'charter schools' as the arrangement and 'charter schools' as the schools.

So a key task next is to maximize the proportion of the new schools that succeed academically and financially and that survive. Partly this means weeding-out low-quality schools now operating. Partly it means ensuring the quality of new starts.

The chartered sector is designed to be accountable. And failing chartered schools do close: In Minnesota 19 have closed, almost two-thirds of these in 2000 and 2001. Here the schools have a three-year contract, affirmatively renewable. The contract may be not-renewed, or may be revoked during its three-year term for financial or academic failure or for violation of law.

In the district sector, by contrast, a failing school seldom closes. Its district's usual response is to send in new management and additional resources. (Districts failing financially - in 'statutory operating debt', like Hastings currently - are bailed out with a local excess levy that often includes significant state aid.) Saint Paul put over \$50 million of state and private money into the effort to fix three small elementary schools. Rarely, a district will 'reconstitute' a school, removing the principal and teachers and re-staffing, as Saint Paul finally did to turn around Dayton's Bluff and as Minneapolis did with Morris Park.

To improve the quality of new schools the effort in 2005 focuses on improving sponsoring. The decision to approve a new school is made jointly between the state and some 'sponsoring' entity designated in law: a district, a college or university, a large non-profit or foundation. The sponsor must be sure the school is ready to start and to succeed; then must do a quality job of overseeing the school's academics and its finances.

Commissioner Alice Seagren now requires training for sponsors. Bob Wedl, a former commissioner, heads an effort to organize technical support for sponsors. And the Legislature this year will again consider opening the way for a few single-purpose sponsors, able to devote their full attention to the job of generating quality public schools new.

Editor's note: Ted Kolderie is a senior associate with the policy group Education/Evolving. To see an Education|Evolving report by Jon Schroeder on the chartering program currently in Minnesota (on which much of the factual information in this article is based) go to www.EducationEvolving.org. To see his report for the Progressive Policy Institute -- covering the full history of chartering in Minnesota -- go to www.ppionline.org.

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