

CENTER
FOR SCHOOL CHANGE



**Charter Public Schools:
A Brief History
and
Preliminary Lessons**

by
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Table of Contents

Background	1
Where Did the Charter School Movement Come From?	1
Charter School Essentials	2
What Kinds of Charter Schools are Operating in Minnesota?	4
What is Happening in Other States?	7
What About Similar Activity in Other Places?	9
Some Keys for Developing and Operating a Successful Charter School	9
A Few Valuable Curriculum Ideas	12

Why are educators among the strongest proponents of charter public schools? Because in a number of states, they've seen how the idea can help them accomplish their central goals:

- Better education for young people,
- More quality education options for families,
- New opportunities for educators to work with parents in establishing the kind of schools they think make sense, and
- Stimulating the often resistant educational system toward greater improvements.

Where Did the Charter School Movement Come From?

The central idea of the Legislature freeing up teachers who wanted to establish public schools which parents select was originally proposed by the California Alternative School association, LEARN, in 1985. A bill proposing this idea was developed, debated and defeated in 1988. Many of those alternative school people work (and succeed) with youngsters from low income families.

The movement got encouragement from AFT Al Shanker in 1988, when he read *Education by Charter* by Ray Budde, which used the word "charter," and proposed that school districts give local teachers the opportunity via contract or "charter" to establish new kinds of schools (if the majority of teachers in their school approved of the request).

Shanker came to Minnesota and spoke about this in 1989. A Democratic state senator, Senator Ember Reichgott, heard him and decided to promote the idea. Working with public alternative school teachers, parents and others frustrated by the system's lack of responsiveness, she and Democratic state representative Becky Kelso convinced the 1991 Legislature to permit establishment of up to 8 charter schools.

Because a number of excellent proposals were made, the 1993 Minnesota legislature increased that number to 20, and then to thirty-five in 1994.

Minnesota's legislation took the Budde concept several steps further. Ted Kolderie and a local organization called the Citizens League urged that the charter idea be an opportunity to study a new form of accountability. Minnesota's law allows educators to establish new kinds of schools which would have to be open to all kinds of students, be non-sectarian and not charge any tuition. These schools would receive waivers from all other state curriculum rules and regulations. Teachers and parents establishing the schools are free to select the teachers (and if they want some, administrators).

Accountability to parents and the state comes not from following rules and regulations, but from being responsible for results with students: improved student achievement would be written into the contract between the educators and the organization (either local school district or state school board) which granted the charter. The following summarizes central elements of the charter public school idea, as developed by Ted Kolderie with input from Senator Ember Reichgott Junge and this author.

Charter School Essentials

Mission: Charter school legislation is being adopted to help increase student achievement and graduation rates, and to encourage school districts to improve their programs. This legislation stresses accountability for results, rather than adherence to rules; provides new opportunities for educators to create the kinds of schools they think most appropriate, and authorizes new organizations to establish public schools.

1. The state authorizes more than one organization to start and operate a charter public school in the community. Authorization can come from a local,

regional or state school board, or other entity such as a college/university or group established by the Legislature.

2. The organizers -- usually teachers, parents or other community members, can approach either a school board or some other public body to be their sponsor. The local board is eligible to be a sponsor (and to convert some or all of its existing schools to charter status, if a majority of teachers in the school vote to do this). But the operator of a charter school may also be a college or university or other non-profit, non-sectarian group.

3. The school is public. It is non-sectarian. It may not charge tuition. It may not have admissions tests. It must follow health and safety regulations.

4. Accountability is based on a performance contract. The authorizing agency and educators who work in the school agree on student outcomes to be achieved. The continued existence of the school depends on whether these outcomes are achieved.

5. There is an up-front waiver from rules about curriculum, management and teaching. States may specify student outcomes. But determining how the school operates should be up to the people who establish and operate it. The charter school concept trades bureaucracy for accountability, regulation for results.

6. The charter public school is a school of choice. It is actively chosen by faculty, students and families. No one is assigned to be there.

7. The school becomes a discrete entity: The law may let the founders choose any organization available under general state form or may specify an organization, such as

non-profit. As a legal entity, the school will have its board. There is real site management. Teachers, if employees, have full rights to organize and bargain collectively. However, their bargaining unit is separate from any district bargaining unit.

8. The full per-pupil allocation moves with the student. This amount should be roughly the average state allocation per pupil, or the average in the district from which the student comes. If the state provides extra funds for students from low income families or with disabilities, these funds also should follow the students.

9. Participating teachers should be protected and given new opportunities. Teachers may take a leave from public school systems, and while on leave will retain their seniority. They may continue to participate in the local or state retirement programs. New teachers may join state retirement programs. They may choose to be employees, or to organize a professional group under which they collectively own and operate the school.

