



MINNESOTA SPONSOR ASSISTANCE NETWORK

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DISTRICT-INITIATED CHARTERED SCHOOLS New Opportunities for District Boards and Teachers

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School boards in Minnesota are beginning to understand that they, too, have “choice” in how they organize learning opportunities for the students of their district.

“Choice” is not just for parents and students!

While district boards continue to use the “district owned and operated school” model as the primary vehicle for delivering education, a number of Minnesota district school boards are beginning to carry out their responsibility by granting “sponsor initiated” charters to develop the types of new schools the district board wants created.

Chartering schools is now viewed as a “management option” for the boards of these districts as one way for them to meet their responsibility to educate the students of the district.

Chartering schools puts a new option to work that impacts not only the role of the district board but also, in some cases, the district-employed teachers as well. Minnesota law makes it risk free for teachers who are district employees to take a leave of absence and teach at a chartered school. The teacher is able to return to the district with all of the benefits of tenure and salary had they not taken the leave to teach at the chartered school.

Of course, sponsoring charters is nothing new to Minnesota school districts. For the first several years following passage of Minnesota’s chartered school law in 1991, districts were the *only* agencies that could grant charters.

As of this fall, a total of 30 different Minnesota school districts have granted charters to 64 different schools. Twenty-two of those districts are still active as sponsors – currently overseeing – or having approved – 37 chartered schools.

In most cases, these schools were initiated by teachers, parents, community organizations or others outside the district and the district board and administration *responded* to that initiative by granting the charter.

More recently, however, districts have begun to consider the chartering option, including Faribault, Waseca, Hopkins, Chisago Lakes, LeSeuer-Henderson, Intermediate District 917, Northeast Metro Intermediate District 916 and Milroy. Here are brief summaries of three of those districts that have affirmatively decided to exercise that option and have “*sponsor-initiated chartered schools*” that offer new and different choices for their communities’ students and families.

Faribault School District

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The board of the Faribault district views itself as an “education board for all of the students of the district,” rather than a “school board for the district-operated schools.”

The board carries out this concept in a number of ways as it provides a comprehensive array of programs and services for all the students in the district regardless of where they attend school. Briefly, they include:

- At the high school level, agreements have been developed with the Vocational/Technical College to provide college

level courses for students both on the high school campus (college in the schools) as well as the post-secondary campus.

- Students who had either dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out can attend the district Area Learning Center but actually spend most of their time at the college learning a skill that will serve them well in the world of work.
- The Adult Basic Education program (ABE) for adults who are working on either a diploma or their GED is located at the college so that the people can both access the resources of the ABE program and also be motivated to take college level courses. The college charges no rental for the space for the ABE program.
- Several years ago, the district was finding it financially unsound to keep open a small rural elementary school in nearby Nerstrand. The community clearly wanted its school – which had an outstanding academic reputation – to remain open. The board decided to convert this school to chartered status and empower the community to operate the school. A service contract is also negotiated between the two boards and the district provides business services, transportation and special education services to the charter. The cost to the district of improvements it made in the building to accommodate the chartered school are being repaid through rent reimbursed by state lease aid. The teachers are employed by the EdVisions Cooperative which provides the teachers a new employment opportunity. The teachers are a majority on the chartered school board. Visitors to the district’s web site will find the Nerstrand Charter School right there with the rest of the public elementary and secondary schools it operates directly.
 - Students attending both district and non-public schools in Faribault ride the same busses to a central location in the city and are then transported to the various public and private schools in the district.
 - Students who are home schooled or attend religious or other private schools in the district frequently take one or more classes at the district schools and are transported between their schools during the day, as well. Some home schoolers are spending a majority of their day in a district school.

- All students may participate in any of the extra-curricular activities provided by the district regardless of whether they attend district schools, the district-sponsored chartered school, nonpublic schools or are home schooled. Parents of non-district students are required to pay a higher, fee but scholarships are available for families in need.
- The district has initiated a unique plan to fully utilize the Minnesota Tax Credit/Deduction program where parents of public and non-public students can either claim a tax credit or a tax deduction for education expenses they incur for their children K-12. The district has arranged with the local bank to provide low interest loans to families who can then purchase private tutoring, music lessons, etc. The loan is repaid when the family receives its income tax refund the following year.
- The Minnesota Academy for the Deaf and the Minnesota Academy for the Blind are located in the Faribault district. The district welcomes any of these students to participate in the educational programs or extra-curricular activities of the district. Interpreters for the deaf are employed by the district so that deaf students can participate in classes in district schools. Faribault bills the excess cost to the district of residence just as chartered schools do.

District officials are quick to point out that additional revenues can flow to the district because of these various initiatives involving students attending non-district schools.

