

Minnesota's charter leadership also significant at federal level

The ink was hardly dry on Minnesota's pioneering charter school law when, in September of 1991, former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger introduced the "Public School Redefinition Act," legislation creating a federal start-up grant program for charter schools. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) was the chief Democratic co-sponsor.

When the legislation was reintroduced in 1992, Senators Durenberger and Lieberman were joined by Representatives Dave McCurdy (D-OK) and Tom Petri (R-WI), who introduced companion legislation in the U.S. House.

President Clinton then included the charter grant program first proposed by Senator Durenberger in his legislation reauthorizing the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was adopted in 1994.

Senator Durenberger and the other original authors of this program had three principal goals: To help build awareness of the charter idea nationally, to encourage states to pass charter school laws and to help address what quickly emerged as the single biggest obstacle facing early charter founders – the absence of planning and start-up funding for these new, more autonomous public schools.

The federal charter school program was not intended to be a typical federal categorical program – to influence or directly assist individual districts or schools from Washington. Rather, it was designed to help legitimize a new education improvement strategy and to encourage states to pass laws allowing that strategy to emerge in schools that had adequate funding for their initial planning and start-up expenses.

The most controversial issue in gaining Congressional approval was how prescriptive the legislation should be on which agencies could authorize and oversee charter schools. It was not resolved until the House/Senate conference committee deliberations, where Senator Durenberger was joined by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and the Clinton Administration in overcoming the House position that only districts should be allowed to authorize charters. The final bill left that critical question to be determined by each state's charter school law.

In the intervening years, the federal charter school program has grown significantly and maintained its broad bipartisan support in the Congress and from Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama.

And, sixteen years since its creation, \$2.5 billion in federal start-up funding has played a major role in increasing the number of charter schools – from about 50 in seven states in 1994, to a projected 5,200 charter schools, serving more than 1.7 million students in 39 states and the District of Columbia, in the 2010-11 school year.



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