Charter school legislation, with widely varying details, has been approved in Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico and Wisconsin, as well as Minnesota.

What Kinds of Charter Schools are Operating in Minnesota?

Here's a brief summary:

Cedar Riverside Charter

Located in a low income housing project in Minneapolis, 90% of the students come from families receiving AFDC. This elementary charter is strongly supported by parents, who are being welcomed into the school they helped create and help to staff. It's using a variety of progressive and "open education" ideas.

Metro Deaf School

Located in St. Paul, this school was established by a group of parents and teachers frustrated because metro area districts were refusing to use American Sign Language to help teach hearing impaired students. Since the school has been established, districts are starting to use ASL, in part to retain their students.

Skills for Tomorrow

A Minneapolis high school program established by a former alternative school teacher, this school serves a multi-racial cross section of inner city youngsters, many from low income, single parent homes. Eight of these youngsters recently testified at the Minnesota Legislature, where they eloquently explained why they liked SFT much better than their large, traditional high schools.

City Academy

This St. Paul high school serves exclusively inner city youngsters, many of them from low income families who've failed in traditional schools. City Academy was recently featured in a Minnesota Education Association statewide newsletter which cited the school's success with a number of youngsters.

New Country School

A grade 7-12 school is located in LeSueur, Minnesota, about 70 minutes southwest of Minneapolis. Started by several former public school teachers, the school stresses school-based entrepreneurship, community service, sophisticated use of computers and a number of the ideas suggested by Ted Sizer. New Country School is located in two store-fronts on the main street of town allowing its students instant access to the variety of businesses and organizations located there. This is in marked contrast to

the local public secondary school located several miles from the town's commercial area.

Toivola-Meadowlands Charter

Located in rural northeastern Minnesota, about 45 miles from Duluth, this school was established by a group of parents and teachers frustrated by the district's lack of response to their interest in greater parent involvement, more use of the community in learning, and more sophisticated use of technology.

Toivola-Meadowlands Charter is a K-12 school because the parents like the idea of their children being together in the same building, functioning something like a modern one-room school house. In its first year, a number of the secondary students planned, raised money for and went to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, after studying the Holocaust and prejudice for most of the year. On their return, the students built a life-size model of Ann Frank's room and took other students and parents through the model, explaining its significance.

Winona Montessori School

A few years ago, parents in this southeastern Minnesota community tried to convince the local school board that Winona, like Minneapolis, St. Paul and a number of other school districts, ought to offer a Montessori public school as an option. The district refused (insisting that equal educational opportunity meant that all elementary schools should offer essentially the same program). The parents and some teachers felt that this was trying to fit different kinds of youngsters into the same mold. So they established a private non-sectarian school, with some scholarship money available. When Minnesota's charter law passed, they convinced the district to convert the school to an elementary charter school.

New Heights Charter

This school located in Stillwater, a St. Paul suburb, serves secondary students, many of whom had not succeeded in traditional schools. It uses the youngsters interest in horses to promote basic and applied skills.

Dakota Charter School

Established on the Lower Sioux Agency (reservation) in southwestern Minnesota, this charter serves secondary students. The students are learning a great deal about their own culture, as well as studying career options, given the new wealth that has come into their community from a tribal operated casino.

What's Happening in Other States?

Colorado

A number of public school educators were deeply involved in the campaign to adopt charter school legislation. Arnie Langberg and Mary Ellen Sweeney helped lead this fight. Several alternative school educators are establishing charter schools, in communities including Denver, Jefferson County and Boulder.

California

About 75% of the charter schools established to date have been conversions of existing public schools. Many of the charter schools are actually converted existing public alternative schools. Educators were frustrated by their districts' bureaucracy, and eager to have the freedom to carry out the program as they thought appropriate. Many are, according to a number who've called me, eager to have the freedom to select staff and administrators, rather than to have them assigned to the school.

Georgia and New Mexico

Recent conversations with state officials in Georgia and New Mexico suggest that no charter schools have been established, but that a great deal of discussion is taking place about how to implement the legislation.

Wisconsin

Milwaukee teachers/union activists recently visited Minnesota to learn how they can use Wisconsin's charter law to carry out some of the ideas. Howard Fuller, Milwaukee's crusading African-American superintendent has been a strong proponent of charters to help break through and stimulate his district's bureaucracy.

Michigan

Governor Engler proposed charter schools as one portion of a larger school reform package. Several charter schools were approved and open in September, 1994. Michigan's law allowed colleges and universities, as well as local districts, to sponsor charter schools. In November, a district court ruled the charter law unconstitutional. Discussions are now taking place to consider modifications in the charter legislation. Several prominent Michigan public alternative school educators were at a recent meeting, pointing out that the charter school movement has much to learn from alternative public schools. I agree.

