



Ripples of Innovation

Ripples of
Innovation

Ripples of
Innovation

**Charter Schooling in Minnesota,
the Nation's First Charter School State**

by Jon Schroeder

PPi
PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

Preface

In the fall of 1992, shortly before Bill Clinton was elected president, the nation's first public charter school opened in St. Paul, Minn. It was the first concrete iteration of a powerful, innovative idea—that public schools are defined by operating norms and public accountability rather than solely by who manages them.

Now, more than a decade later, Minnesota charter school expert Jon Schroeder tells the story of charter schooling in the “Land of 10,000 Lakes.” He examines the successes, failures, lessons learned, and next steps for Minnesota's public charter schools. Because charter schooling has generally been successful in Minnesota, Schroeder's paper is a useful resource for other states to improve weaker charter laws or pass new ones, as well as for states that are struggling to successfully implement charter schooling initiatives.

Schroeder's paper offers a concise and accessible overview for educators, policymakers, journalists, and anyone else with an interest in these dynamic new schools and the state policies that support them. It is the second in a series of state analyses following “Catching the Wave, Lessons from California's Charter Schools,” which PPI released in 2003 to examine charter schooling in California. During the remainder of this year, the 21st Century Schools Project will produce similar analyses about charter schooling in Arizona, New York City, Ohio, and Texas.

A generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made it possible for the 21st Century Schools Project to undertake this work. We are grateful to the Gates Foundation for their support of this project and their overall commitment to educational improvement.

The Progressive Policy Institute has been an active proponent of public charter schools for more than a decade. We see public charters as the most productive marriage of choice and customization in public education to ensure high quality, publicly accessible, and publicly accountable schools. The 21st Century Schools Project at PPI works to develop education policy and foster innovation to ensure that America's public schools are an engine of equal opportunity in the knowledge economy. Through research, publications and articles, and work with policymakers and practitioners, the Project supports initiatives to strengthen accountability, increase equity, improve teacher quality, and expand choice and innovation within public education.

The goals of the 21st Century Schools Project are a natural extension of the mission of the Progressive Policy Institute, which is to define and promote a new progressive politics for the 21st century. The Institute's core philosophy stems from the belief that America is ill-served by an obsolete left-right debate that is out of step with the powerful forces reshaping our society and economy. The Institute believes in adapting the progressive tradition in American politics to the realities of the Information Age by moving beyond the liberal impulse to defend the bureaucratic status quo and the conservative bid to dismantle government. More information on the project and PPI is available at www.ppionline.org.

Andrew J. Rotherham
Director, 21st Century Schools Project
Progressive Policy Institute
April 2004

Ripples of Innovation

**Charter Schooling in Minnesota,
the Nation's First Charter School State**

by Jon Schroeder

April 2004

PPi
PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

Contents

Author's Foreword	5
Executive Summary	7
Minnesota Charter Schools in 2004	9
An Accelerating Rate of Growth	17
In the Beginning and Since	23
Evaluating Charters and Chartering	32
Needed: New Ways of Evaluating not Just Schools But the Law and its Implementation	38
Future Ripples: The Next Generation of Minnesota's National Leadership on Charter Schools and Chartering	42
Conclusion	49
Resources	50

Author's Foreword

Thirteen years ago this spring, Minnesota's State Legislature began a revolution in the organization and governance of public education that has now spread to 41 states and the District of Columbia. The idea behind this revolution was simple: grant parents, teachers, and others in the community the opportunity to start and run new public schools outside the direct control of local school districts.

These new public schools were to be authorized for a specified term and granted a "charter" that would define academic and other goals and set the parameters for their operation. They would be less regulated, but would have to abide by the underlying principles of public education: open to all, publicly funded, no discrimination, no tuition, no teaching religion. They would be judged on the results they achieved. They would be schools of choice.

The ripples of innovation following this Minnesota-born idea spread quickly across the country, with about 3,000 charter schools now in operation serving some 750,000 students. The significance of this idea was also recognized in 2000 when Minnesota's charter law received the prestigious Innovations in American Government Award from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This annual award salutes outstanding examples of creative problem solving in the public sector.

The nation's first charter school—City Academy—opened in St. Paul in the fall of 1992. A dozen years later, Minnesota has 88 charter schools in operation, with as many as 40 more expected to open in the next two years. If anything, chartering

new public schools is on an accelerating track in Minnesota—contrary to trends being observed in a number of other states. The idea remains controversial, however, particularly in a state that is facing severe fiscal pressures and continued opposition to the charter idea from powerful protectors of the status quo.

Along the way, Minnesota has provided more than its share of leadership to the nation's charter school movement and more than its share of national leaders. In addition to launching the idea, the original author, former State Senator **Ember Reichgott Junge**, has testified and assisted policymakers in crafting legislation in a number of other states. So have two other sources of the original thinking behind this idea: **Ted Kolderie**, senior associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and **Joe Nathan**, director of the Center for School Change and the Minnesota Charter School Resource Center at the University of Minnesota.

More recently, Kolderie and **Joe Graba**, former dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University, have created Education/Evolving, a national initiative that is focusing on the rationale and the state policy infrastructure for new school development. Their colleague, **Bob Wedl**, a former Minnesota commissioner of Education, is directing a parallel consortium of Minnesota's diverse charter school authorizers that is also likely to benefit their fellow authorizers and policymakers well beyond the state.

Minnesota's earlier leadership also included the legislation introduced in 1991 by its former U.S. senator, **Dave Durenberger**, to create a

federal grant program for charter schools. With bipartisan cosponsorship from Senator **Joseph Lieberman** and strong support from President **Bill Clinton**, this legislation was adopted in 1994. By the end of 2004, it will have provided more than \$1.2 billion in start-up funding for charter schools nationally.

From 1996 to 2003, Minnesota was also home to the **Charter Friends National Network** (CFNN), a project of the Center for Policy Studies that linked and supported more than 70 state-level charter support organizations. The CFNN played a major role on federal policy development, starting new state charter support organizations, launching National Charter Schools Week, and strengthening grassroots involvement in the U.S. Department of Education's National Charter Schools Conference. And CFNN is now in transition to a more permanent, Washington-based national charter school leadership organization.

Finally, Minnesota has produced a number of **leading charter school founder/directors**

who are known and respected nationally. They include **Milo Cutter**, founder of City Academy; **Bob DeBoer**, director of New Visions charter school in Minneapolis; **Tess Tiernan**, director of Skills for Tomorrow in St. Paul; and **Doug** and **Dee Thomas**, who, with others, co-founded Minnesota New Country School and its national scale-up organization, EdVisions Schools. They and dozens of other charter school leaders are ably served by **Steve Dess**, director of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, who, since 1997, has built one of the nation's strongest and most effective state-level charter advocacy and support organizations.

All these individuals and organizations have given leadership and inspiration to the state's charter movement for more than a decade. Minnesotans can be proud that they—and many of their colleagues—have made significant contributions to the growth and success of charter schools nationally as well.

—Jon Schroeder, April 2004

Executive Summary

This report traces the origins, evolution and impact of Minnesota’s pioneering charter school law—on its own schools, students, and communities and on the development of charter laws in many other states. It notes that, unlike what is now happening elsewhere, new schools are now being chartered at an accelerating pace in Minnesota. And because Minnesota has been chartering schools for more than a decade, the report found that many fundamental pieces of the infrastructure needed to maintain and accelerate that expansion are now in place.

This is happening at a time when Minnesota faces several critical challenges, including huge gaps in achievement levels and graduation rates among different demographic groups in an increasingly diverse school-age population. Those gaps will become even more evident under the testing and reporting requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. In addition, like most states, Minnesota faces tight budgets and strong resistance to authorizing new spending—creating heightened competition for available resources and intense resistance to creating new public schools from established interests intent on protecting the status quo.

Minnesota’s charter school movement has experience, assets, and new perspectives it can draw upon to overcome this resistance and help give leadership to a new generation of policy initiatives and ideas—not just in Minnesota, but elsewhere in the country as well. Minnesota’s next generation of national leadership on charter schools and chartering can draw upon:

- ❑ Strong policy leadership—both from bipartisan policymakers and key education reformers and leaders in and outside the traditional public education system.
- ❑ New insights about the essential role that creating new schools must play—at least on par with improving existing schools—in addressing the challenges now facing American public education.
- ❑ A consistent context of expanding public school choice and *choices*—creating the “supply side” for school improvement and a favorable policy environment for bringing new school choice options to scale.
- ❑ Expanding opportunities for organizations other than local school boards to authorize and oversee new public schools—withdrawing the historic “exclusive franchise” of public school districts.
- ❑ New options and new opportunities for teachers, including establishing teacher cooperatives and other professional practice arrangements.
- ❑ Direct relationships between new public schools and the state, resulting in a significant degree of autonomy and a realistic goal of having public funding—*all* of it—follow students.
- ❑ Reasonably equitable funding for charter schools, relative to district schools, including state and federal funds for planning, start-up, operations, and facilities.
- ❑ A growing infrastructure of private-sector financial support and technical assistance, advocacy, and administrative support.

- ❑ An emphasis on using new schools to establish, redefine, and strengthen communities, particularly in the state’s growing immigrant population and other communities of color.

This report also makes seven broad recommendations—addressed to Minnesota’s education and public policy leadership. Although each state is different, these recommendations include important lessons that are just as relevant for policy discussions now going on in other states. They include:

- ❑ Re-articulate a clear and convincing rationale for chartering—as a mechanism to address serious shortcomings in our current education system—by creating many new and substantially different public schools of choice.
- ❑ Continue to expand the boundaries that have historically defined “public schools,” while preserving and honoring the most essential core elements of “public education.”
- ❑ Use charters and chartering to more strategically and proactively address huge gaps in student achievement levels among racial and other demographic groups, while also contributing to racial and ethnic integration.
- ❑ Better document the successes of individual charter schools in meeting the student achievement and teacher quality goals of NCLB, while also documenting fulfillment of the unique mission and attributes of each charter school.

- ❑ Use charters to test new and creative strategies to expand choice and *choices*—while also respecting today’s fiscal realities.
- ❑ Continue to strengthen the capacity of a diverse array of sponsors to provide appropriate oversight, and promote more responsive and cost-effective ways to provide functions historically performed by district central office administrators and by unions.
- ❑ Broaden and deepen private-sector financial support and partnerships that can expand available resources, and proactively seek greater non-financial contributions from community partners for creating and replicating high quality new schools.

This is not an agenda for the complacent or faint of heart. Nor is this a time to presume Minnesota’s historic education policy leadership and innovation can run on past success—or even on current momentum. Maintaining Minnesota’s historic position of leadership—and meeting the state’s new educational challenges and opportunities—now requires moving chartering to a new level as a proactive strategy for changing and improving public education.

Thirteen years ago this spring, Minnesotans made a huge contribution to addressing their own and the nation’s educational challenges by passing America’s first charter school law. Minnesota’s education and policy leaders have a new obligation in 2004—to make sure the revolution they began in 1991 is retooled and reinvigorated, to address challenges that now face us as a state and nation, and to realize exciting new opportunities that now lie ahead.

Minnesota Charter Schools in 2004

Snapshots of the Major Distinguishing Characteristics of Charter Schools and Chartering in Minnesota

Except for the law that is their foundation, each Minnesota charter school is unique. However, to gain a necessary composite picture, it may be helpful to describe Minnesota's charter sector in a series of snapshots that trace its growth and impact over time.

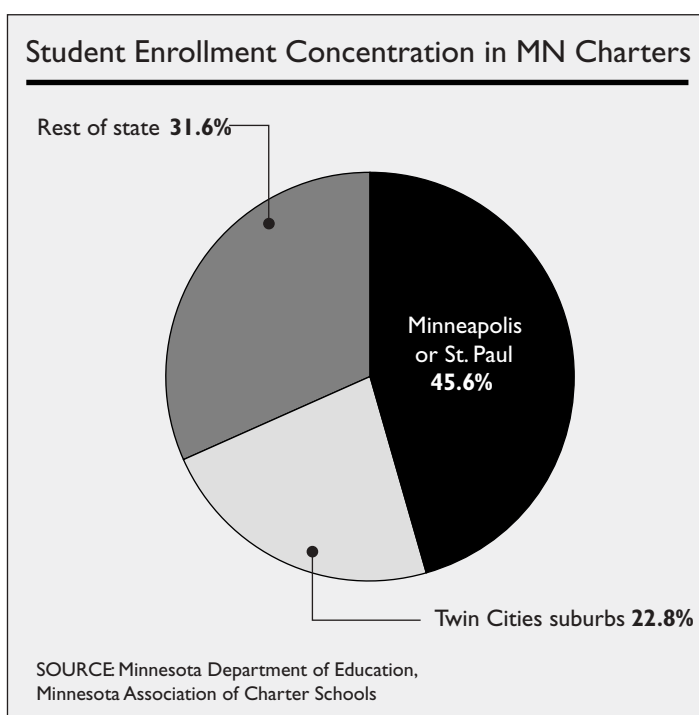
Total of 88 charters now operating, with 26 more approved to open

Minnesota currently has 88 operating charter schools with another 26 so far approved to open in 2004. The current schools serve approximately 14,100 students, or fewer than 2 percent of Minnesota's public school enrollment. Of the 114 schools now open or approved, about 70 percent are in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, including 29 charters in St. Paul, 23 in Minneapolis, and 26 in

Twin Cities' suburbs. The remaining 36 Minnesota charter schools are scattered throughout the rest of the state.

Enrollment is concentrated in several key cities

While charter schools serve fewer than 2 percent of the state's overall public school students, there are districts where the market share for charter schools is much greater and clearly being felt. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, for example, charters now serve approximately 7.2 percent and 9.3 percent of the districts' public school enrollments, respectively. Minneapolis district leaders have been particularly conscious of the growing competition from charters (see sidebar on Page 37), as well as other public school choice options available to its students.



Other Minnesota districts with high concentrations of charter students include Duluth, with four charters and about 9.3 percent of the district’s public school enrollment; Bemidji, with three charters and about 7 percent of district public school enrollment; and Northfield, with three charters and 6.5 percent of district public school enrollment.

Low income students and students with disabilities

Minnesota’s charter schools disproportionately serve lower-income students. Statewide, approximately 54.1 percent of charter school students are low income, compared to an overall statewide average of 27.5 percent. Sixty-nine of Minnesota’s 88 currently operating charters are above that statewide average. The concentration of low-income students in charters is particularly evident in Minneapolis and St. Paul (see bar graph below).

