



How the idea of ‘chartering’ schools came about

What role did the Citizens League play?

by Ted Kolderie

In the spring of 1988, a Citizens League committee began developing a program for chartering schools. Twenty years later that idea has become law in 40 states and the District of Columbia. The chartered sector of public education has grown from a single school in Saint Paul to more than 4,000 schools nationally, serving more than 1 million students. It is a preferred framework as major districts across America now move increasingly to create schools new.

How this happened is an important story, interesting both as education policy and as a process of system change—a citizen organization working effectively for the

grew out of long-range thinking about a more equitable and competitive public sector contained in “Issues of the ‘80s,” a report from a committee chaired by David Graven.

But changes in system architecture did not change the schools. More and more the question was, “How do we get more good schools and more diverse schools for kids to choose among?”

By the mid-1980s the state was beginning to move. In 1985, Gov. Rudy Perpich proposed inter-district (public-sector) open enrollment—actually, before an audience assembled by the Citizens League in downtown Minneapolis. This came into law only in 1987-88. But in 1985, the Legislature

teachers might get “charters” to start small schools within schools. It was an idea he had picked up from an educator in Massachusetts, Ray Budde. The proposal became part of the national discussion about “restructuring” triggered by the 1983 report, “A Nation at Risk.” Shanker’s proposal appealed to the Citizens League also in terms of its 1987 report on cooperatively managed schools. So the committee got his text and began discussing the idea.

By September the outlines of a proposal for a Minnesota chartering program had begun to emerge. That year the Minneapolis Foundation devoted its Itasca Seminar (actually held at Gull Lake) to K-12 education. The seminar program was developed at the foundation by Virginia Greenman, who had been auditing the Citizens League committee meetings. At Itasca Shanker repeated his chartering proposal. Sy Fliegel followed, describing the new and charter-like schools created in East Harlem in New York City.

I offered Shanker a ride back to the Twin Cities airport. He accepted. We talked most of the way about the Citizens League committee and its development of his idea: Might a new school be set up outside an existing school building?

Back at Gull Lake that evening, several attendees began discussing ways to realize Shanker’s idea. The group included Joe Nathan, a Citizens League member who had presented to the committee, and Ember Reichgott, a DFL state senator. That began the process that led to legislation.

The Citizens League committee finished its work a few weeks later. In November 1988 the board approved the report “Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students,” which was released in December.

Citizens League President Peter Vanderpoel, staff and others met with Sen. Reichgott. During the 1989 session she got the program into the Senate omnibus bill, only to have the House resist in conference committee. She tried again in 1990 but got the same result. But at end of the conference committee DFL House member Becky Kelso told Reichgott: “If you’d like to try that charter idea again next year, I’d like to help you.”

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common good in a field long dominated by experts and interest groups. Let me try to catch the essentials of it. As with most things, the explanation requires going back to beginning.

Traditionally, improving education had meant expanding access and increasing financing. The Citizens League helped with some of the latter, most famously in the re-equalization of Minnesota K-12 finance in 1971. But by the 1980s, there was a growing sense that the system and the schools needed to change.

The Citizens League had begun thinking about school choice in the 1970s. A 1979 report recommended paying for low-income students to attend other schools, public and nonpublic. In 1982, a Citizens League committee chaired by Carol Trusz gave a more general endorsement to parental choice. They proposed moving decisions about spending and instruction increasingly to schools and talked generally about creating new schools. That interest

did enact the Post-Secondary Enrollment Option, allowing juniors and seniors to enroll in college, earning credit simultaneously toward high school and college graduation. This introduced a new idea that was embodied later in chartering: that some entity other than a local district might start and run a public school, might offer public education. In 1987, another Citizens League committee proposed “cooperatively managed schools” that would offer larger professional roles for teachers.

In the fall 1987, the board programmed a study of school structure in the metropolitan area. John Rollwagen, a Citizens League member for years (and by then CEO of Cray Research), agreed to chair the committee. Jody Hauer staffed it. Work began in February 1988.

About April, reading his column in the Sunday *New York Times*, we learned that Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, had suggested in a speech to the National Press Club that

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An improved bill was introduced in 1991 reflecting contributions from a task force chaired by Gov. Perpich's new commissioner of education, Tom Nelson (today superintendent in South Washington County). Again, going into the conference committee, the program was included only in the Senate bill. And, as before, the K-12 associations opposed it. As the session was ending, the Senate chair announced: "We've got five votes in the Senate and two and a half in the House." The swing vote in the House was Rep. Ken Nelson. He asked for a set of amendments: cap the program at eight schools and make districts the only sponsors. Reluctantly, Reichgott agreed. On the House floor a motion to return the entire K-12 bill to conference over this issue lost by three votes. Some days later, after Senate approval, Gov. Arne Carlson signed the bill.

The legislation did not create a single school. It was purely enabling legislation. It was up to teachers and others to create schools. Joe Nathan, by then head of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute, took

states acted, including Colorado, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts. Joe Nathan and others from Minnesota were on the road, talking about our chartering program and commenting on bills drafted in other states.

By the early 1990s the Citizens League had become less active in chartering. After a few years on the Citizens League staff, Vanderpoel had retired. Curt Johnson, executive director when chartering was launched, had become Gov. Carlson's chief of staff. Others continued the work with the Legislature, which session by session expanded and improved the program, removing the cap, adding additional sponsors, and improving the financing.

In 1994, Congress acted to provide start-up assistance to new chartered schools based on legislation originally introduced in 1991 by long-time Citizens League member U.S. Sen. Dave Durenberger. Durenberger's lead staff member on this issue, Jon Schroeder, had been a Citizens League research associate from 1972-77. Beginning with \$1.6 million in its first year, the federal charter program now annually provides about \$200 million



Schools, KIPP schools for African-American middle-schoolers, innovative schools like High-Tech High and Green Dot in California. Everywhere chartering was growing, changing, and continuously showing new and unexpected variations in the sponsoring and the design of schools.

In 1994, Gov. Carlson nominated the program for one of the "Innovations in American Government" awards given annually by the Ford Foundation and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The proposal did not advance. Carlson was again rejected the next year.

But by 1999, with so many states involved in chartering and with the program so prominent in the education-policy discussion across the nation, Minnesota was being urged: "Please, apply again!"

A third application was submitted, and in 2000 the Minnesota Legislature's chartering law won one of the \$100,000 awards as an important innovation in American government. At a ceremony in the Capitol rotunda, Gov. Jesse Ventura handed plaques to Commissioner Alice Seagren, to Senator Ember Reichgott-Junge, and to John Rollwagen. That award hangs today in the Citizens League office in Saint Paul. ●

Ted Kolderie was Executive Director of the Citizens League from 1967 to 1980.

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the lead in assembling teachers and others to talk about this. Gradually, proposals began to appear; schools began to appear.

Word of the Minnesota legislation began to get around the country. In California, Eric Premack, a Minneapolis native and an intern with the Citizens League in 1986-87, was working for the California Legislature in 1992. He began spreading the word there. That spring, when I was in California, Eric arranged meetings with key people. State Sen. Gary Hart authored a bill and got it through on the last night of the session.

California's action put the idea of chartering schools into play nationally. In 1993, six

in start up grants for charter schools, a cumulative total of about \$1.9 billion over the last 14 years.

In Minnesota, after leaving the Durenberger office and joining Education Evolving, Schroeder organized, and until 2004 ran, the Charter Friends National Network. He was a founding board member of its successor, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, and continues to chair its policy committee.

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