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In the Strategy for Public Education Chartering Can Drive Innovation

By Ted Kolderie

Minnesota's Innovation at 25

The 4,000 people in Nashville's convention center on June 27 celebrated the 25th anniversary of chartering. Minnesota's innovative 1991 legislation has spread remarkably: Today about 6,800 schools enroll some three million students. In Minnesota 166 schools enroll over 51,000.

"The most visible and substantial education reform of the modern era . . . the best example of reinventing government applied to public education," say Chester Finn and Bruno Manno in their new book from Harvard Education Press.

Public education, long a public-sector public utility, is now a two-sector system. The district sector dominates; enrolling 55 million students, spending annually about \$600 billion. The chartered sector is small—but large enough and dynamic enough now to be attracting opposition from big city districts fearing its growth.

This new controversy is forcing some basic questions: What is the charter sector for, anyway? How does this new second sector fit in America's strategy for improving its public education? As opposition rises, confusion reigns.

I see four ideas moving.

1. **Ignore chartering.** *Most students are in districts: Realistically the challenge is to get existing schools to do better. Set standards; measure performance; impose consequences. It's the accountability model; 'standards-based systemic reform'.*



For 30 years this notion that the problem is one of performance has dominated national policy. And 'performance' barely improves. To keep betting all the chips here is a risk: not a necessary risk, so not ethically an acceptable risk. Design also matters, for system and school.

2. **Stop chartering.** *Word about the Broad Foundation wanting to create thousands more charter ("quality") seats has agitated Los Angeles. Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and other districts are blaming their financial crises on the growth of enrollment in 'charters'. So: cap, contain, downsize, the charter sector. Saving the district comes first.*

This is unlikely; undesirable. These districts' problems have other origins. Removing the pressure from chartering would remove the incentives for change. States will not want to go back to the public-utility model they found so frustrating before 1991.

3. **Combine charter and district.** *Create an elected super-board overseeing but not running autonomous schools; chartered and district. David Osborne, author of "Reinventing Government", sees this 'portfolio' idea emerging in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Denver.*

Realistically, this might recentralize everything. Elected boards don't like autonomous schools. Politics likes sameness. So this could block innovation. Michigan rejected the super-board idea for Detroit.

4. **Replace the district.** *The district is an unsuccessful institution; the sooner it disappears the better. Get more charter management organizations (CMOs) running 'high performing' schools.*

This, too, is unlikely. And unnecessary: The district sector performs acceptably most places. Most people like traditional school. Improving existing schools is part of a two-sector strategy. CMOs are not conspicuously interested in innovation; push a model of school not suitable for all.

There is a centrist strategy

Good ideas abound for producing better schools. The difficulty has been with the 'how' of getting-there. The idea of the superintendent changing the district schools comprehensively has proved unsuccessful. So, be practical: Try a different 'how'.



Successful systems change gradually, as innovation spreads. These are open systems. Someone tries something different. Always there are 'early adopters'. Nobody *has to* adopt the different. More do, as the innovation improves. Some lag.

We see this diffusion of innovation all around us. We don't argue whether communications should be landline phones *or* cell phones; conventional autos *or* hybrid/electric. We have both; the new spreading while the traditional improves.

We want education to be a successful system. So let schools and teachers try things. *Use the charter sector to generate new forms of school and approaches to learning, and encourage districts to encourage their schools to adopt these innovations.*

This can work in Minnesota. Our chartered sector differs significantly from most states'.

- It is diverse: 53 percent students of color; 55 percent on free lunch; 20 percent limited English proficiency; its full share of special education.
- It is entirely nonprofit. Most schools are freestanding; perhaps five affiliated with CMOs.
- Most schools are traditional but a significant number innovate; with project-based learning, age3/grade3 models, language immersion schools other than Spanish, computer gaming, career academies. MACS, the association of charter schools, is inventorying the innovation.
- The schools get most of the operating money available to district schools.
- Minnesota has multiple authorizers (entities to approve and oversee schools). Its 'single-purpose' authorizer is an innovation.
- So is the idea of organizing teaching on the 'partnership' model common in most professional areas: law, medicine, architecture, engineering. Nowhere else have union people formed an authorizer to spread this model.

Minnesota's charter sector has schools that build around the individual student's interests, making motivation central. Motivation matters. And is usually missing: Who would assert traditional school is arranged to maximize motivation?

More and more superintendents are ready for change. It is harder in the district sector to introduce and sustain 'different'. But leadership increasingly understands gradualism. Lakeville's Impact Academy is an example. Education Evolving's website tracks district innovation. The state is starting to help; with its Innovation Zone legislation, and in 2016 with the \$500,000 grant program for teacher-powered schools.

The 'partnership' innovation can retain and attract top-quality teachers. It is attractive to unions



whose members want professional responsibility: Many teachers in Minneapolis and Saint Paul hate ‘regimented learning’.

Last November 220 teachers from 23 states met in Minneapolis to consider how to create and operate the ‘teacher-powered’ arrangement. Half were from chartered schools; half from district schools. This is innovation-based systemic change at work. (See www.teacherpowered.org)

No other adequately effective strategy for public education is visible. ‘Deploing the problem’ and ‘reaffirming the goal’—without a ‘how’—only builds frustration. It is time to be practical; time to try *innovation-based* systemic reform.

‘Trying things’ means thinking differently

For those ‘in charge’ this will not be easy. No more ‘comprehensive’ change. No more mandating solutions from the top. No more hunting for ‘the one best way’. Instead, change will consist of encouraging schools and teachers to try things.

Those schools and teachers probably will depart from the consensus. That’s OK: The idea *is* to try things. Give them time: No innovation is perfect at the start.

For the schools trying things the concept of performance will be multidimensional, with success judged on-balance—as ‘quality’ always is. Think about your car: purchase price and operating cost; style and color, capacity and reliability, speed and safety. It’s the same with schools and students. It’s important to be proficient in English and math; and to develop critical and creative thinking and social/emotional skills. At the charter conference held here on July 27, Don Shalvey said this concept is now the one the Gates Foundation is using.

Why ‘innovate’?

The rule is: When what you’re doing isn’t working and you don’t know for certain what will, you try several different things. So:

- ❑ For the charter sector that means state government creating a climate of encouragement for innovation; organizing itself to support ‘different’. Also, creating more single-purpose authorizers that, like Innovative Quality Schools, request proposals for ‘different’. It means money, public and private, for start-up.
- ❑ For the district sector it means improving the ‘innovation zone’ legislation. Perhaps re-creating the innovation office in the state department; covering districts along with



charters. It means pushing Minneapolis to give real autonomy to its 'partnership' schools. It means encouraging Saint Paul to consider that student misbehavior might be a symptom of a failure in its schools to offer a program students find engaging.

- ❑ For the governor and commissioner it means making aggressive use of the flexibility given states by the recent national legislation.

The potential for new-and-different is enormous. Minnesota could, like some states in New England, be trying competency-based learning; even (gasp) doing away with age-grading. Minnesota could personalize standards; set the bar high but differently for students headed into different fields.

Let's build a charter sector encouraged to innovate, that will push the district sector also to try things. That will get education changing the way successful systems change.

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