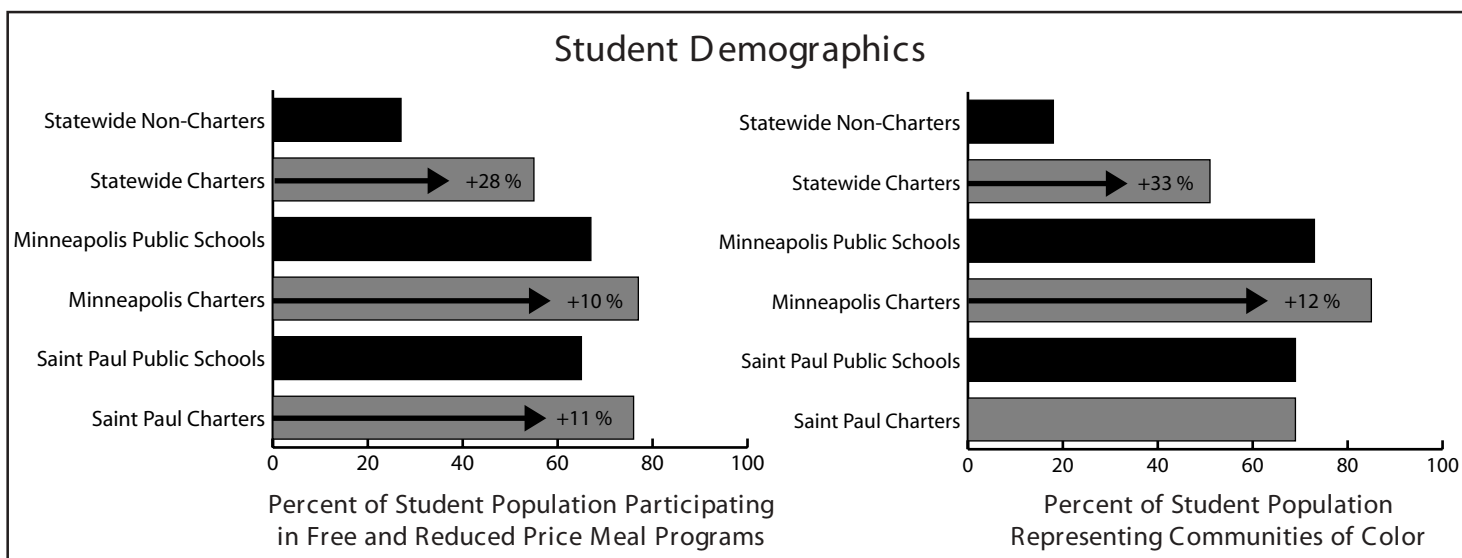
Minnesota charters appear to be serving a comparable share of students with disabilities relative to the 12.2 percent of district school enrollment. More than one-half of the currently operating charters serve a higher percentage of special education students than do district schools as a whole. And about 20 percent serve more than double the statewide average.

Several Minnesota charter schools consider serving students with disabilities a primary part of their mission, including the Metro Deaf School in St. Paul and the New Visions School in Minneapolis. Metro Deaf, which has been a pre-K-8 school, will be opening a sister high school, Minnesota North Star Academy, in 2004. Founders of New Visions, also a K-8 school, are now in the early stages of planning a charter high school. The Fraser School—a well-established private school that has served generations of students with disabilities—has recently been approved to open a new K-4 charter school, the Fraser Academy.

Diverse student results

Existing data sources have not done detailed analyses of how well the state’s charter schools and chartering are doing at the school level or statewide. Evaluation is complicated because many charter schools are small and new, and Minnesota has historically lagged behind other states in establishing easily compared standards.

As measured by the state’s tests and NCLB, Minnesota charter schools have done superbly, so-so, and not so well. Last year, 43 of the state’s 88 charter schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, 12 did not, and the remaining 33 were too small or new to show results. Performance of charter schools



SOURCE: Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, Minnesota Department of Education

in St. Paul and Minneapolis is mixed, but several schools are outperforming district peers on various measures while serving high concentrations of low-income students and students of color. Elsewhere in the state, about one-half of charters outperform the state average, despite more disadvantaged student populations. And schools are showing better results the longer they have been in operation. In addition, Minnesota sponsors have proven effective at achieving the law's accountability goals by shutting down charter schools that are not achieving results (see Pages 28-29).

Students of color and English Language Learners

Minnesota's charters also serve a disproportionate share of students of color. Statewide, approximately 52.9 percent of charter enrollees are students of color, compared to an overall statewide average of 18.9 percent. Almost one-half of the charters located in Minneapolis and St. Paul are what might be called "culturally centered." They include charters created by and predominantly serving students in the Twin Cities' African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Hmong, American-Indian, and East African communities.

Many of these schools have a high percentage of English Language Learners (ELL). In fact, about 20 percent of Minnesota's charters are above the statewide average of 6.2 percent of their students who are ELL. And more than one-half the students in 10 Minnesota charter schools are ELL (see sidebar on Page 13).

Diverse grade configurations

The 114 charters now open or approved have at least 14 different grade configurations, although there is an overall tendency to include more grades in a single school than is common in most larger district schools. For example, 11 of Minnesota's

operating or approved charters are K-12 schools. And there are more K-7, 8, or 9 schools than either lower elementary or middle school configurations. About one-half of Minnesota's non-K-12 charters are elementary, K-8, or middle schools, and one-half are senior high schools or combined junior/senior high schools.

The most common grade configuration is the grade 9-12 high school (35 charters), although there are also 13 grade 6-12 or 7-12 combined junior/senior high schools. The fact that Minnesota has as many charter high schools as it does is partly a function of need and demand for alternatives to large, traditional district high schools. It also reflects the relatively generous funding for charter operations and facilities, compared to many other states.

The growing number of charter high schools is also creating demand for sports and other extracurricular programs. In some cases, charters are creating extracurricular programs of their own. And a few charters have agreements with school districts to allow students to play on teams in the high school in whose attendance area they live. However, other districts deny charter students the opportunity to participate in their extracurricular activities. The lack of uniform opportunities has helped make the case for legislation to require not only that districts allow charter school students to participate in district-sponsored extracurricular activities, but also for the students' charter school to pay the direct and indirect costs of that participation.

Most charter elementary schools are either K-6/7 (17 schools) or K-8/9 (17 schools). In a number of cases, Minnesota charter schools have started smaller and added grades over time, sometimes beginning with as few as two or three grades. Several charters that started as K-6 or K-8 schools have added middle- or high-school grades under strong pressure from parents who like the smaller environment or other attributes of the school.

Finally, some Minnesota charters are emerging that extend beyond the traditional K-12 grade range. For example, Volunteers of America/Minnesota has granted a charter to the Early Literacy Academy in Minneapolis, which will serve students from age three to grade three. This school will draw on both preschool and K-12 funding streams to provide a more seamless literacy and school readiness curriculum to preschool students, who will then attend the same school through the third grade.

At the other end of the grade range, the Saint Paul College—a community/technical college—has sponsored the Minnesota Academy for Technology. Located near the college’s campus in downtown St. Paul, the charter makes it possible for students to have a more seamless learning opportunity that extends beyond high school to eventually include a two-year associate’s degree.

Charters adding new types of schools and learning programs

A high percentage of Minnesota’s earlier charters were intended to serve the diverse and often

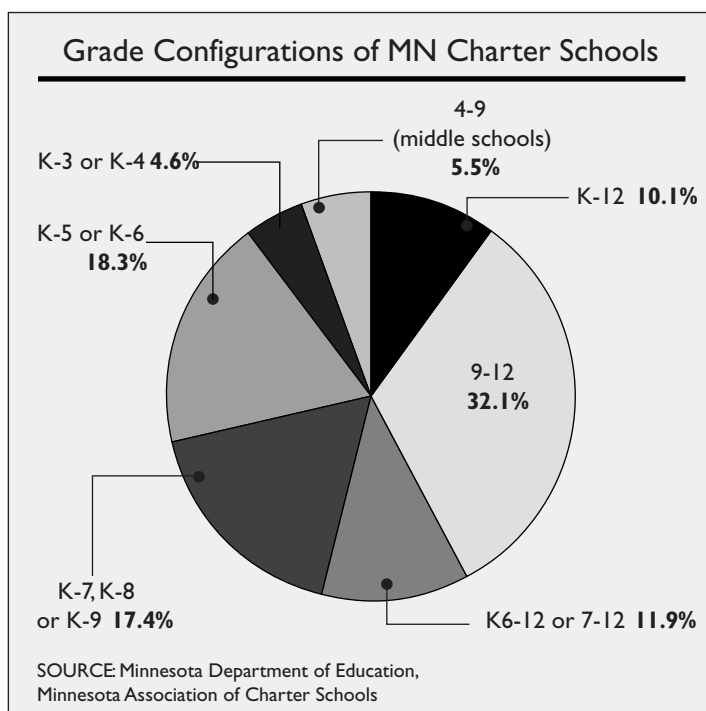
at-risk student populations in Minneapolis and St. Paul. And, as noted above, many of these urban charters predominately serve low-income students and students of color and have higher than average concentrations of ELL and special education students.

At the same time, there is a more recent trend toward opening more charters in the Twin Cities suburbs and elsewhere in the state that are intended to serve a broader cross section of students. Of the schools currently approved to open in 2004, almost 40 percent are in suburban communities—compared to only 15 percent of the schools operating in the 2003-04 school year. Smaller high schools serving a broad cross section of students with a rigorous, college-bound curriculum have also opened in the last several years in several communities outside the Twin Cities, including Northfield, Hutchinson, Bemidji, and Duluth.

Along with this broader focus, Minnesota’s charter schools have a growing diversity of missions and learning programs. A dozen charters have adapted the project-based learning model first used at the Minnesota New Country School in Henderson. Several other schools, including the new Minnesota Internship Center and Liberty High Schools that opened in 2003, also require extensive hands-on and community-based learning.

Although Minnesota has lagged behind other states in opening online schools, it does have several charters that make extensive use of technology, including Cyber Village Academy (CVA) in St. Paul. Students at CVA are at home three days a week—taking their courses online—and physically at the school two days each week. Other online schools chartered so far have included Blue Sky Academy, which opened in 2003, and Hopkins Online Academy, which reverted to a smaller district program because of problems qualifying for an adequate level of state funding.

Another school district, Chisago Lakes, has also converted a pre-existing distance learning program into a district-sponsored charter, the TRIO



Not “Your Grandmother’s Minnesota”—Or Is It?

Many Americans have a somewhat dated image of Minnesota and its now 5 million residents—perhaps created by some combination of the movie “Fargo,” Garrison Keillor’s “Lake Wobegon,” or Michael Landon’s version of “Little House on the Prairie.” The reality, however, is that Minnesotans are an increasingly diverse group of folks. This is not “your Grandmother’s Minnesota.” Or is it?

Statistically, the state remains overwhelmingly populated by whites and Northern Europeans, and settled by people who have been here for at least several generations. But, beginning with a huge wave of refugees from Southeast Asia in the mid-1970s, Minnesota is becoming a state strongly influenced by a new wave of immigrants and refugees. There are hundreds of thousands of “New Minnesotans” including families from the Horn of Africa, Hmong families originally from the hill country of Laos, and others newly arrived from the former Soviet Union, Bosnia, Mexico, and Central and South America.

The impact of Minnesota’s increasing diversity is greatest on the state’s schools, and particularly in Minneapolis and St. Paul. But the impact is now also being felt in certain Twin Cities suburbs and even smaller cities and towns where agribusinesses have been attracting hundreds of immigrant workers and their families. One quarter of the school-age population in Worthington—a community of 11,300 in Southwestern Minnesota—are now children of New Minnesotans from Latin America, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. St. Paul has the nation’s highest concentration of Hmong students. Despite its reputation for cold winters, Minnesota is now home to more than 50,000 Somali people—more than any other state.

Like past waves of immigrants, these New Minnesotans place a high value on education. And many of them have not been satisfied with either the environment or the results their children have experienced in traditional district public schools. So, in addition to longer-established African American and Native American communities, these New Minnesotans are creating new charter public schools.

Among them are the Twin Cities International Elementary School and Minnesota International Middle School—serving a total of more than 450 students. More than 90 percent of these students are from war-torn Somalia. Now in their third year of operation, these two schools have recently co-located to a newly renovated 88,000 square foot facility near downtown Minneapolis. A yet-to-be opened charter high school will be on the second floor.

In these schools, certified ELL and other teachers work closely with paraprofessionals and Somali elders. The shared leadership in the schools includes a Somali co-director and Somali board members. This is a school in which these New Minnesotans clearly have pride and enjoy acceptance and ownership.

Minnesota now has about 20 what might be called ethnocentric charter schools, with more on the way. They include charters predominantly serving students in the African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Hmong, American-Indian, and East African communities. Among the state’s most recently approved charters will be a Spanish language immersion elementary school in Worthington, the first of what could be a new wave of similar schools serving recent immigrant students in smaller cities and towns outside the Twin Cities metro area.

Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School. And Minnesota Transitions School in Minneapolis has created an online high school program for its highly diverse student population. No national online models have been chartered yet in Minnesota, although William Bennett's K-12 has a contract to run a statewide online program with the tiny Houston School District in the southeastern corner of the state.

All of these online schools face regulatory barriers and current state funding limitations on the number of previously private- and home-schooled students who may enroll. Several charter schools that use project-based learning or other hands-on learning experiences in the community have also run into problems documenting their students' attendance to the satisfaction of audits done by the state Department of Education.

At the other end of the spectrum, Minnesota has a growing number of traditional-looking "back to basics" schools, including a half-dozen chartered by a new nonprofit sponsor, Friends of Ascension, that are scheduled to open in the fall of 2004. A majority of these schools use the Core Knowledge curriculum and will be located in suburban communities that previously have not had charter options. Several other urban charters—serving high populations of students who are predominantly low income or recent immigrants—also make use of Direct Instruction, Core Knowledge, and other similar learning models. Core Knowledge schools in Minnesota benefit from the availability of a national partnership and technical assistance resource center for the Core Knowledge program that is run by the Minnesota Humanities Commission.

Relatively small, homegrown schools—not affiliated with Education Management Organizations

Minnesota charters are relatively small in enrollment, even relative to charter schools

nationally, with an average about 160 students in each school. Enrollments range from 26 to just under 1,000 students, with 42 percent of the schools enrolling fewer than 100 students and only 19 percent having more than 200 students. Only three Minnesota charter schools have more than 500 students.

Not surprisingly, a number of operational challenges have arisen because of the relatively small size of most Minnesota charter schools. They include special education funding and regulations, pupil transportation, facilities financing, and teacher licensure rules that are generally designed around larger schools and districts.

Virtually all of Minnesota's charters are founded and run by teachers, parents, or other community members and do not make use of outside for- or nonprofit management companies. One exception is the state's second largest charter, the multi-campus Duluth Public School Academy, which is managed by Edison Schools. Other contracts between Edison Schools and two Twin Cities charters—originally managed by Learn Now—were recently terminated by the boards of the schools, who decided to hire their own school leadership. Designs for Learning, a Minnesota-based firm that did whole-school management for several years, now has more limited contracts with charters to provide a menu of administrative services such as accounting, payroll, and fringe benefits management.

New professional and leadership opportunities for teachers

Minnesota charters have created new and expanded opportunities for school leadership for teachers and administrators, including a disproportionate number of women school leaders and school leaders of color. Approximately 56 percent of the directors or principals of Minnesota

charter schools are women and about 24 percent of charter schools are led by persons of color, including 60 percent of the charters in Minneapolis and 35 percent in St. Paul. Approximately 350 Minnesota charter school teachers are now serving on charter school boards and over one-half of the boards have a teacher majority.

The strong role of teachers in the management and governance of charters in Minnesota reflects a unique provision in the state's charter law that—absent a state waiver—has required that licensed teachers in the school constitute a majority of the members of their charter school board by the end of the school's third year of operation. About one dozen Minnesota charters are also affiliated with EdVisions Schools. The EdVisions model includes teacher cooperatives or other ways of establishing a teacher professional practice, like those traditionally owned and run by lawyers, doctors,

accountants, and other professionals (see sidebar on Page 16).

