



Austin Roers

Minnesota's addition to its "new schools creation" policy: Site-governed Schools



Briefly, the law provides:

- (1) the board and teacher union must have an MOU stating how the law will work in the district;
- (2) the board issues a request for new school proposals;
- (3) sites or teams of teachers across sites, along with community input, develop new school proposals;
- (4) the board acts on the proposals;
- (5) performance agreements are developed between the board and the site; and,
- (6) new school is developed, implemented and held accountable. Boards need to be willing to take some risks and not evaluate new models of schools through the lens of the current models. Henry Ford was not trying to make a better horse.

The autonomy provided by this model includes permitting the new school to develop the model of school; decide which teachers will teach at the site; decide the leadership model for the school and, if it is a principal, they make the decision as to who that person is; make decisions as to how the revenue earned by the students at the site is to be used; and manage the site budget with a few exceptions for district-wide services.

Everyone would agree that public education is rightfully expected to educate all students to high levels of achievement. Most agree that while we do a very good job with most students, the current system needs to do better with some of the others.

Bob Wedl

At Education Evolving, we suggest that, while we do need to work on continuous improvement with our current schools, at the same time we must be willing to develop new and different models of schools and schooling. Virtually every sector of society is being significantly changed, being developed new. Education is not exempt...and should not want to be.

The 2009 Minnesota Legislature modified current law to give school boards another option to use to educate more of Minnesota's students to high levels. School boards have "choices," too, in terms of how they educate students. The new site-governed school law provides boards a "charter-like" option in that the schools approved by the district board are provided significant autonomy and flexibility to develop new models of schools in exchange for greater accountability...all within the district under the prevue of the board.

The law includes no mandates. If the board doesn't want to use this option or the teachers' union rejects it, new school creation using this model won't happen in that district.

The site decides whether to purchase services from the district such as staff development, transportation, food services, and others. Because of the union/board MOU, the site teachers set their own work rules, length of the day and year, staff development time, etc.

The law provides that SGSs (site-governed schools) have significant statutory flexibility through a waiver from the same laws and rules as chartered schools including waivers from Labor Day start, how specific categories of aid are to be used, numerous rules of the commissioner and more. PELRA and tenure are not waived because it is the board that employs teachers, not the sites.

A key and welcomed point is that this change in Minnesota law was led by teacher union leaders. Lynn Nordgren, President of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, led the development of this bill and Representative John Benson, retired union president in Edina, was the House lead author. Senator Kathy Saltzman was the Senate lead author. Lynn Nordgren says, "Teachers know students best and know what works for them, and if given the autonomy and flexibility provided for in this law, they welcome the accountability."

Jeff Buszta and Ann Gunsmith, along with a group of teachers working on their site-governed school proposal to the Minneapolis Board, said, "Spending the summer with our professional colleagues preparing the application to create our school has been the best professional development we have ever had." The Minneapolis Board Strategic Plan calls for the use of site-governed schools. Gaelle Berg, the leader of a team proposing a French Immersion site-governed school to the Minneapolis Public School Board, said, "Some ask why teachers are willing to do this. Teachers are committed to the kids and see this as an opportunity to develop new ways to address their needs...and clearly, the feeling of 'teacher ownership' is important professionally."

Richard Ingersoll, in his book "Who Controls Teachers' Work?," shows that schools work better where teachers have a greater say about their work.

When Mark Schmitz, Superintendent of the Staples-Motley district, in response to a question about why the district board in fall of 2009 proposed to sponsor two new models of schools using the chartering law, said, "We know we need new kinds of schools if we are going to meet the needs of some of our students, and just continuing to try to make our current schools fit everyone's needs maybe just isn't possible...and who better than our competent teachers to lead that effort for us?" With the MDE denying the Staples board the chartering option, the district is now considering the SGS option.

Regardless of the current economic times, new school creation is a need if we indeed are going to educate all...as we surely must do. With the site-governed school law, school boards now have more choices as to how to do that.

Bob Wedl is a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education and school administrator in North Branch and Minneapolis. He is now a Partner and Senior Associate with Education Evolving. For more information on site-governed schools, go to www.educationevolving.org.

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