Massachusetts

The Legislature authorized up to 25 charter schools, scheduled to begin in September, 1995. Sixty-four applications for charter schools have been filed, some coming from classroom teachers. Three came from the Edison Project.

What About Similar Activity in Other Places?

New York City

More than 50 new small high schools are being planned by various educators who asked for, and received the opportunity. Many of these schools are being started by people who helped established nationally recognized schools like Central Park East and the South Bronx Alternative School. About 30 of the schools are working under the encouragement of the Coalition for Essential Schools. All of them recognize that "bigger is not better," and that small, personalized programs offer great promise for improving education for inner city youngsters. These new schools are being called "New Vision" or Coalition (of Essential School) Campus schools. They are being opened without explicit state legislation.

Philadelphia

High schools are being broken up into smaller programs, which many readers of *Changing Schools* would call "schools within schools." In each case, groups of teachers were allowed to design the programs, which are called "charters" in Philadelphia. Many of the students in these programs voluntarily selected them. Unlike students in all the other kinds of programs described in this article, some of the Philadelphia "charter" students were assigned to participate. Preliminary research cited in *Education Week* (April 6, 1994, p. 10) shows that youngsters in these high school "charters" (most of whom come from low income families) are doing better than those in large, traditional high schools.

Some Keys for Developing & Operating a Successful Charter School

1. Planning

- 1.1 Include experienced teachers who've demonstrated the ability to make a difference with youngsters

- 1.2 Include some parents who are eager to have a different kind of school
- 1.3 Consider including, at least at the high school level, some students
- 1.4 Identify and involve some community members/business people who can assist the school
- 1.5 Develop a timeline for planning: a list of key actions which will be taken, who is responsible, when the action must be completed, and how you'll know when it's completed (these key actions probably will include completing a statement of philosophy, developing an initial budget, assessing and selecting a site, establishing hiring procedures and evaluation procedures, creating a public information-student recruiting plan, etc.)
- 1.6 Early in the process, list, discuss and come to agreement on your core beliefs about learning: first general, then more specific.
- 1.7 List and come to agreement about what you want students who graduate from your program to know and be able to do. This is important for programs involving elementary, as well as secondary schools. People will want to know this, and it will be vital for your performance contract.
- 1.8 Discuss and agree on what ages of students with whom you want to work
- 1.9 Include, if at all possible, some people with strong knowledge of student assessment methods or effective uses of technology in education.
- 1.10 Celebrate achievements - small victories are important. It's easy to be overwhelmed. Give yourselves credit and recognition for progress along the way.
- 1.11 Recognize that starting and running a school involve skills. Some people have both sets of skills, others don't. A number of new skills have been started by people with excellent political skills and great persistence. Such people may or may not have the day to day organizational skills needed for a school to excel. Several charter schools have made transitions between the people who helped organize and the people who operate the school. Ideally, some of the folks who planned in the school will work in it. But it's vital to recognize that different skills are involved.

2. Public Information and Student Recruitment (When you are ready)

- 2.1 Use your local/regional media. Call radio stations and ask to be on talk shows. Describe the progress you're making. Let people know about application procedures. Explain why you are doing this program.
- 2.2 Stress the value of options - some students are served well by existing programs. Other students will thrive in a new kind of program. Recognize that reporters love controversy. They often will try to get you to attack existing schools. Resist that temptation! Stress the value of options. While some people won't like what you're doing, regardless of what you do, you'll have fewer opponents if you don't get into intense criticism of others efforts.
- 2.3 Adopt an attitude of humility. Describe how you are doing certain things differently, explain how this corresponds with educational research. But don't over promise: after all, your school hasn't started yet.
- 2.4 Have a concise, clear brochure available to send out to people as soon as possible. Include your tentative starting point, core beliefs about learning, sample activities, etc. Include a sample of the student outcomes you

- hope/expect to achieve. Have several non-educators read the text before distributing it. If things aren't clear to these readers, change/clarify them.
- 2.5 Be as clear as you possibly can in your brochure about what your school will and won't do. If you aren't going to have a football team, say that. If you are going to stress phonics or whole language instruction, say that. If you are going to have weekly writing assignments, say that. If you aren't using worksheets, say that. Clarity early on reduces conflicts later.

3. Selection of Faculty

- 3.1 If at all possible, at least some of the people planning the charter school ought to be educators who hope to work in it. The planning process helps them develop a strong sense of ownership. They're putting "sweat equity" into the school.
- 3.2 It's rarely a good idea to hire an entirely new group of people to operate a school which others have planned.
- 3.3 Conversely, the faculty should include at least a few people with strong skills who haven't been a part of the planning group.
- 3.4 Look for people with specific ideas about what they would do with students. Philosophical agreement is important, but not sufficient. You want people who have real skills with students.
- 3.5 Hiring a predominantly young/inexperienced staff often leads to trouble. While they make a great deal of enthusiasm and energy, they need mentors and models to help with tough issues.
- 3.6 Most schools conclude that they need some person who has overall responsibility. This person may teach part time. But there is a need for a person who will spend part of her/his time insuring that decisions are carried out. This person need not be a principal. But most schools conclude they need a person who is not teaching full time, with some school wide responsibilities.