Minnesota's charter law requires that all charter school teachers be certified. But in smaller high schools and schools using interdisciplinary learning methods, concerns have arisen about the ability of teachers to meet the "highly qualified teacher" requirements of NCLB. These requirements appear to insist that all teachers demonstrate competencies in specific subject areas that they presumably teach one at a time. In response to these concerns, charter advocates—and allies in alternative programs and smaller rural districts—have been working with the State Board of Teaching to create a new type of teacher license. This license would recognize competencies that are required to teach across subject areas and/or make extensive use of technology, project-based, or other non-traditional teaching/learning methods.

EdVisions Cooperative: Teachers in Professional Practice

Charter school skeptics often ask, “What’s really different about these schools anyway?” When they do, a good place to take them is any of a dozen charters in Minnesota where the teachers are organized as professionals—more like a law firm or medical practice than your typical “teacher as worker” public school.

The oldest of these teacher-run charters is Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) in Henderson. Opened in the fall of 1994, MNCS serves approximately 120 students in grades 7-12. The nonprofit MNCS contracts with the EdVisions Cooperative that has members who work in nine other schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The teachers—who prefer to be called “advisors”—each work with 15-20 students across grade levels under a curriculum that is project-based. The advisors also share administrative and support functions needed to keep the school and its facility up and running.

Advisors with MNCS are convinced that the incentive structure is better under their professional practice model, leading to their increased willingness to keep up to date with research-based learning, theories, and discussions. This type of management arrangement also allows teachers to block off more time to develop and improve their professional development plans. The MNCS advisors review themselves in the fall, at mid-year, and at the end of the year, so professional development plans are never idle. In addition, each advisor’s plan includes professional, school, and personal goals. Each advisor is also able to create joint goals with other staff members.

At MNCS, the teacher cooperative allows the advisors to consistently strengthen their knowledge about how to make sound management decisions and increase accountability. A professional practice arrangement has also improved the advisors’ time-management, they say, mainly because decisions are made at the source. If something in the curriculum or culture is not working, the MNCS advisors can address the problem within 24 hours, eliminating the bureaucratic red tape of working through superiors who are not familiar with day-to-day happenings at the school.

The teachers at MNCS also believe their management arrangement has led to higher-performing students. On a daily basis, students observe teachers working together to learn from their experience and to make the school a better place. Advisors also say that because ownership allows them more time to stay up-to-date with the latest research and development, they are able to more consistently improve the learning program—with resulting improvements in student achievement. The MNCS’s teachers believe that their ability to make changes to the learning program at a rapid pace has also been a factor in inspiring student performance.

An Accelerating Rate of Growth

Seven Reasons for Optimism About the Future

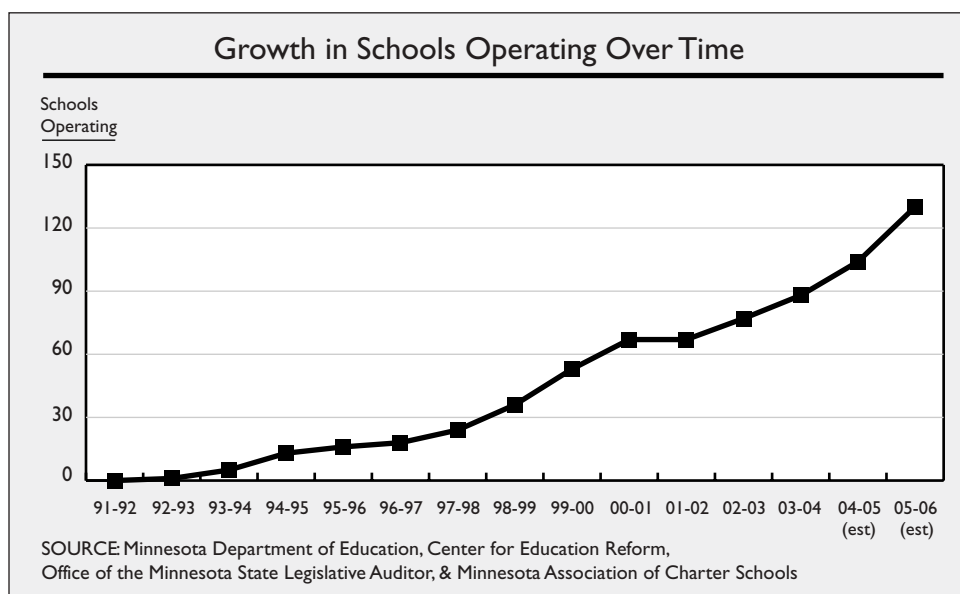
This series of snapshots helps produce a composite picture of a growing and changing collection of charter schools in Minnesota that is beginning to make its presence known. The graph below documents growth trends over time and the accelerating rate of growth that Minnesota chartering is now on. It is a pattern that is likely to continue into the future. The strength of Minnesota's charter law is the most important factor in the state's charter school growth. That law and related policies include relatively equitable funding for charters and separate funding streams for start-up and facilities. In addition, at least seven other factors help explain this optimism about the future of charters and chartering in Minnesota.

Bipartisan political support

Because charters have historically been considered part of Minnesota's broader strategy of expanding public school choices, they have enjoyed consistent bipartisan support. The initial leadership

behind expanding school choices came from a Democratic governor, Rudy Perpich, in the early and mid-1980s. The chief authors of Minnesota's pioneering charter legislation were also both Democrats, State Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge and State Rep. Becky Kelso. That was critical since Democrats controlled both houses of the Minnesota Legislature at the time. During the 1990s, both President Bill Clinton and Secretary of Education Richard Riley made visits to Minnesota charter schools, helping to bolster and demonstrate this bipartisan support.

Minnesota's legislature is currently divided along party lines, with a Republican House of Representatives and Democratic Senate. Arguably, the Legislature's strongest charter advocate is veteran Republican State Rep. Alice Seagren, who chairs the House Education Finance Committee. There is predictable partisan tension around other education issues. But key Democrats, including Steve Kelley, chair of the Senate Education Policy Committee, and Mindy Greiling, Carlos Mariani, and other ranking Democrats on the



House Education Policy and Finance Committees, are all charter supporters.

Then-Gov. Arne Carlson, a moderate Republican, signed the first charter law and became a strong supporter of charter schools during his eight years in office, from 1991 to 1998. Minnesota's current governor, Tim Pawlenty, a conservative Republican elected in 2002, is also a strong charter supporter, as is his commis-

sioner of education, Cheri Yecke. The Pawlenty administration has proposed a package of charter-friendly initiatives

in the 2004 legislative session. Under Yecke's leadership, the State Department of Education has also created the Office of Choice and Innovation, directed by veteran education reformist Morgan Brown. This office is intended to give leadership to the department's role in support of charters and other public school choice options.

Strong public support

Minnesota's various public school choice programs also enjoy broad support from the state's general public, according to a February 2003 statewide poll commissioned by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. This survey found that 75 percent of Minnesotans believe the state's families should have the right to select among various public schools. More specifically, 80 percent support the state's Post-Secondary Options program, with 12 percent opposed; 56 percent support interdistrict open enrollment, with 32 percent opposed; and 52 percent support the state's charter school law, with 21 percent opposed.

The lower support for charters corresponds to lower levels of awareness of this public school

choice option. However, by a margin of more than two-to-one, the same poll found that Minnesotans approve key concepts behind the charter idea, including school-level authority over hiring and firing of employees, the opportunity for groups of parents or teachers to start new public schools, and the opportunity for new public schools to focus on specific themes. The poll found support for charters

and other public school choice options strongest among state residents under age 50 and parents with school-aged children.

"I never fit in at my former school. People were mean. Then I shadowed a friend here. I couldn't believe it! What a change! I knew it would work better for me. And, it has!"

—Student at Avalon High School in St. Paul

New, important stakeholders

The charter idea in Minnesota originated with a relatively small group of state policy leaders and education reformers. In recent years, however, a much larger and broader group of stakeholders for the charter movement has emerged. Of course, the largest group of stakeholders is the schools themselves—including their parents, students, teachers, board members, and other community supporters. In a number of cases, grassroots community organizations and their most respected and influential leaders have been behind the establishment of these new schools—particularly in immigrant and low-income communities and communities of color.

Parents of charter school students also now have a networking and advocacy organization called Parents Voice, Teachers Choice. Although in its infancy, this new organization intends to provide an opportunity for charter school parents to network and find encouragement to become more involved in their children's education and in their schools.

What is arguably the most important group of stakeholders—students attending charter schools—

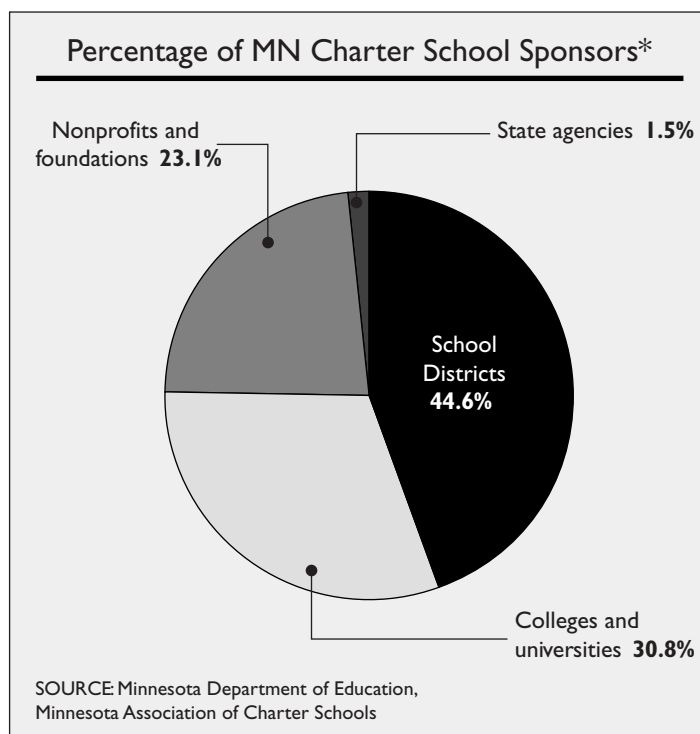
also has a new vehicle for communicating with each other and broader audiences through a state-wide, student-directed newspaper, *Charter Vision Minnesota*. This newspaper, totally written and edited by students, comes out four times a year, including strategic periods before and during the annual legislative session, at key recruitment times, and during “National Charter Schools Week.” The first two issues have included dozens of articles written by students about their schools and their experiences as charter school students. The newspaper is distributed statewide by mail to key stakeholders and opinion leaders and through the charter schools in their respective communities.

Charter Vision Minnesota also provides the majority of the content for a unique new website—www.chartervision.org. This site, designed and maintained by a 2003 charter school graduate, includes historical background and more recent developments on Minnesota’s charter law, links to dozens of state and national Internet resources, and a link to detailed profiles of all Minnesota charter schools. Responsibility for managing both the print and electronic versions of *Charter Vision Minnesota* lies with an editorial board of 15-20 charter school students from throughout the state.

A large and diverse cadre of charter sponsors

Another important set of charter school stakeholders is Minnesota’s growing cadre of sponsors—more commonly known as “authorizers” in many other states. They include some of the state’s most prestigious private colleges and universities—Hamline University, the University of St. Thomas, Bethel College, Augsburg College, and others—as well as a growing number of large and well-established nonprofits, including Volunteers of

America, Pillsbury United Communities, Project for Pride in Living, the Metropolitan Minneapolis YMCA, Audubon Center of the North Woods, and the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.



*For all approved schools

Overall, Minnesota’s sponsors currently include 29 school districts, 20 public and private colleges or universities, 13 nonprofit organizations, one private foundation, and the Minnesota Department of Education. Sponsors that have granted the largest number of charters are the St. Paul School Board (15), the Minnesota Department of Education (12), Minneapolis School Board, (10), Volunteers of America/Minnesota (eight), Friends of Ascension (seven), and Hamline University (five).

Although many school district leaders remain skeptical, it is important to note that almost 10 percent of the state’s traditional school districts—with about 30 percent of the state’s public school students—have sponsored charter schools. Several—including Northfield, Faribault, Hopkins,

Chisago Lakes, and Waseca—are doing so proactively to add new choices and new opportunities for students in their districts (see sidebar on Page 37).

The Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA)—historically the most progressive of the state’s mainline education organizations—has also joined forces with charter school supporters on common interests around teacher quality, technology, and other issues relating to the viability of smaller public schools. The MREA has also been an active participant in the Minnesota Charter School Forum and its Teacher Quality Working Group.

Growing capacity to link and strengthen sponsors

Understanding and appreciating the vital role of sponsors has been one of the most important “lessons learned” in the 13 years since Minnesota passed the nation’s first charter school law. As noted above, Minnesota has an unusually large number and variety of sponsors, raising natural questions about quality control as well as capacity and long-term commitment. One obvious response might be traditional prescriptive efforts by the Legislature and state education officials to regulate sponsors through a complex array of prescriptive requirements.

So far, overregulation has not happened in Minnesota, in part because of voluntary efforts by sponsors to connect, learn from each other, and improve the job they do in approving and overseeing charter schools. Most significant has been creation of an informal Charter School Sponsor Consortium, a project of Education/Evolving, a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University.

The Charter School Sponsor Consortium, headed by former state education commissioner Bob Wedl, now includes a dozen sponsors, mainly private colleges and nonprofits. The Consortium recently completed a comprehensive resource guide for sponsors. It also

conducted a day-long strand of sponsor-related workshops at the state charter association’s winter conference and is planning a number of follow-up workshops, networking, and other meetings over the next year. The goal of this activity—which could develop into a state charter sponsors association—is to make charter sponsoring and oversight in Minnesota equal to the critical role it plays. The Sponsor Consortium is also committed to making charter sponsors truly self-improving as new challenges and new opportunities emerge.

Strong technical assistance and start-up support

Minnesota is fortunate to have a number of high-caliber organizations available to advise and assist charter founders and operators. They include the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) and the Minnesota Charter School Resource Center and its parent, the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota. With a substantial infusion of out-of-state philanthropic support, both organizations now offer a variety of technical assistance and support services.

For the last five years, MACS has also enjoyed substantial dues income from virtually all the state’s charter schools. This combination of income sources now finances major initiatives on leadership and governance, curriculum and assessment, facilities financing, operations, and management. And, with financial support from the State Department of Education, MACS has also launched a separate Special Education Project that provides administrative and technical assistance and support to a significant number of the state’s charters.

Other nonprofit organizations assisting with school start-up funding and technical assistance include SchoolStart and EdVisions Schools. Both have received significant financial support from national foundations. In addition, dozens of for-

profit businesses are now offering start-up and administrative support services to Minnesota charter schools. A number of these businesses support the charter movement financially through associate memberships in the state charter school association.

In addition to technical assistance, a significant amount of public and private financial support is also available to Minnesota charters. Since 1995, Minnesota has received approximately \$39 million in federal charter school funding, 95 percent of which is passed through

to schools. Virtually all the state's charters have benefited from this program, which, in recent years, has provided as much as \$450,000 in start-up and implementation funding to schools for two to three years. In addition, the Legislature created a state-funded start-up aid program, which has provided an additional \$500 per student to new schools during their first two years of operation. Total appropriations for this program in Fiscal Years 2002 and 2003 were about \$5.9 million. As part of a larger deficit reduction package, this program was suspended for new schools for two years in 2003. But charter advocates are hoping to see funding restored beginning in 2005.