Some of this revenue comes through contracted services – for example, business services, transportation and special ed services provided the district-sponsored chartered school; and state building lease aid the charter uses to pay rent for its district-owned building.

The district is also eligible for and receives added revenue for transporting and allowing private and home-schooled students to take classes in district schools. These added revenues makes it possible to provide better services for all of the students.

Finally, because the district views itself as the education provider of all of the students, the community is viewing it this way, as well. Parents of students attending private schools

or home schools value the way they are welcomed by the district. And, district officials feel this attitude and practice removes many of the barriers that frequently exist in communities between public and private schools.

As a result, the broader community has been supportive of the district and its schools – an attitude that district officials feel becomes evident when the district goes to voters to approve both capital and operating referenda.

Waseca School District

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In 2002, based on the recommendation of Superintendent Dr. Jim Schmitt, the Waseca board voted to initiate the sponsorship of a new K-5 chartered elementary school. The school's focus would be a rigorous curriculum, longer school day and longer school year.

The result is the TEAM Academy, a chartered public school now in its initial year of operation. Having the Waseca school board initiate the charter school is an example of how the board is using the chartering model as a management choice. This school is accountable to the Waseca school board and is viewed by the board as one of its schools.

- The charter school teachers are teachers that are employed by the Waseca district. The charter school board has a contract with the district board for the services of the teachers. Therefore, the status of the teachers in terms of benefits, seniority, etc. remains unchanged.
- What is most unique in this arrangement is the organizational structure of the chartered school. Four of the teachers who are employees of the district are members of the charter school's board. The charter board also has three parents. The charter board contracts with the district for principal leadership services.
- The chartered school board contracts with the district board for building space, financial/accounting services, special

education, food and nutrition services, and custodial services. The district provides transportation for students attending the TEAM Academy.

The district understands that it must provide high quality services to the chartered school or the charter board can choose to purchase these services elsewhere. This arrangement makes the district more accountable for the quality of the services it provides to the chartered school.

The district is also exploring how it might create a "charter district" where all of the schools in the district would be chartered. The role of the board would change considerably under this design. Under such a model, the board would be responsible for setting the expectations for each school and holding them accountable for results.

Like Faribault, district officials in Waseca believe their actions in chartering the TEAM Academy have influenced public attitudes about the district. Prior to launching its charter initiative, the district had been unsuccessful on several occasions in gaining voter approval for an excess levy referendum. In fact, the referenda were defeated by substantial margins.

This past year, the voters approved a referendum. Discussion in the district suggests that one key reason some voters were more positive was the recognition that the board was now looking at new options to delivering public education to students and families in the Waseca community.

Hopkins School District

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The Hopkins School District No. 270, a Twin Cities suburb, has a reputation for education excellence and is led by Superintendent Dr. Michael Kremer. The district provides a wide array of programs and services for its students. About seven years ago, it partnered with the City of Hopkins and

Stages Theatre to create a community arts center, the Hopkins Center for the Arts.

The district also has an elementary school with an arts focus. And, the Fine Arts Interdisciplinary Resource (FAIR) middle school, an interdistrict desegregation magnet school, is located in an adjoining district.

The Hopkins district is also a member of the West Metro Education Program (WMEP) that operates this school and students from Hopkins attend this school. And the nearby Minnesota Rudy and Lola Perpich Center for the Arts serves grades 11 and 12.

What was missing was a grade 9 and 10 arts centered school. The Hopkins school board decided to provide that option for students by initiating the sponsorship of a chartered school to serve that need. The Hopkins school board selected the management option of chartering to develop this new school rather than directly developing and operating the school itself. The result is the Main Street School of the Performing Arts, a chartered high school that opened in the fall of 2004.

- The board of the Main Street School of the Performing Arts is comprised of parents and community members. Hopkins District 270 and Stages Theatre Company representatives are ex-officio members.
- The teachers are employees of the charter school, not the Hopkins school district.
- The school is located in a vacant parochial school within walking distance of the Hopkins Center for the Arts. Students take classes at both locations. The charter board has a lease

agreement with the non-profit organization that owns the Main Street program.

- The charter board has a service contract with District 270 for business functions, curriculum leadership, special education and other services.
- The district supports the chartered schools ultimate expansion to grades 11 and 12 as the current 9th and 10th graders move into those grades.

For more information, contact Karen Charles, Principal of the Main Street School of the Performing Arts at 952-224-1542 or John Schultz, Hopkins District Director of Teaching and Learning at 952-988-4037.

Comments or questions

Comments or questions regarding this paper or the Chartered Schools Sponsor Assistance Network may be directed to Robert Wedl, the Network's Director, at: robert_wedl@yahoo.com