4. Opening the School

- 4.1 Strongly consider holding a conference with each parent/student prior to the opening of school. This is an excellent time to explain how the school will operate, review expectations of students, obtain information from parents and students about their priorities-goals, and ask the parent(s) to help out the school in some way. It's helpful to have a list of ways parents can help out, from the traditional come to school to volunteer, to serving on a committee, to helping set up field trips, mentorships, or other types of community experiences. Such an opening conference is invaluable in getting off on a positive note, making mutual expectations clear, and learning something about each youngster.
- 4.2 Consider an opening ceremony of some fashion. Students need to feel a part of something important. Hold periodic meetings to celebrate accomplishments and progress.
- 4.3 Continue to use (and revise) your work plan to establish priorities. Opening a new school is an enormous amount of work. You can't do everything you want to do immediately.

- 4.4 One priority should be communicating with your community - via newsletters (which students can help produce), public presentations (in which students participate) and via the local news media. It's probably impossible to communicate too much. Don't promise the sun, moon and stars – but do continue to share what is happening.
- 4.5 Another priority should be safety procedures, in the building and on field trips. This is for the protection of both the youngsters and the adults.
- 4.6 You are going to make some mistakes. All of us do. Learn from them. Don't think you'll avoid them.
- 4.7 Give yourselves permission to celebrate progress and to relax. It's easy to get so overwhelmed with what needs to be done that you exhaust yourselves and others. Rested people make better teachers and parents.

5. Working with unions

- 5.1 Many chartered schools have been started by teachers who are active union members.
- 5.2 Charter schools represent a new opportunity for unions, which have attorneys, accountants and others specializing in the kind of business services schools need. Unions could very well supply this kind of expertise, via sub-contract, with chartered schools.
- 5.3 At some point, a union itself probably will establish a charter school. This would be a wonderful example of teacher and union empowerment.

A Few Valuable Curriculum Ideas

1. School based entrepreneurship

High school students in Rothsay, Minnesota run the town's hardware store and own the local grocery store. High school students in Proctor, Minnesota run the only catering service in town. Cedar Rapids, Iowa students operate a bakery. St. Paul middle school students build and sell bus safety kits. Georgia students operate a day care center. The goal is to provide a service to the community, develop entrepreneurial skills, and improve basic and applied academic skills.

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Stern, David, Stone, James, Hopkins, Charles, McMillion, Martin, Crain, Robert, *School Based Enterprise*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1974.

2. Youth service-combining classroom work and community service

City as School 16 Clarkson St., New York, NY 10014 (212) 645-6121.

Conrad, Dan, and Hedin, Diane, *Youth Service: A Guidebook for Developing & Operating Programs*, Washington: Independent Sector, 1828 L St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Cross-Aged Structured Tutoring Program for Math, Dr. Geri Plumb, Boise Schools, 1207 Fort St., Boise, Idaho 83702.

Every Child a Winner, PO Box 141, Ocilla, Georgia 31774 (912) 468-7098.

Foxfire, Rabun Gap, Georgia 30568.

Gray, H Dean and Tindall, Judy, *Peer Counseling: In-Depth Look at Training Peer Helpers*, Accelerated Development Inc. P.O. Box 667, Muncie, Indiana 47305.

Lewis, Barbara, *A Kids Guide to Social Change*, Minneapolis: Free Spirit, 1990.

National Youth Leadership Council, 1910 W. County Rd. B, Roseville, MN 55113, (612) 631-3672 (*Growing Hope* resource book, free newsletter, various materials).

Parsons, Cynthia, *Service Learning from A to Z*, Vermont Schoolhouse Press, PO Box 516, Chester, Vt. 05143.

Project Adventure, Box 100, Hamilton, Mass 01936

Wigginton, Eliot, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience*, New York: Doubleday, 1985

3. Bringing together senior citizens and youth

American Association of Retired Persons/Elvirita Lewis Foundation, *Growing Together: An Intergenerational Sourcebook*, from AARP, 1909 K Street, Washington, D.C., 20049.

Illinois Intergenerational Initiative, Anthony Hall 110, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois 62901 (Excellent free newsletter)

4. Promoting parent involvement

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Home and School Institute, 1201 16th St, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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4. Requiring students to demonstrate skills and knowledge prior to graduation

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