Finally, several major national foundations—including the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—have made almost \$11 million in grants to four nonprofit organizations to help fund new Minnesota charter schools: the MACS (\$1.92 million for planning, start-up, and expansion grants); the Center for School Change (\$3 million for its Star Schools Program to help launch five new charter high schools in St. Paul); SchoolStart (\$1.63 million for start-up grants and other start-up and ongoing assistance to new schools); and EdVisions Schools (\$4.4 million for planning and start-up grants and other assistance for 15 new schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin). EdVisions Schools also received an additional \$4.5 million grant to replicate its project-based learning and teacher cooperative model in 20 new schools throughout the country. In addition to pass-through grants for schools, both the state charter association and SchoolStart have also received general operating grants from the Walton Family Foundation.

A connected and united movement

The growing number of schools, sponsors, and other stakeholders around the Minnesota charter school movement is a huge,

What Is Public Education Anyway?

Public education in Minnesota now includes a range of educational choices authorized and run outside the traditional control of school districts, school boards, and superintendents. So what continues to qualify these options as “public education?”

In the case of the state's Post-Secondary Enrollment Options program, juniors and seniors in public and private high schools make arrangements to attend a college or university, with their tuition paid by the state.

Other Minnesota choice programs, however, generally involve a charter or contract with a public school district. Even when charters are sponsored by a private university or nonprofit organization, they must be approved by the State Department of Education. As is true for traditional districts, the State Department of Education monitors enrollments, finances, teacher qualifications, special education compliance, and other requirements placed on all public schools in Minnesota.

These schools are also publicly funded. State law prohibits discrimination in admitting students and requires that charters admit students by lottery if they are oversubscribed. They also must not charge tuition or teach religion, and they must meet the same standards and take the same tests as all other public schools in the state.

These are the key principles and values that have historically defined public education in America—not who hires the teachers or who owns the buildings. And, by insisting that chartering, Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, and other earlier Minnesota school choice programs are part of an expanding definition of “public education,” they have retained broad bipartisan support among state legislators and other policymakers.

positive set of assets. But it is also a challenge for all these charter stakeholders to stay connected, informed, and united. This is particularly important in the legislative arena, where charters continue to face opposition from key organizations and leaders in the district sector.

To encourage good communication and collaboration, leaders of the Minnesota charter movement agreed in 2003 to create an informal networking opportunity, the Minnesota Charter School Forum. The Forum includes more than 30 leaders of organizations that support charter schools, including groups that both support and oppose broader school choice strategies.

The Forum meets monthly during the legislative session and, when needed, develops

position statements and coordinated strategy to advance common positions. It also uses periodic electronic communications to inform a larger number of key stakeholders. During the 2003 legislative session, the Forum proved its value by serving as a major information and coordinating resource in successful efforts to quickly defeat a proposed moratorium on future charter school development in the state.

The Forum does not lobby directly, but includes among its regular participants several organizations that engage professional lobbyists, including MACS—which expanded its capacity this year to communicate with and, when necessary, mobilize charter school leaders, parents, teachers, and students through phone outreach and regular email and faxed updates.

In the Beginning and Since

The Context, Rationale, and Evolution of the Minnesota Charter School Law

Minnesota’s school choice initiatives were born of the notion that public education should not be the exclusive domain of a government monopoly. To withdraw what Minnesota charter pioneer Ted Kolderie dubbed the “exclusive franchise” school districts held on public education, two important opportunities were needed. First, individuals and communities must have the right to start and run new public schools outside the traditional district framework. And, second, parents need the right to choose the public school their students attend, with the money generated by those students following them to whatever public school they choose.

The emphasis on creating new schools and additional school choices has gained even greater popularity within this public interest rationale offered by charter supporters. They include education reformers like Joe Graba, a former teachers union leader and Democratic state legislator. Graba makes a strong case that the degree of improvement now being demanded of public education cannot be achieved by relying only on changing the schools we have now. To meet those needs, Graba argues, many more and substantially different schools must also be created new.

Public school choice

Charter schools in Minnesota are considered one of a number of strategies—put in place by state policymakers over two decades—to expand public school choices for students, parents, and teachers and to broaden the state’s definition of “public education.”

Ahead of passage of Minnesota’s pioneering charter law, Minnesota’s Legislature first enacted the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options program in 1985 that allows high school juniors and seniors to attend college at state expense. In 1988, the Legislature authorized the nation’s first statewide interdistrict open enrollment program, which was phased-in for all school districts in 1989 and 1990.

Minnesota students may also choose from a number of contract, alternative, and second-chance schools and programs run outside traditional district control that were authorized beginning in the mid-1970s and significantly expanded in the late 1980s. More than 180,000 students attend these alternative programs at any given point in time—or about 21.5 percent of the state’s public school enrollment.

Particularly in Minneapolis and St. Paul—originally in response to desegregation court orders—students have also been offered numerous magnet, emersion, and other voluntary choices, both within their districts and in several, newly created interdistrict schools. More recently, settlement of a lawsuit brought by the Minneapolis NAACP chapter against the Minneapolis School District and the state created new opportunities for more than one thousand Minneapolis students of color to attend suburban public schools.

Origins with Albert Shanker and a Citizens League Committee

Minnesota’s pioneer charter law traces its origins to the 1988 Itasca Seminar, organized by the Minneapolis Foundation, that brought together key

Minnesota's Charter School Law*

Minnesota's charter school law has been amended every year since its adoption in 1991. Current major provisions include:

Eligible sponsors: School district boards, intermediate district boards, public and private colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, and private foundations with more than \$2.0 million in assets, state Commissioner of Education on appeal from districts.

Limits on charters or chartering: No limits on the number of charters granted; districts may not approve charters to be located in other districts without the other district's approval (does not apply to non-district sponsors).

Eligible applicants: New schools, public and private conversions; 60 percent of teachers in existing schools must support conversions.

Form of school organization, governance: Charters are treated as independent Local Education Agencies (LEAs); they must be organized as nonprofits or cooperatives; licensed teachers working in the school must constitute a majority of the charter school governing board by the end of the third year of operation, unless a waiver is granted by the state Department of Education; boards are subject to state open meeting law.

Term length: Up to three years.

Waivers: Schools receive a blanket waiver of state education laws and regulations, as opposed to having to seek waivers one at a time. However, charters are required to comply with civil rights and special education laws and requirements.

Contracting: Charters may not be granted to a for-profit management company, but nonprofit boards may contract for management or other services with for-profit or nonprofit organizations.

Teacher licensure, other issues: All teachers must be licensed; teachers may organize and bargain collectively, but, if they do, they are not part of the district master contract; district teachers are granted leaves up to five years to work in charter schools; charter school teachers must be part of the state public school teachers retirement system.

General operating funding: All funding flows directly from the state and does not pass through districts; charters receive the average per pupil general revenue amount paid to districts; they are also eligible to receive virtually all other categorical aids and grants; the one major exception is the local portion of excess levy referenda revenues approved by district voters.

Transportation: State transportation funding follows students to either the charter or district (charter school's choice); if funding goes to the district, the district must provide transportation to students within the district's boundaries.

Facilities assistance: Charters may rent (but not buy with state funds) their facilities; the state provides a separate stream of aid explicitly for facilities on a reimbursement basis, up to 90 percent of state-approved lease expenses up to \$1,200 per student (may be up to \$1,500 for school under long-term lease agreements that were in effect in 2003).

Special education: Charters are public schools and, as independent LEAs, are responsible for providing required special education services for eligible students; as an LEA, charters are allowed to bill back to the district of residence of special education students most excess costs beyond special education revenues received by the charter from state and federal sources.

Entrance requirements: Charters may enroll students from anywhere in the state; all students who apply for enrollment must be treated equally; a lottery must be held to choose students if more apply than there is space available.

* Adapted from the Center for Education reform's annual rating of state charter school laws and Minnesota's charter law—Chapter 124D.10 and 124D.11—as most recently amended in 2003.

business leaders, educators, and policymakers to explore ways of improving the state's public schools. One of the speakers was the late Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker repeated the proposal he had made to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., earlier that year—that groups of teachers be given the opportunity to start and run what he called “charter schools.” Sy Fliegel, another speaker, also discussed his work in East Harlem, where dramatic improvements occurred when students were

allowed to choose schools that were smaller and more autonomous.

Members of a Citizens League Committee were in the audience who, already aware of Shanker's proposal, had been working through the summer on the outline of a charter school proposal. Also present were State Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge and State Rep. Ken Nelson, who had previously authored Minnesota's inter-district open enrollment law. The Citizens League report appeared late that year, and was picked up in a

Higher Education and Nonprofit Sponsors

Minnesota's Unique Contribution

Sixty-five different organizations have granted charters in Minnesota, more than one-half of which are private colleges, nonprofit organizations, or private foundations. The range and diversity of chartering organizations is unique among the states with charter laws and has important qualitative and political implications for the rest of the country.

It is important to note that all but a handful of these non-public sponsoring organizations have granted just one or two charters. And, as is noted elsewhere, all of these charters must be approved by the state Department of Education before the schools may open.

But it is also clear that a growing number of charter schools in Minnesota are being authorized and monitored by organizations that have a very different perspective and much value to add.

Several of the post-secondary sponsors—including Hamline University, Concordia University, Bethel College, Augsburg College, and the University of St. Thomas—clearly see chartering as an important extension of their missions. They all have assigned experienced faculty and administrators to manage their chartering role. Some see their charters as R&D and teacher education opportunities for their faculties and students. Others see their role in chartering ethnocentric charters as an extension of their pre-existing outreach to various communities of recent immigrants and other “New Minnesotans.”

A number of the nonprofit sponsors see chartering as an extension of their work in support of children and families—especially in the inner cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. They include the Metropolitan Minneapolis YMCA, Pillsbury United Communities, Volunteers of America, and Project for Pride in Living. Several of these organizations provide “wrap-around” services to their schools, including after-school care, mentoring, tutoring and adult literacy, and parenting education.

Three of these sponsors are especially worth watching for the value they add to the state's charter approval and oversight process: Volunteers of America, Friends of Ascension, and Hamline University. All three have granted a number of charters and are beginning to specialize in particular types of schools. And all have at least part-time staff assigned to manage their role in chartering.

At the same time, Minnesota sponsors are very different organizations, with very different philosophies about educational needs and what should be done to address them. As a result, they offer contrasting models and rich opportunities for reflection and evaluation.

bill introduced by Reichgott Junge and Nelson in the 1989 Minnesota Legislature.

Though the bill passed the Senate as part of the omnibus education bills in 1989, 1990, and 1991, it could not gain sufficient votes to pass the state House of Representatives. Finally, in 1991, a House-Senate conference committee reached agreement on a much-weakened compromise. And, after surviving a House floor fight by just one vote, the nation's first charter school law was adopted as part of a larger omnibus education bill and signed into law by then-Gov. Arne Carlson.

A mere shadow of its future self

Minnesota's initial charter law had some strong elements and several critical flaws. Its chief assets were its degree of freedom from state laws and regulations and the schools' relative autonomy from districts. Each school was to be treated as an independent Local Education Agency (LEA), hiring its own teachers and having total control of its funds, which were to flow directly from the state.

To gain sufficient House support, however, three critical compromises were made in the legislative conference committee: Only local school districts could grant charters, only eight charters could be granted anywhere in the state, and the governing board of each school had to consist of a majority of licensed teachers working in that school.

This latter provision is unique in the country. And, although originally an unsuccessful effort to quell teachers union opposition, it *has* helped create new opportunities for leadership and new management models involving teachers in a number of Minnesota charter schools. In recent years, however, it has also come under criticism as a limiting factor in creating the kind of strong and diverse governing boards that any healthy nonprofit organization requires.

The limitations on sponsorship and the eight-school cap were particularly discouraging. But charter supporters immediately went to work developing school proposals. The *first approved* was **Bluffview Montessori** in Winona in December 1991. And the *first opened* was **City Academy** in St. Paul in the fall of 1992. Other charters were soon approved in rural St. Louis County, Stillwater, and Minneapolis. During the first year, district boards also denied charter proposals in Northfield and St. Cloud.

A continuous stream of improvements in the law began almost immediately

The volume of early interest and district opposition led to two important changes in the 1993 Legislature: An increase in the limit on charters to 20 and an opportunity to appeal district decisions to deny charter proposals to the State Board of Education, if two local board members support the proposal. If approved on appeal, the state board then became the chartering authority. The 1993 Legislature also allowed conversion of existing district schools to charters, if 90 percent of the teachers agreed.

The graph on Page 17 documents an initial round of charter approvals and openings in the first several years after the law took effect. By 1995, however, it was becoming clear that additional changes in the law, as well as expanded start-up and other technical assistance, were needed if Minnesota's charter schools were to be more than an interesting side show in Minnesota's broader strategies for school change and improvement.

In response, charter pioneer Ted Kolderie and others convened a meeting of about 50 state charter supporters in December of 1996. Charter school advocates were invited from four other states: Howard Fuller (Wisconsin), Eric Premack (California), Linda Brown (Massachusetts), and Ken Campbell (Washington, D.C.).

These four charter advocates described so-called non-governmental “charter friends” organizations they had helped establish in their respective states to provide technical assistance, advocacy, and other support for charter schools and their state’s charter law.

This meeting represented a significant turning point. Leaders of Minnesota’s charter school movement realized they needed to strengthen its law and significantly expand its technical assistance and advocacy capacity—in effect learning lessons from other states that had followed Minnesota’s lead in passing the nation’s first charter school law. The response was a second major wave of changes and improvements in the charter law and significant expansion in technical assistance capacity—initially through expansion of Minnesota Association of Charter Schools and the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota, but later through a number of other organizations, (see Pages 20-21).

On the legislative front, key supporters like Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge and Gov. Arne Carlson gave new leadership to what has become a pattern of continuous evaluation, change, and overall improvement in Minnesota’s charter law over time. The most important changes have included:

- ❑ A gradual increase (to 20, then 35, then 40) and, in 1997, elimination of the **statutory cap** on the number of charters that could be granted.
- ❑ Significant expansion in **charter sponsors**, adding the State Board of Education on appeal (1993), public post-secondary institutions (1995), private colleges and universities (1997), intermediate school districts (1998), and larger nonprofit organizations and foundations (2000). The previous requirement for two affirmative votes on the district board—to be able to appeal to the state board—was also removed.

Paying For the Charter School House

One of Minnesota’s most important contributions to the charter idea nationally is its Building Lease Aid Program. Adopted in 1996, this program now provides as much as \$1,500 per student per year for charter schools to cover up to 90 percent of their eligible lease expenses. During the last four years, the average per-pupil lease aid payment has been about \$1,100. In 2003, as part of overall state deficit reduction, the maximum payment for new schools and newly negotiated leases was reduced to \$1,200 per student. But the \$1,500 maximum payment still applies to schools that had long-term leases in effect at that time.

This additional cash flow for charter facilities has sent a strong signal to the financial community that charters are an acceptable risk for tax-exempt bonds and other forms of long-term facilities financing. At present, about a dozen Minnesota charters have now accessed tax-exempt revenue bonds to build or buy facilities.

Because Minnesota law prohibits charter schools from using state funds directly to buy buildings, these bond sales have required creation of separate nonprofit corporations that actually own the buildings and lease them to affiliated schools. The schools’ lease aid payments are then used to pay rent to the building corporations, which use those funds to pay off the bonds.

Even with last year’s reduction in the maximum payment, Minnesota’s lease aid appropriations are about \$17.1 million in the current fiscal year, rising to \$21 million in 2005. This level of spending is expected to increase in 2006 and beyond, with as many as 40 new schools expected to open in the next two years.

Not surprisingly, biennial state appropriations earmarked for lease aid are a vulnerable target for charter school opponents. To address concerns about rising appropriations, some charter school advocates have urged repeal of the state’s current prohibition on charter schools using public funds to buy buildings. For many charter schools, being able to gain equity in a building could reduce the state’s facilities costs over time. And removing the current ban on direct ownership would eliminate the need for and cost of parallel nonprofit building corporations.

Approved Minnesota Charter Schools That Have Closed or Never Opened

School	City	Opened	Closed	Sponsor; Reasons for closing or not opening/comments
Central Minnesota Deaf School	St. Cloud	1997	2000	St. Cloud School Board; low enrollment, financial problems
Dakota Open School	Morton	1994	1998	Minnesota Dept of Education; financial and management problems
Fort Snelling Academy	Minneapolis	2000	2001	Normandale Community College; financial and management problems
Frederick Douglas	Minneapolis	1994	1999	Minneapolis School Board; facility; enrollment; finances
Hopkins Online Learning Academy	Hopkins	2002	2002	Hopkins School District; state funding restrictions
Learning Adventures Middle School	St. Paul	1998	2001	Central Lakes College; low enrollment
Martin Hughes Charter School	Mountain Iron	1998	2001	Mt. Iron School District; financial problems; dispute with management company.
Mexica Multicultural Education Charter School	St. Paul	2000	2002	St. Paul School Board; low enrollment
Native Arts High School	Minneapolis	2000	2003	Augsburg College; low enrollment
PEAKS Charter School	Pillager	1999	2001	Central Lakes College; financial and management problems
PEAKS Charter School	Faribault	1999	2001	Alexandria Technical College; financial and management problems
Right Step Academy	St. Paul	1995	2000	St. Paul School Board; financial and management problems
Skills for Tomorrow Junior High	St. Paul	2000	2001	Rockford School Board; low enrollment
Strategies for Success	St. Paul	1998	2001	St. Paul School Board; financial and management problems
Success Academy	St. Paul	1997	2000	St. Paul School District; financial and management problems
Summit School for the Arts	Chisago City	1997	2000	Chisago Lakes School Board; low enrollment; academic issues
Toivola-Meadowlands Charter School	Meadowlands	1993	2000	St. Louis County School District; financial/facilities problems
Prairie Island Charter School	Red Wing	Never opened		Red Wing School District; founder commitment
Roseville Edison School	Roseville	Never opened		Roseville School Board; facilities
St. Paul Area Military Academy	St. Paul	Never opened		Century College; facilities, other start-up issues

- ❑ Significant efforts to provide **funding equity** for charters relative to district schools by adding **transportation revenue** (1995), extra aid for **low-income students** (1996), **per pupil facilities and start-up aid** (1997, with increases in subsequent years), and some **integration aid** and **voter-approved revenues** (1999). The total appropriation for Minnesota's **lease aid program** for Fiscal Year 2004 is about \$17.1 million, rising to \$21 million in FY 2005. This pioneering program provides schools up to \$1,200 per student per year to cover up to 90 percent of their eligible lease expenses (see sidebar on Page 27). Overall, charter schools in Minnesota are receiving an estimated \$120 million in the 2003-04 school year in a combination of local, state, and federal revenues—or an average of about \$8,500 per student—for planning, start-up, operations, and facilities.
- ❑ Additional **flexibility in governance** by allowing a state waiver of the teacher majority requirement for charter boards (1999) and increased opportunities for existing schools to **convert to charter status** by dropping the teacher approval requirement from 90 percent to 60 percent (1999).

While most of the changes in Minnesota's charter law have been positive, the state's charter advocates have also had to be on constant guard against efforts by opponents to **weaken the legislation and curtail growth** in the number of schools and overall enrollment.

In both 1997 and 1998, for example, the State House of Representatives approved legislation **prohibiting or limiting contracts with for-profit management companies**. However, the State Senate and then-Gov. Arne Carlson forced the House to back down in conference committee. Three years later, tough negotiating produced

acceptable compromises on efforts to add new and more **prescriptive reporting and other oversight and accountability requirements** to the law.

More recently, charter advocates had to rally their forces in 2003 to beat back an attempt in the State Senate to impose a **multi-year moratorium on new charter development**. Also in 2003, and in the face of a \$4.2 billion state deficit, charters had to accept **cuts in state building lease aid and suspension of state start-up aid** for at least two years.

Impact of policy changes on number of charters

The graph on Page 17 documents growth in the number of charters operating in Minnesota each year since 1991, with projections for the next two years.

In addition to growing awareness, interest, and demand, this accelerating rate of growth can be attributed to several parallel changes in the state's policy environment, including expansion in non-district chartering authority—particularly the addition of private college and nonprofit sponsors. Minnesota's facilities aid program and the addition of several streams of operating revenue previously available only to district schools have also been critical factors in the more recent growth. Finally, there has been an increasing amount of state, federal, and private sector start-up assistance and a growing cadre of technical assistance and support organizations and resources available to assist new charter developers (see Pages 20-21).

Closures have occurred mainly because of governance and management issues

In addition to the 88 Minnesota charter schools now open, 17 have been closed. This represents 16.2 percent of the 105 charters that have opened since 1991. Three other charters have been

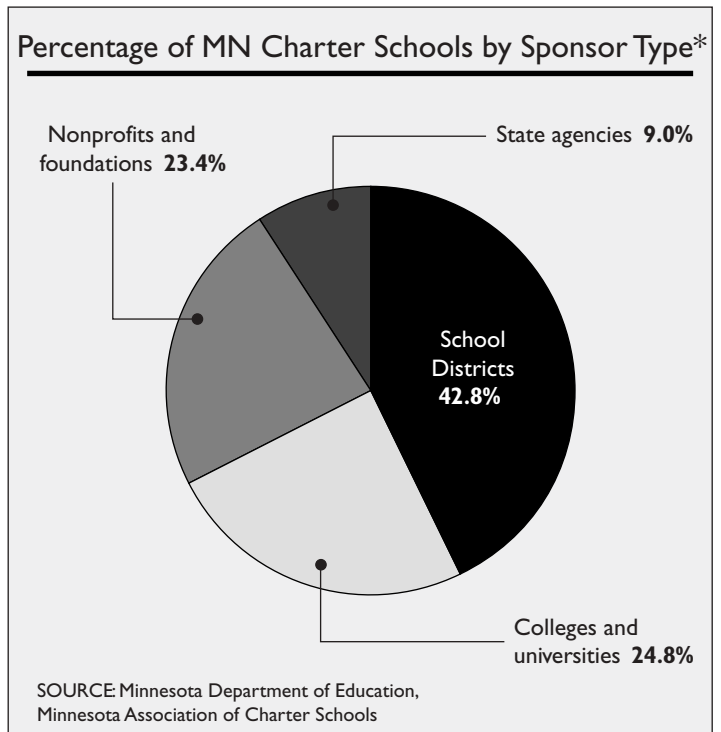
approved, but never opened. About one-third of the schools that have been closed did so voluntarily, while the others were closed by their sponsors during or at the end of what are up to three-year terms. In most cases, the closures were due to administrative, governance, or financial problems, although academic shortcomings were often just below the surface (see table on Page 28).

The pace of closures has dropped significantly in the last two years after a peak of 12 closures in 2000 and 2001. That led to no net growth in the number of charters operating that year. The string of closures also raised serious concerns in the Legislature and elsewhere about the capacity of charter schools to competently manage their affairs. One outcome of that concern has been increase of technical assistance and management training for charter developers and operators. Another has been closer scrutiny of school finances, governance, and administration by charter school sponsors. One indicator of the impact of these initiatives is that the number of charter schools in what state law defines as “Statutory Operating Debt” has declined from 20 charter schools in 2001, to seven in 2002, and just two in 2003.

It should also be noted that the state’s charter school leadership—particularly the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools—has supported virtually all of the closure decisions and has worked closely with both the boards of the schools and the sponsors to ensure the smoothest possible transition of students, staff, and programs to other educational settings.

In recent years, there has also been a modest trend toward changing sponsors from one organization to another—when a sponsor is no longer interested in performing its duties, or the school wishes to affiliate with an organization it feels will better support its mission. Overall, 11 such switches in sponsorship have now occurred, with more likely

this spring and summer. These changes must be approved by the State Department of Education. This year, the State Department itself was forced to assume sponsorship for several schools whose sponsors did not wish to continue in that role. This is intended to be temporary, although the State Department is also the permanent sponsor for nine charters it has granted on appeal.



* For all approved schools

Law has been strengthened and defended despite status quo opposition

Minnesota’s mainline education interest groups—the teachers unions, schools boards, and administrators associations—opposed adoption of Minnesota’s charter law in 1991 and have opposed its strengthening over time. They have acted largely behind the scenes, however, and without the kind of high-profile killer amendments, lawsuits, targeting of pro-charter legislators in the media, direct involvement in election

campaigns or other similar tactics that have been used by charter opponents in other states.

When they do testify in the Legislature, opposition lobbyists generally begin their statements with, “We support charter schools, but ...” They then go on to urge caution in further expanding the number of charters in the absence of more substantial evidence of their success.

The main concerns raised by charter opponents, of course, continue to revolve around the movement of money that follows students from one school choice to another. This is disruptive to districts and, understandably, something they would rather not have to plan for or deal with.

But because chartering has been done in Minnesota in the context of broader public school choice options, it has become increasingly difficult for districts to make the case that money should not be following student choices. Districts have created alternative programs for students who are not succeeding in traditional district schools. Districts themselves are now also aggressively recruiting students from each other under the state’s interdistrict open enrollment program. A growing number of them are offering online learning options that can enroll students statewide. And, as noted above, almost 10 percent of Minnesota school districts—enrolling about 30 percent of the state’s public school students—have now granted charters themselves.

Implications of the evolution of Minnesota’s law for other states

During the last 13 years, Minnesota has both inspired and benefited from policy development

around charters in other states. Of course, 39 states and Congress, legislating for the District of Columbia, have now followed Minnesota’s initial leadership by enacting charter laws of their own. But Minnesota has also borrowed heavily from more recently enacted state laws in making several of the changes outlined above—including conversion provisions in California, university sponsorship in Michigan, and the state board appeal option in Colorado.

“My mom is proud. She now sees what I can do!”

—Student at High School for the
Recording Arts in St. Paul

One important tactical lesson from Minnesota may be the potential for strengthening a state’s charter law over time. Charter advocates

in states initially passing laws often have to make a hard choice between accepting a relatively weak law or postponing their fight for another day. In Minnesota, a law with serious weaknesses has been incrementally strengthened—as the constituency for the idea has grown and made itself felt in the legislative process, as hard evidence of problems with certain provisions of the law has emerged, and as myths and concerns raised earlier have been dispelled.

It has generally helped the charter cause that the strengthening amendments have been included in the annual “omnibus” education bills that are put together in conference committees. This makes it difficult for interest groups to urge legislators to vote “no” on final floor passage since they would also be putting at risk funding and other provisions they support.

Every state is different, but Minnesota may be demonstrating that the charter idea is powerful enough to help sell itself over time, if given the opportunity. Minnesota’s experience also provides hope that policy development around charters can be self-improving—given vigilance of an active and growing volume of stakeholder and political support.

Evaluating Charters and Chartering

“Success” Depends on How You Define It and on Who Is Asked

This report was not intended to produce original research on student achievement gains and other outcomes, either for Minnesota charter schools and students or for chartering as a broader strategy for educational change and improvement. And, unfortunately, existing data sources have not done detailed analyses of how well the state’s charters and chartering are doing at achieving school-level or state-level goals.

One factor in this lack of analysis is that Minnesota has historically lagged behind other states in establishing uniform and easily measured, comparable standards and related testing requirements. That is changing now, with federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements and repeal—in 2003—of the state’s controversial and less measurable or comparable “Profiles of Learning.” The Profiles were criticized on a number of fronts for being overly bureaucratic and burdensome for teachers, and not specific and measurable enough in telling students what they need to know.

In their place, the state is now introducing new standards for math, reading, and other subjects that are similar to how other states measure and report student achievement. They should, if tests are properly aligned, make it easier to measure and compare progress in the future. All public schools in the state are now scrambling to adapt curriculum to the new math and reading standards. New or adapted state tests will follow and be used to determine if Minnesota schools and students are making the degree of annual progress toward proficiency required to avoid the consequences spelled out in NCLB.

In the meantime, the indicator getting the most attention is whether schools did or did not make

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) using testing data that has previously been available. A quick analysis of those designations finds that as of mid-February 2004, 12 Minnesota charters did not make AYP last year. This tally also shows that 43 Minnesota charters made AYP, with the balance apparently too small or too new to be judged.

“Snapshot testing” has made school-level reporting and comparisons difficult

Prior to passage of NCLB, Minnesota’s education accountability system included reading and math tests administered each year to all third and fifth graders. Fifth and tenth graders have also been required to take statewide writing tests. And basic skill tests—in reading and math—have been administered to all students in the eighth grade. To qualify for high school graduation, students must take the eighth grade reading and math tests (and the 10th grade writing test) until they pass. As public schools, charter schools have been required to participate in the same standardized tests.

Historically, these state-mandated tests have been reported as “snapshots” of a school’s performance in a given year. The reading scores of last year’s third graders, for example, are compared to this year’s third graders. There has been no statewide requirement or mechanism to document *gains* in the performance of individual students, teachers, or schools over time.

From an analytical standpoint, that is problematic for new schools, very small schools, and schools with highly mobile student populations. At best, it provides an incomplete accounting of an individual school’s performance. Used inappropriately, such

testing and test reporting can mislabel schools and divert energy from developing needed and better ways of both improving student achievement and holding schools accountable.

So, how are Minnesota charter schools doing? It depends on which schools and who's asked

One set of evidence, of course, is the marketplace—the growing number of schools and growing number of families choosing them. Some schools have waiting lists. Others have been forced to add sections or grade levels in response to student/parent demand.

Another set of anecdotal evidence is the growing recognition given Minnesota charters by their educational colleagues and peers. Twelve Minnesota charter schools have now gained accreditation from the North Central Association/Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement. And in 2003, Community of Peace Charter Academy in St. Paul received a prestigious National Schools of Character Award from the National Character Education Partnership.

Not surprisingly, Minnesota charter schools have done superbly, average, and poorly—as measured by the state's tests and the evolving definitions of what is needed to meet NCLB requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward proficiency for all students. Also not surprisingly, achievement gains as determined by these measures tend to reflect how long individual schools have been in operation and the demographics of their students.

As noted above, Minnesota's charter schools are highly diverse—in their size, missions, learning methods, and student populations. A majority of Minnesota's 88 charter schools have opened in the last four years. The small average size of Minnesota charter schools also means that sample sizes are

often too small to support valid statistical comparisons for individual schools or student subgroups. As a whole, they serve populations that are more urban, lower income and higher in their percentages of students of color. And a number of the schools disproportionately serve English Language Learners (ELL) and students with special needs.

Despite these demographic realities, a recent analysis of 2003 state test data by the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) found that:

- ❑ In Minneapolis, three of the eight charters reporting third grade reading scores outperformed the districtwide average: Harvest Prep Academy, Minnesota Transitions, and the Woodson Institute for Student Excellence. All three serve very high concentrations of low-income students and students of color.
- ❑ Harvest Prep also significantly outperformed the districtwide average on the third grade math test. For fifth graders, two Minneapolis-sponsored charters—Cyber Village Academy and Harvest Prep—outperformed the district average on the state's reading test.
- ❑ In the Twin Cities suburbs and rest of the state, about one-half the charters are outperforming the statewide averages in reading in both the third and fifth grades, despite higher than average percentages of low-income students, students of color, and special education students.
- ❑ In St. Paul, none of the city's charters outperformed the districtwide average in 2003 on either the state's third or fifth grade math or reading tests. However, by the time students take the eighth grade basic skills test, the results do show gains, with a better showing against

Achievement Gap Adds Urgency to the Task

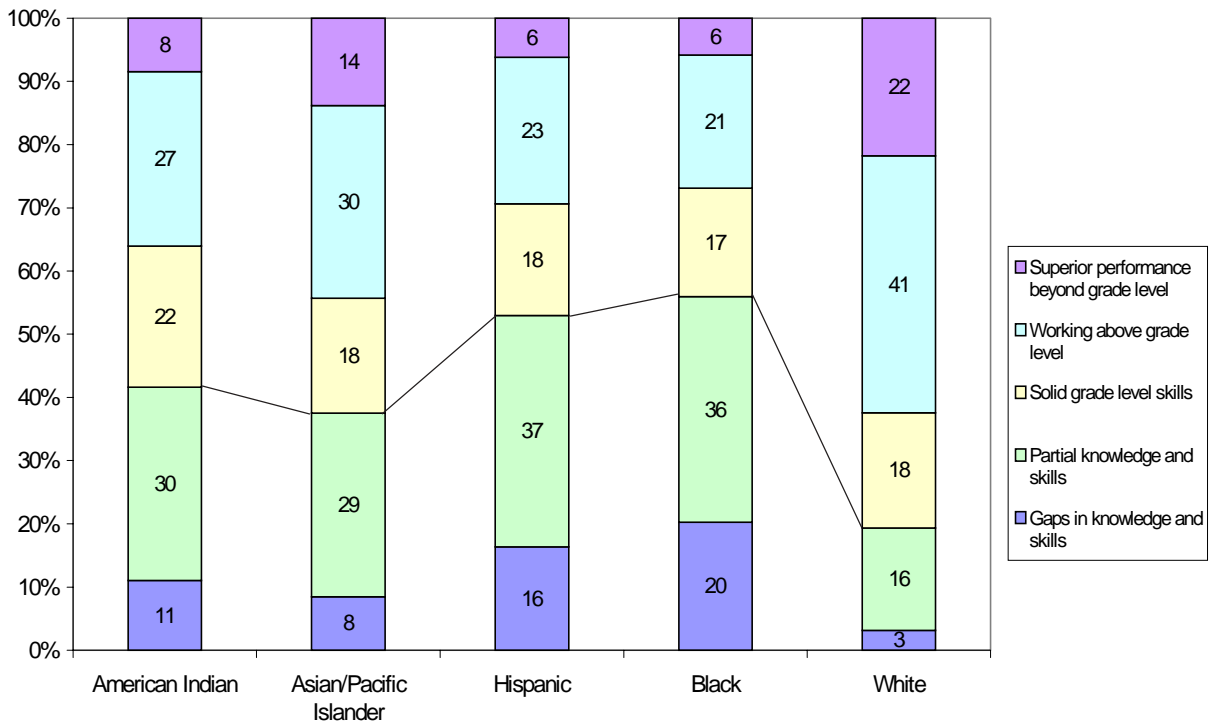
Regular listeners to Garrison Keillor’s “A Prairie Home Companion” may have the mistaken impression that there is a less urgent need to change and improve public education in Minnesota. At least in mythical Lake Webegon, “all children are above average.” Aside from the statistical impossibility of such a claim, “tain’t so.”

It is true that, using aggregate and average testing and other student performance data, Minnesota continues to look very good when compared to other states. Students score well on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, as well as the ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate tests, all taken by students who are headed for college.

But one of Minnesota’s no longer well-kept secrets is that the state has huge and unacceptable gaps in achievement levels and high school graduate rates among its increasingly diverse communities.

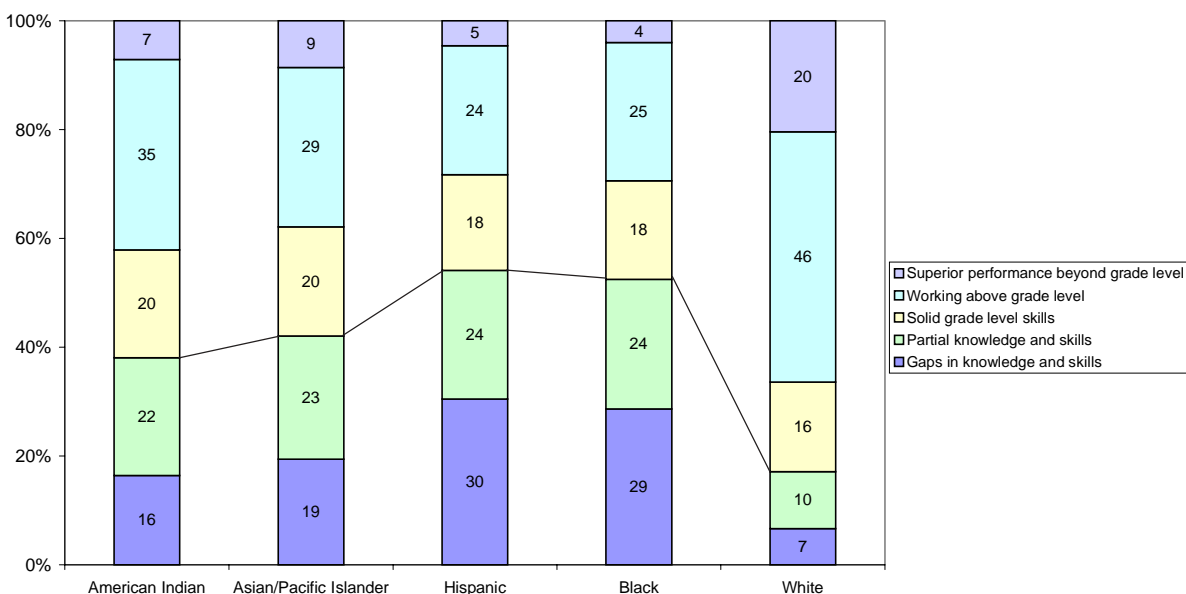
According to the Center on Education Policy, the state has the largest achievement difference between African-American and white students among the 19 states that require graduation exams. The Center notes that 78 percent of Minnesota’s white students passed the math portion of the state’s eighth-grade basis skills test on the first try, compared with 33 percent of the black students. And the rate at which black students pass the reading portion of the eighth grade basic skills test lags 38 percentage points behind white students.

Third Grade Minnesota Comprehensive Math Achievement Levels in 2003, By Ethnicity



SOURCE: Minnesota Department of Education

Third Grade Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Reading Achievement Levels in 2003 by Ethnicity



SOURCE: Minnesota Department of Education

The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership (MMEP) recently issued a report further documenting these gaps across a number of different racial and ethnic groups in the state. The graphs above show the differences among students of various racial groups on the state's third grade standardized tests for both reading and math.

In math, for example, 63 percent of white students in the state exhibited either "superior performance beyond grade level" or "solid grade level skills," while the percentage totals in those two categories for American Indian students was 36 percent, 44 percent for Asian/Pacific Islander students, 29 percent for Hispanics, and 27 percent for black students. For third grade reading, the percentages of students in these two top categories was 66 percent for white students, 42 percent for American Indians, 28 percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 29 percent for both Hispanic and black students.

The MMEP report documents similar gaps in high school completion and college attendance rates. In 2001, for example, the Minnesota Department of Education found 39 percent of black students graduated in four years, compared to 43 percent of American Indian students, 47 percent of Hispanic students, 68 percent of Asian students, and 83 percent of whites.

The MMEP argues that the urgency to address these disparities is growing as the percentage of the state's population in lower-performing demographic groups continues to grow. And the MMEP notes that—with huge percentage increases in non-white populations now living in selected suburbs and rural communities—these gaps in student achievement are no longer a concern only in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

citywide averages—especially in math, where three of four charters in St. Paul reported test data outperformed the districtwide average in 2003. Those three schools were Twin Cities Academy, Community of Peace, and Higher Ground Academy.

- Community of Peace had particularly strong results in math, ranking among the top 20 schools in the state in gains in math scores between the fifth and eighth grades. No other school on the top 20 list had such a high concentration of low-income students.

Test analysis helps make the case for independent ‘value-added assessment’ in addition to existing accountability measures

With some exceptions, like Community of Peace and Harvest Prep Academy, these snapshot test results document achievement gaps that are not significantly different from gaps in the district schools—especially in Minneapolis and St. Paul. But because of the newness, mobility, and demographics of many of the charters in the two central cities, the results also beg for the kind of “value-added assessment” that can track changes on an annual

basis for the same groups of students and for individual students.

That kind of test reporting is more common in the Minneapolis School District. But another set of analyses of Minneapolis charters—using tests the district administers to both its own schools and district-granted charters—also demonstrates the need for independent reporting of comparative testing data.

In late 2003, Minneapolis district leaders reported that a slightly higher share of its own students made a year’s progress on the district’s math and reading tests than did students attending district-sponsored charter schools. Two weeks later, however, the pro-charter Center for School Change reanalyzed the data and concluded that a majority of district-sponsored charters actually recorded higher shares of *students* making a year’s progress than did the district as a whole. The Center found that students in six of the nine district-sponsored charters made more progress in reading, math, or both than did the district as a whole. Five of the seven district-sponsored charters that had two years of test results also showed more progress than district schools in the share of students making at least a year’s progress in reading or math over a two-year period.

District Chartering: Choice Can Be for School Boards, Too

It would be naïve and inaccurate to claim that charter schools do not remain a burr under the saddle of most school boards, district administrators, and teachers union leaders in Minnesota. Losing an exclusive franchise and claim on students and the money they bring with them, is not an easy thing to accept.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, since 1992, almost 10 percent of Minnesota's school districts—with about 30 percent of all state's enrollment—have granted a total of 62 charters. Many of these charters have been renewed and most are still operating. And, in a few places around the state, chartering is now being done proactively by districts—to add new choices and new opportunities for students, families, and teachers.

One of the more proactive districts is Northfield, a well-educated college community just 45 miles south of Minneapolis. The Northfield school board has now granted three charters, including an innovative new high school—ARTech—that opened last fall. Just 15 miles away in Faribault, Superintendent Keith Dixon has become a near folk hero in the charter school movement with his positive and professional approach in chartering a former district elementary school in nearby Nerstrand. Dixon also points with pride to a still-unused provision his board negotiated in the district's master contract, allowing district school teachers to set up charter-like schools within existing district buildings.

Another 20 miles southwest of Faribault, the district board and administrators in Waseca have proactively chartered a new elementary school that will offer a new choice to the district's students, including students from a growing number of Hispanic families living in the community. And in suburban Minneapolis, the Hopkins School District—arguably one of the state's best—is opening a new arts high school this fall in partnership with local artists and a highly regarded community theater group.

Perhaps of greatest interest is discussion now going on in Minneapolis about how to deal with natural enrollment decline and competition from charters and other choice options that has left the state's largest district with an estimated 800 empty classrooms. Part of Interim Superintendent Dave Jennings' solution to the dilemma is an active program of chartering—both new schools and conversions of existing schools.

In February 2004, the Minneapolis School Board postponed a decision on Jennings' recommendations, as well as his plan to close and reconfigure a number of existing district schools. Meanwhile, the board is in the early stages of a search process designed to hire a permanent replacement for Jennings by sometime later this summer or fall.

Minneapolis is clearly a school district at a major crossroads in its history, in part because of choices made by what will soon be 10 percent of its students to attend charter schools. One obvious answer is for the district to ask parents and students why they have made that choice and then proactively create new charter schools that respond.

Needed: New Ways of Evaluating not Just Schools, but the Law and Its Implementation

Besides including the kind of value-added assessment that tracks long-term individual student and school gains, any meaningful comparisons of existing data will need to factor in other characteristics of schools including their age, student demographics and mobility, types of learning programs, and management and governance models.

Only then will meaningful comparisons and conclusions be possible. Until then, making gross comparisons of averages of charter and district school test results may satisfy journalistic curiosity and be useful to advocates for one type of school over another. But they will not be of much value to either policymakers trying to evaluate the effectiveness of a state charter law or to leaders of individual charter schools trying to figure out what is working in the individual classroom, what is not working, and why.

At least that is the argument made by public policy veteran and charter pioneer Ted Kolderie in a recent paper written for *Education/Evolving* and published as commentary in *Education Week* in September 2003. Instead, Kolderie argues that policymakers should be separately evaluating chartering as a strategy for education change and improvement. To that end, Kolderie lays out a framework for evaluating chartering that *Education/Evolving* has now translated into a model Request for Proposals (RFP) for states, sponsors, researchers, and others.

One framework for such an evaluation is to use the state's original goals that were articulated in the legislation that authorized chartering of new public schools in the first place. Using that framework, here are the six goals in Minnesota's original charter law, along with at least preliminary indicators of whether those goals are, in fact, being achieved.

Goal #1: Improve student learning

This is a critical question, of course, that is partly addressed above in the context of existing state and federal testing and accountability requirements; or in cases like Minneapolis, based on tests required by sponsors. Using these standard measures, results to date are clearly mixed and inconclusive, with student demographics and newness of most schools playing a bigger factor in testing results than whether schools are chartered or not.

One readily available source for evaluating this goal should be the annual progress reports that all charter schools are required to file each year with their sponsors and the state Department of Education. These reports are supposed to cite progress made on academic and non-academic goals set down in each school's charter agreement with its sponsor. Presumably, each school should be required to quantify these goals and determine what tests or other instruments are used to measure progress toward achieving them.

Another source of data could be surveys taken of parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders on how satisfied they are with the school and its progress toward achieving student learning and other important goals. One rare source of this kind of stakeholder opinion is the Minneapolis School District, which reported in November 2003 that 97 percent of parents of Minneapolis charter school students were satisfied with their schools. This was significantly higher than satisfaction rates for district school parents, particularly when demographics were factored in. The biggest parental concerns about district schools, especially for parents of students of color, centered around poor discipline and growing gaps in student

achievement levels. The survey found that these concerns are being addressed more successfully in Minneapolis charter schools than in Minneapolis district schools.

The findings in the Minneapolis survey were consistent with less scientific conclusions in a report on “school culture” issued in mid-2003 by St. Paul-based Education/Evolving. The report was the product of a series of visits and conversations with students, parents, teachers, and others in 10 Minnesota charter schools.

The report found that most of the students and parents interviewed place highest value on a number of characteristics of their schools that might be grouped under a common heading of

“positive school culture.” These characteristics include small school and class size; familiarity and regular contact between students, teachers and other adults; individualized instructional methods; the school’s mission or focus; more flexibility in scheduling; pacing of student learning; an increased role for teachers in school-level decisionmaking; and, overall, a more positive and welcoming environment for students and their families.

Students attending these 10 charter schools—all in the Twin Cities area—generally come from larger district schools and reflect their racial, income, and language diversity. One significant factor in the positive evaluation of their new charter school environment is a sense of order, discipline, and safety. The Education/Evolving report cited a number of positive outcomes they attributed to the students’ views about positive school culture, in-

cluding better student and teacher attitudes, increased student motivation, a greater feeling of safety, better behavior, and higher attendance.

Goal #2: Increase learning opportunities for pupils

The fact that more than 100 new public schools have been created under Minnesota’s charter law is clear evidence that this goal is being met. That is particularly true in areas where charter schools are concentrated—for example, in Minneapolis and St.

Paul where more than 50 new school choices have been created. Other communities that have, relative to their size, benefited from this goal

“Cyber Village Academy is like the real world. In the real world you can move ahead if you want, or take more time to learn something if you need to. You have to meet due dates, but people don’t tell you when to do your work. We also learn time management. You need that for the real world, too.”

—Student at Cyber Village Academy in St. Paul

include Duluth, Bemidji, Northfield, LeSueur-Henderson, and Faribault.

The availability of these new choices has also stimulated districts to offer students and families additional choices in district schools. The St. Paul School District, for example, cited growing competition from charters as a key reason for adding a Hmong language and culture program to its Phalen Lake Elementary School. The Minneapolis district has begun offering more K-8 schools, citing the positive response of parents in the city to charters that offer that option. And shortly after Minnesota passed its charter legislation, parents in the Forest Lake school district proposed a Montessori charter and the district then decided to open one itself. (See sidebar on Page 37 for the impact of charter and other competition on district public schools in Minneapolis.)

Goal #3: Encourage the use of different, innovative teaching methods

Beyond the *number* of choices, are charters offering choices that are *different*? And, how different? One clear answer is that charters are offering smaller-scale options to students and families that have historically had to pay tuition in private schools to get school and class sizes comparable to those they are now accessing for free. Charters are also offering more families the opportunity to enroll their students in the same school for longer periods of time—with more K-12, 6/7-12, and K-8 options available in charters than are generally available, especially in large urban districts.

Higher degrees of parent and community involvement are also significant differences in many charter schools, particularly those serving lower-income families and families of color, and in recent immigrant and refugee communities. Although the cultures are very different, a stronger role for parents and the broader community is also evident in several charter schools in smaller rural communities, including those in Echo, Lafayette, Nerstrand, and Emily.

Of course, there are also a number of charter schools that do look and act very differently from most current district public schools. For example, a growing number of charters are offering what is often described by parents as “back to basics” curriculum—particularly in reading and math. A few charters are making extensive use of online learning, including Cyber Village Academy, Minnesota Transitions, and a former district program now-turned-charter in Chisago Lakes. Metro Deaf School—and its new high school now under development—also offers a distinct alternative for students who have heretofore had to choose be-

tween attending residential schools away from their families or being mainstreamed with students that do not have hearing impairments. And, a number of charters, including the 12 affiliated with EdVisions Schools, are using project-based learning. In its purest form, these schools offer a very different kind of environment outside the traditional course/curriculum approach to teaching and learning.

“Teachers get to know you more here. There’s more freedom because there’s more trust.”

—Student at Avalon High School in St. Paul

Goal #4: Require the measurement of learning outcomes and create different, innovative forms of measuring outcomes

Just by their existence, charters have fundamentally changed the focus of accountability and its emphasis on setting goals and measuring and monitoring progress toward achieving them. It is also significant that 17 of the 105 charters that have opened to date in Minnesota have been closed. Although most of these closures were fueled by management and governance problems, lack of progress in improving student achievement has often been just below the surface. Closing schools—particularly at this pace for reasons relating to their performance—is in and of itself a new and healthy form of accountability.

It is important to note that, since Minnesota’s charter law was first adopted in 1991, policymakers, journalists, and others have placed a much greater emphasis on measuring student academic outcomes using standardized tests, rather than on measures unique to the mission and goals of each school. That reality has no doubt stifled at least some of the energy and commitment needed to “create different and innovative forms of measuring outcomes,” as prescribed by the state’s charter law. Nevertheless, that mandate remains in force. And, if charters are to ever have any hope of altering public policies in this regard, their leaders and

supporters will need to place a much higher priority on creating additional ways of measuring learner outcomes, as well as explaining in understandable terms why they are superior measures of what is actually going on in their schools.

Goal #5: Establish new forms of accountability for schools

Beyond testing methodology that is better aligned with the unique mission, goals, and student population of each school, charter schools have also had the opportunity to design new governance mechanisms for holding school leaders and teachers accountable. And, with its diverse array of sponsors, Minnesota is in an ideal position to establish new forms of oversight and accountability that can be used to monitor school performance, intervene if necessary, and ultimately determine whether a school's charter should be renewed or revoked.

The existence of a fixed-term contract that has to be periodically evaluated and renewed represents a significant change in school-level accountability for public schools in Minnesota. Several long-term Minnesota charters have now gone through that renewal process three or even four times. In addition to the fixed-term contract, Minnesota charters are also required to submit an annual report to the state and their sponsors. Properly done, this report can also provide an important context for reviewing and assessing progress on school-level goals.

Finally, the fact that all charter schools are schools of choice adds an extra degree of accountability for satisfying parents and students. Several of the charter schools that have closed in Minnesota did so because they could not attract enough students to remain financially viable. This exposure to the marketplace has been even more demanding for Minnesota charters because of the scrutiny they have been given by some elements of the media—in some cases fueled by critics and opponents of the charter idea itself.

Goal #6: Create new professional opportunities for teachers

Finally, as noted earlier, Minnesota has a unique statutory provision that, absent a waiver, a majority of the governing board of the state's charter schools must be licensed teachers working in the school. While there are differences over the wisdom of this requirement, there is no question that it has helped produce new professional opportunities for hundreds of charter school teachers all across the state. Some 350 charter school teachers, for example, are now sitting on the governing boards of Minnesota charter schools. In many other schools, there are flatter and more participatory internal management arrangements. Some schools have "lead teachers" rather than principals. Others have divided the management function between a lead teacher or academic administrator and a nonprofit executive or business manager.

In the Minnesota charters affiliated with EdVisions Schools, the charter opportunity has gone further by allowing teachers to form cooperatives or other types of professional practice arrangements that have been more prevalent in professions such as law, medicine, accounting, and architecture. Now teachers can also organize their own professional practices, employ administrators who report to *them*, share financial rewards, and accept and exercise a new level of authority and responsibility for their professional lives.

It is interesting to note that, although it is permissible, teachers in none of the more than 100 charters that have opened in Minnesota since 1992 have organized and bargained collectively as their own local union. That is not to say that all Minnesota charters have been ideal employers. And it is not to argue that the option to organize and bargain collectively should not exist nor ever be used. But, it does suggest a work environment in many charters that is fundamentally different from those found in most districts and district schools.

Future Ripples: The Next Generation of Minnesota's National Leadership on Charter Schools and Chartering

Seven Broad Recommendations to Address the Challenges and Opportunities Now Facing Education and Public Policy Leadership—both in Minnesota and Nationally

For two decades now, Minnesotans have been leading the nation in making decisions and taking actions to advance a broad strategy of expanding choice and choices within public education. Beginning in the 1980s, the state opened new choices to parents and students through Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, interdistrict open enrollment, and the creation of new “second chance” alternative schools. In 1991, the Minnesota legislature created a new option by enacting the nation’s first charter school law. Since then it has continued to expand opportunities to create or sponsor charter schools and opened new revenue streams to Minnesota charter schools. In addition to making Minnesota a national leader in charter school and public school choice options, this public authority and support has also attracted private sector philanthropy from outside the state and promoted increased non-governmental capacity to support non-district public schools.

Now, in 2004, Minnesotans stand at a critical crossroads—both in addressing their own educational challenges and opportunities, and in providing inspiration and leadership to the rest of the country.

Minnesotans could remain on their current course—viewing chartering as a useful, but somewhat peripheral, element of efforts to change and improve existing public schools. And Minnesotans could continue to respond to and support what appears to be a moderate stream of good ideas put forward by educators and others proposing new charter schools. Or Minnesotans

could become much more strategic and pro-active in identifying gaps in the educational environments the state now has—and then use chartering to create many more and significantly different schools from scratch.

The second of these two options is clearly the preferred and necessary route for moving charters and chartering to a new level. Exercising that option will require action on a number of fronts—both involving public policy initiatives and private sector support.

A start on that action agenda—for Minnesota policymakers, and education and public policy leaders—is grouped under the following seven broad recommendations. And, while these recommendations are primarily intended for audiences within Minnesota, they—like previous initiatives that have their origins here—should have relevance and value to other states as well.

- ❑ **First, articulate a clear and convincing rationale for chartering—as a mechanism to address serious gaps in the capacity of our current educational system to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse student population—by creating many more new and different public schools of choice.**

This strategy for change needs to be at least on par with parallel strategies to change and improve the schools we now have. This is not to say that parallel effort—now largely focused on implementation of NCLB—should not go forward. It is to say that it is neither wise nor responsible to

pin all of our hopes and expectations for necessary change and improvement on strategies that depend so heavily on changing existing schools.

The “new schools strategy” must also be articulated in ways to ensure that state leadership and policy support for charters and chartering can transcend changes in the state’s political and policy leadership. Fortunately, that should be possible since chartering should enjoy the philosophical support of those on the conservative side of the political spectrum, while providing new and better options for many students and families that have traditionally supported liberal policymakers and elected officials. Maintaining this broad bipartisan coalition of support is critical in overcoming strong, entrenched defenders of the status quo.

Finally, this broader context for the importance of chartering must be used to a much greater extent in responding to the question, “*How are charter schools doing?*” This question must now be modified to ask, “*How is chartering doing—as a mechanism for getting the new, different, and better schools it must now have?*”

❑ **Second, continue to expand the boundaries that have historically defined “public education,” while preserving its most essential core elements.**

Minnesotans have a deep, historic commitment to public education. But over time, the definition of “public education” in Minnesota has consciously and systematically been expanded. It now includes:

- Juniors and seniors in public and private high schools attending public and private universities at state expense.
- School districts contracting with private, nonprofit organizations to provide public education to students not succeeding in district public schools.

- Private, nonprofit organizations being granted charters and receiving public funding to deliver public education on a reasonably equal basis with districts.
- Private universities, nonprofit organizations, and foundations having the authority to grant charters and provide ongoing oversight of charter public schools.

In the future, it is likely that this expansion in how Minnesotans define public education will continue, with resulting implications for the rest of the country. And, done right, with broad bipartisan support, this approach to improving education could represent a major breakthrough in narrowing differences among those who have historically supported more traditional definitions of both public and private school choice.

Whether that happens will depend on a continued willingness by education policy leaders to focus on ends, rather than means. It will also require a strong emphasis on creating high-quality learning environments that produce better results. And it will depend on maintaining a strong commitment to creating and preserving access to high-quality learning opportunities for all Minnesota students.

❑ **Third, use charters and chartering more strategically and proactively to address huge gaps in student achievement levels among racial and other demographic groups, and better serve the increasing diversity in the state’s student population, while also contributing to racial and ethnic integration.**

Minnesotans need to become much more comfortable with the reality that their current education system works quite well for large numbers of students, but is nowhere near adequate for many oth-

ers. It is simply not acceptable that Minnesota has the nation's widest gap in achievement levels and graduation rates between white students and students of color. This realization requires discipline on the part of those seeking change in how they characterize the state's public education system as a whole. And it requires an openness and much less defensive posture on the part of historic defenders of traditional public education—to admit to deficiencies and to have an open mind about supporting new and different options.

Overall, it requires Minnesotans to be much more strategic and proactive in identifying gaps or deficiencies that now exist and in filling those gaps by creating many more new schools. For a state that has historically looked inward for solutions to its failings, this must also include replication of proven, successful school models developed in other states. And it must include making more effective use of new educational technologies and teaching and learning methods that engage and motivate students who are now either failing in or have already left the current system.

One way to make Minnesota more strategic and proactive in chartering new schools is new, single-purpose nonprofit sponsoring organizations. These new nonprofit sponsors would have no other mission than to grant charters and oversee charter schools. They would also specialize in specific types of schools or specific, unmet student needs. And they would be proactive—requesting proposals and seeking out the best models available to address the priority needs they identify—both nationally and from within the state.

“I like my school because it has better discipline. It's strict and there's more work. But I like to work hard.”

—Student at Metro Deaf School In St. Paul

Among the existing new school strategies that need both encouragement and caution is creation of new schools by and largely for students of a particular racial, ethnic, immigrant, or refugee community. Minnesota now has a number of these “ethnocentric” charter schools started in and by the state's increasingly diverse collection of communities: Hispanic/Latino, Southeast Asian/Hmong, East African/Somali, Native American, African American, and others (see sidebar on Page 13). This trend is supported in part by an increasingly diverse collection of charter school sponsors that serve these communities, including

the Lao Family Community, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Pillsbury United Communities, Project for Pride in Living, James Ford Bell Foundation,

Volunteers of America/Minnesota, and the YMCA of Greater Minneapolis.

Done right, these ethnocentric charter schools provide both learning opportunities for students not doing well in the current system and an empowerment mechanism for families and communities. They need to be judged on their results, particularly in producing better outcomes for students who are low income, highly mobile, and English Language Learners. At the same time, charter school advocates need to be creative in designing voluntary strategies that will encourage sharing social and cultural assets *among* communities and that will discourage permanent racial and ethnic isolation.

- ❑ **Fourth, continue to strengthen the capacity of a diverse array of sponsors to provide appropriate oversight and promote more responsive, cost-effective ways of providing**

functions historically provided by central district office administrators and by unions.

While creating new and more proactive sponsoring organizations, Minnesota also needs to continue to strengthen the sponsors it already has. The Charter School Sponsor Collaborative created by Education/Evolving offers a good base for this activity. It should now expand its membership to include more of the state's 60 or so sponsors, including school districts. The Collaborative should also broadly disseminate and encourage use of its recently produced resource guide for sponsors.

Short of traditional regulation, sponsors need to be encouraged and rewarded for upgrading their commitment and capacity to charter along the lines recommended by the Collaborative's recently published resource guide. One option is to limit participation in the Collaborative to those sponsors who agree to abide by a common set of principles or even standards the Collaborative develops. In return, such sponsors might be given greater deference in the state's approval process for new charters. Or such sponsors might be able to access additional financial resources to support their sponsoring activities.

There is no question that chartering is now being subsidized by most of the state's sponsors. That is a barrier to both expanding the number of schools many sponsors charter and increasing their capacity to carry out their multiple roles. Some combination of federal, state, school, and private revenue sources must be made available to all sponsors in Minnesota who agree to some common set of standards designed to improve the quality of their work.

At the same time, many more school districts need to see chartering as a strategic opportunity to expand and strengthen the educational options available to their students. As a start, pending legislation offering districts additional encouragement

to grant charters should be adopted. More districts—and their unions—should also develop models for selling administrative, financial, professional development, and other services to charter schools. In all cases, this must be done without recreating the bureaucracy and prescriptive compliance-oriented oversight of traditional districts.

- ❑ **Fifth, better document the successes of individual charter schools in meeting the student achievement goals of No Child Left Behind, as well as the unique mission and attributes of each charter school.**

It is no secret that many charter—and non-charter—educators in Minnesota have serious reservations about what they view as a “one-size-fits-all” approach to academic accountability that is presumed in NCLB. They are particularly concerned about the uniform and relatively limited measures used to determine adequate annual progress toward student proficiency over the next decade.

Yet, because the NCLB goals are unlikely to change, charter school operators and sponsors must be more proactive about developing academic goals and appropriate measures of how they are doing to achieve them, to provide a more complete picture of each charter school's performance. Obviously, the state's standards for core subject areas must be included in this process. However, charters can also serve as models for developing new goals for the knowledge and skills students should be acquiring and measuring progress toward achieving those goals.

- ❑ **Sixth, use charters to test new and creative strategies for both expanding choice and choices—while also living within today's fiscal realities.**

Charter school advocates must continue to challenge the notion that both urban and rural learning

sites must be larger than research demonstrates they should be to serve the academic and other related interests of students. At the same time, making small schools—especially small high schools—realistically viable will require much more than evidence that they work well for students. Minnesota should lead the nation in developing and implementing financing and other policies that reverse what is now more than 70 years of policies designed to promote both larger schools and larger school districts. The following are among the policy initiatives needed to assure the viability of small public schools.

- ***Design creative, flexible, and affordable ways of financing school facilities.***

This includes a continued strong commitment to funding Minnesota's pioneering building lease aid program, coupled with removal of the current prohibition on charter schools owning buildings. Charter schools should also be able to access financing at rates comparable to the General Obligation bond rates available to school districts—perhaps through state-supported loan guarantee and loan pooling arrangements. And charter schools should be assured priority treatment in accessing excess building capacity in the district sector.

In the long term, charters should be viewed as an R&D opportunity for testing more flexible and affordable ways of financing facilities for all public schools. Ideally, such financing should be flexible enough to follow students to the growing number of choices being made available to them. It should also support a variety of sites for teaching and learning, including multi-use facilities and schools that benefit from co-locations and partnerships with other organizations. And it should not discourage creation of less capital-intensive schools that place a much greater emphasis on technology and on learning that takes place away from traditional school sites.

- ***Design creative and flexible ways of arranging and financing pupil transportation.***

One of the realities of offering more choice and *choices* is that it inevitably costs more to transport students to numerous, often smaller school sites. One of the realities facing Minnesota is that its strong commitment to school choice requires a greater state financial commitment to getting students to and from school and related activities. That is true both for charters and for districts when they offer a significant number of choices among their own schools.

Beyond money, however, education policy leaders in both the charter and district sectors should work together to develop new approaches to financing and organizing pupil transportation. This might include using public transportation systems where available and age-appropriate for students, subsidizing parents and other adults to transport students, and collaborating with employers, district and private schools, higher education institutions, and other common destinations. Safety of students must be paramount in exploring these or other options. But the affordability and feasibility of numerous, smaller school choices depends on both adequate financing and on finding new and more cost-effective ways of transporting students to and from those schools.

- ***Create new partnerships with districts and the community in organizing and financing extracurricular activities.***

Small high schools will inevitably struggle to provide the range of extracurricular activities that their students will demand. In the short term, it seems reasonable that charter school students be allowed to participate on sports teams and in other

extracurricular activities sponsored by their “home district” high school. Legislative proposals to ensure all such opportunity should be adopted, along with a requirement that the charter schools and students pay whatever fees and per-student subsidies are paid by district students and by the resident district.

Greater availability of small high schools may require fundamental changes in how extracurricular activities are organized and funded in the long run. Options worth serious study include organizing these activities on a geographic or community basis. Such arrangements would also include stronger partnerships with Community Education, city and county park and recreation departments, and non-school sports, arts, and other youth-serving organizations and activities.

- ***Create new models for financing and supporting educational services for students with special needs.***

As public schools, charters have an obligation to accept all students that enroll. And, in many states—including Minnesota—they have the same obligations as districts to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and other federal and state legislation pertaining to special education and students with disabilities. Minnesota charters have been able to take advantage of a pre-existing law that allows districts (including charters) to bill the district of residence special education services that exceed revenues received for that student.

This law has been essential to charters as a form of “catastrophic insurance protection” against individual high-cost cases that could otherwise bankrupt them. Ultimately, however, it may be that this backup financial protection is best provided by the state, rather than districts. Legislation encouraging the creation of state-level risk pools for this purpose is now pending in Congress.

Once that legislation is adopted, Minnesota charters and districts should work together to explore state-level options to the current district bill-back for excess special education costs. And in the long term, the state’s charter schools should be viewed as a laboratory for designing and testing new and more effective ways of serving special education students—within a context of both historic legal obligations and protections and today’s context of expanded parental options and choice.

- ***Match teacher qualifications and training with new and different types of learning.***

Unlike a number of states, Minnesota’s charter school law requires that all teachers in charter schools be certified. In addition, NCLB requires that charter and all other public school teachers be “highly qualified.” With this requirement, NCLB places a very high premium on being able to demonstrate competency in a core subject—like math, English, social studies, or science. The presumption, of course, is that students must always be taught one subject at a time and that content knowledge can only be transferred directly from teacher to student.

This requirement is problematic for charter high schools—and other small high schools—that have smaller numbers of students and that use project-based learning, Web-based curriculum, or other interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. To address common concerns, Minnesota charters have joined with district alternative high schools and small rural school districts to propose a new type of endorsement for teachers working in educational programs where students are not taught one subject at a time. As this discussion goes forward, Minnesota education officials and teacher training institutions and programs should continue to work with charter and other small school leaders to create

new kinds of teaching credentials that are both rigorous and also relevant to different and effective models of teaching and learning.

- **Seventh, broaden and deepen private-sector financial and other partnerships that support charter schools, and proactively seek greater non-financial support from community partners for creating and replicating high-quality new schools.**

Minnesota charter schools have been fortunate in receiving the generous support of two major national foundations—the Walton Family Foundation and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. These two funders have supported a number of individual charter schools, as well as several organizations that provide technical assistance and other infrastructure for Minnesota’s charter school movement. And a number of Minnesota charter schools have also received at least some assistance from local businesses and foundations—for their launch and ongoing support.

But to achieve the ambitious goals spelled out in this report, a much higher degree of private-sector support for charters and chartering will now be needed. Minnesota corporations and foundations, in particular, have a huge stake in moving new schools and chartering to the center

of the state’s mix of education improvement strategies.

To be strategic, non-governmental funders should work closely with the state’s education policy leadership to identify gaps in funding and help close them. Among the current gaps are initial pre-charter planning, financial support for existing and proposed sponsors, and documentation and replication of school models that have demonstrated success. A careful examination of funding options may find that the most strategic uses of available private sector funds include capacity-building initiatives that address common needs of a number of schools simultaneously, or funding networks of schools that share a common mission or that can share what they are doing well with other charter or district schools.

Private sector support and involvement in charter schools should not be limited to financial support. Assisting with facilities, making surplus furnishings or equipment available, and providing internship and other hands-on learning opportunities are all valuable contributions that can be made by both established businesses and nonprofit organizations in the community. And as noted earlier, one huge gap in Minnesota’s private-sector role in education is hands-on assistance in defining desired educational outcomes and the measures schools and others should use to determine if they are being achieved.

Conclusion

This report includes a number of findings and recommendations that will inevitably be of most immediate interest and value to Minnesota's education and policy leadership. The state that first made chartering possible is at a critical crossroads in the evolution of this innovative and promising idea.

Minnesotans now have the opportunity to become much more strategic and proactive in using chartering to create the number of new and different learning environments the state needs. Seizing that opportunity will require a second generation of policy leadership with ideas and commitment just as bold as the first.

But the challenges that Minnesota now faces are not unique. Neither are the opportunities. Virtually all states face growing gaps in academic achievement within an increasingly diverse student population. No state or community can afford to stand still in this competitive and global economy.

The first generation of policy development around charters and chartering was a constant stream of give and take—as states learned from and expanded upon the initiatives of others. Minnesota was both a source and beneficiary of much of that exchange. This report is intended to keep that ripple of good ideas going—and growing.

Resources

The information and observations contained in this paper draw heavily on the author's own knowledge and, via interviews, that of other Minnesota education policy leaders and observers. The statistical and other information on Minnesota's charter schools and sponsors is drawn from several data bases and websites maintained by the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools and Minnesota Department of Education. In addition, a number of print, electronic and other sources were used in developing this report. They included:

Reports and other documents

- "Alternative-Education Programs: The 'Quiet Giant' in Minnesota Public Education," *Education/Evolving* June 2003.
- "Center for School Change Public School Choice Poll," *Center for School Change, University of Minnesota*, February, 2003.
- "Charter School Closures: The Opportunity for Accountability," *Center for Education Reform*, October 2002.
- "Charter School Financial Accountability," *Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota*, June, 2003.
- "Charter School Laws Across the States: Ranking Scorecard and Legislative Profiles," *Center for Education Reform*, February 2004.
- "Evaluating Chartering: A case for assessing separately the institutional innovation," *Education/Evolving* October 2003.
- Junge, Ember Reichgott, "Honoring Minnesota's Innovative Charter School Law and the People Who Created It," unpublished paper used as part of Minnesota's application for the Harvard Innovations in Government Award, October 2000.
- Kolderie, Ted, "Charter Schools: The states begin to withdraw the exclusive," *Public Services Redesign Project*, October 1993.
- "Minnesota Charter Schools Snapshot," *Minnesota Association of Charter Schools*, February 2004.
- "Minnesota's Charter Schools, An evaluation report prepared for the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning," January 2003.
- "Minnesota Education Yearbook, the status of preK-12 education in Minnesota," *Office of Educational Accountability, University of Minnesota*, 2004.
- Minnesota Session Laws, Revisor of Statutes, State of Minnesota, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003.
- Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 124: 124D.10 and 124D.11, 2003.
- "Positive School Culture: Students and their families help answer the question: 'How are Minnesota's Chartered schools doing?'" *Education/Evolving* September 2003.

- “Profiles of Minnesota Charter Schools,” *Center for School Change, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, EdVisions Schools*, September 2003.
- “Seizing the Charter Opportunity: A report on expanding the support system for charter school development in Minnesota,” *Charter Friends National Network*, December 1996.
- “Sponsoring Chartered Schools: A Resource Guide for Minnesota Chartering Agencies,” *Education/Evolving* February 2004.
- “State of Students of Color 2004: Building Alliances for Student Success,” *Minnesota Minority Education Partnership*, February 2004.
- Jennings, David, “Sustained Success for Minnesota Public Schools: A plan for improving programs for students,” an unpublished paper presented to the School Board of Minnesota Public Schools, February 10, 2004.

Published articles

- “Achievement gap: Coalition has good suggestions,” Editorial, *Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul)*, February 22, 2004.
- Armstrong, Liz Schevtchuk, “Minnesota Lawmakers Renew Efforts to Allow Creation of Charter Schools,” *Education Week*, April 3, 1991.
- “Auditor’s report raises red flags, No Child Left Behind Impact in Minnesota,” Editorial, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Mar 2, 2004.
- Bowman, Darcia Harris, “Charter School Openings Lowest in Six Years,” *Education Week*, February 18, 2004.
- Brandt, Steve, “New test data analysis favors charter schools; Expert draws opposite conclusion,” *Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul)*, December 22, 2003.
- Christiansen, Nicole, “Charter School comes to Waseca,” *Mankato Free Press*, February 3, 2004.
- “Community of Peace Academy Wins National Character Education Award,” *Minnesota Association of Charter Schools*, November/December 2003.
- “District to take bold approach to defining the future of all schools,” Press Release, *Minneapolis Public Schools*, November 3, 2003.
- “East African Cultures and American Public Education Find Common Ground at International Schools,” *Minnesota Association of Charter Schools*, Winter 2004.
- “The Hmong in St. Paul: Journey to Thailand,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 22, 2004.
- Johnson, Denise, “Closing the gap,” *Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul)*, February 22, 2004.
- Johnson, Robert C., “Minnesota Desegregation Plan Gets High Marks, Will Go On,” *Education Week*, January 28, 2004.
- “The Mall of Somalia, Minneapolis’s Own Slice of Mogadishu,” *City Pages*, February 18, 2004.
- “Minneapolis public schools release findings of survey,” Press Release, *Minneapolis Public Schools*, November 18, 2003.
- “Minnesota Backs Nation’s First ‘Choice’ System,” *Education Week*, May 4, 1988.
- Olson, Lynn, “Nation’s First Charter School Clears a Key Hurdle,” *Education Week*, November 27, 1991.

- Shah, Allie, "Academics, discipline seen as Minneapolis schools' hurdles," *Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul)*, November 20, 2003.
- Shah, Allie, "Minneapolis schools prepare to compete for students," *Star Tribune (Minneapolis-St. Paul)*, November 4, 2003.
- Snider, William, "In Nation's First Open-Enrollment State, the Action Begins," *Education Week*, March 15, 1989.
- Snider, William, "Minnesota to Pilot Test 'Learner Outcomes' System," *Education Week*, May 31, 1989.
- Snider, William, "Perpich: An 'Out-front' Message in New Interstate Leadership Job," *Education Week*, October 19, 1988.
- Soenarie, Angelique, "Minnesota Schools: Minority enrollment grows," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 14, 2004.
- "Student achievement is a statewide concern," Editorial, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 11, 2004.
- Wallin, Rebecca, "Minnesota must meet college preparation and completion challenges to compete in the global economy," *Minnesota Journal*, January 27, 2004.
- Webb, Tom, "Web gives easy access to test data," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, January 30, 2004.
- Wehrwein, Austin, "Critics Assailing Minnesota Choice Plan," *Education Week*, October 23, 1985.
- Wehrwein, Austin, "Minnesota Senate Defeats Perpich's Choice Proposal," *Education Week*, May 1, 1985.
- Welsh, John, "Charter Schools mark a record," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 29, 2003.

Websites

- Center for Education Reform: <http://www.edform.com>.
- Charter School Leadership Council: <http://www.cslc.us>.
- Education/Evolving: <http://www.educationevolving.org>
- EdVisions Schools: <http://www.edvisions.coop>.
- Minnesota Association of Charter Schools: <http://www.mncharterschools.org>
- Minnesota Charter School Resource Center: <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change/handobok/ntcsp.htm>.
- Minnesota Department of Education: <http://www.education.state.mn.us/> and <http://www.schoolresults.org>
- National Charter School Alliance: <http://www.charterfriends.org>
- SchoolStart: <http://www.schoolstart.org>
- U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov> and <http://www.uscharterschools.org>

About the Author

Jon Schroeder is coordinator of Education/Evolving, a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University, both in St. Paul, Minn. He is also the founder and provides staff support for the Minnesota Charter School Forum, a coalition of more than 30 charter supporting organizations and leaders in Minnesota.

From 1996 to 2003, Jon was co-founder and director of Charter Friends National Network (CFNN), where he played a major role in assisting state charter school organizations, federal policy development, and other charter school activities nationally. He was also previously policy director in the office of former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger, where he helped conceive and enact legislation that, in 1994, became the federal charter school grant program.

Prior to joining Senator Durenberger's staff, Jon was publisher and editor of a weekly newspaper in west central Minnesota and a research associate for the Twin Cities Citizens League. He is a Minnesota native and has a bachelor's degree in political science from Macalester College in St. Paul.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for the advice, inspiration, and assistance in preparing this report from a number of individuals and organizations including: Steve Dess, Scott Flemming, Rod Haenke, and Julie Cutler of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools; Ted Kolderie, Joe Graba, Bob Wedl, and Kim Farris-Berg of Education/Evolving; Doug and Dee Thomas and their colleagues at EdVisions Schools; Joe Nathan and his colleagues at the Center for School Change and its Minnesota Charter School Resource Center; Morgan Brown and his colleagues at the Minnesota Department of Education; former State Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge; and the directors, students, parents, teachers, and others associated with Minnesota's more than 100 charter schools.