

3RD STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1995 The Washington Post
The Washington Post

December 05, 1995, Tuesday, Final Edition

SECTION: A SECTION; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 1413 words

HEADLINE: Embracing New Schools of Thought; States Charter Independent
Institutions to Improve Public Education

BYLINE: Rene Sanchez, Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

When its doors opened three years ago, the nation's first "charter" school was hailed by its founders as an idea bound to succeed. They just got proof that it has. In a landmark victory for charter school advocates around the country, the school board in St. Paul, Minn., last month extended the school's contract for three more years.

"This is great news for our students," said Milo Cutter, a director at the St. Paul charter school, called City Academy, which serves teenage dropouts. "And it's an important milestone for this movement."

Few ideas in American education today are building as much momentum as charter schools. The experiment that began quietly in Minnesota has taken root in 19 states and the District and has spawned about 250 new schools. Scores of the schools, from California to Massachusetts, opened this fall.

Charter schools are a relatively new approach to public schooling. They are funded with public money, usually the same amount that a state or school district spends per student. But they operate independently of traditional public schools.

Charter schools are free to set many of their own teaching and management rules, and student admission is determined by lottery. The work of the schools is evaluated each time their charters from state or local officials expire.

Around the nation, parents, civic groups, universities and nonprofit foundations are forming charter schools.

Charter schools are emerging as other provocative ideas to revamp public schooling -- such as giving students tuition vouchers for private schools or hiring private companies to teach them -- are mired in political battles and have yet to have widespread impact on students. Only one city, Milwaukee, has a voucher program and only a few others have turned over some of their existing schools to private management companies. In only one instance has a private company set up a charter school. Just last month, Baltimore ended one of the nation's most prominent experiments in school privatization.

The laws governing charter schools vary by jurisdiction. Essentially, though,

The Washington Post, December 05, 1995

any credible group or organization can develop a plan to set up a new school and seek a charter. In some cases the school board does the chartering; in some instances a university.

The gospel of charter schools is being embraced by a broad range of parents and lawmakers across the country who say they consider it a reasonable alternative to the problems that plague public schools -- without giving up on them entirely. Still, skeptics worry that the movement could ultimately damage public schools by shifting too much money away from the poor schools and students who need it most.

There are now nearly 80 charter schools operating in California. In Arizona, nearly 50 opened this fall. In many other states, a growing number of principals, teachers and civic groups are bolting from traditional public schools to create their own schools, hire their own staffs and set their own curricula and class schedules.

Most schools are too new to assess. The City Academy in St. Paul is the first one to have its contract with a public school district renewed. But that has not diminished interest in the idea.

The schools are cropping up in wealthy and poor communities. Some emphasize one academic theme, such as science, or are designed to work especially with certain kinds of students, such as potential dropouts. Others use a standard public school curriculum -- but teach it on their own terms.

Six other states are considering charter school laws. Virginia has debated the idea, but to this point neither it nor Maryland has adopted charter schools. The Clinton administration, which opposes school vouchers, announced recently that it is sending \$ 5 million to several states with charter school laws to help develop new schools there.

D.C. Council members and a congressional panel are studying charter schools. The Bilingual/International School, a charter school started from scratch this fall in the District, has 140 students enrolled. Unlike most charter schools, however, it still has to conform to most of the school system's regulations, and that already has led to disputes over money and supplies.

"Unquestionably, there is more acceptance for this idea than almost any other kind of reform you hear," said Joe Nathan, executive director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota, which is tracking the charter school movement. "One of the greatest desires parents have is for schools to be accountable for their results. That's what you appear to be getting with this. If the school doesn't work, it will not last." 

Already, a few of the new schools have had their charters revoked because of alleged financial improprieties. Others still are squabbling with states or school districts about how much public money they should receive. But many schools that opened without problems have been overwhelmed by interest from parents and teachers and have long waiting lists of job applicants and prospective students.

Charter schools' independence from public school systems varies greatly. Some are supervised tightly by school boards and must subscribe to union agreements that cover teacher work rules and class schedules. Others are virtually free to

craft the kinds of class days they want, as long as students receive the basic academic requirements set by a state.

Educators studying the emergence of charter schools say the concept is winning more public support than other budding school reform movements for several reasons. Because in most cases they are home-grown, grass-roots programs, charter schools are not stirring the same suspicions that private, for-profit companies trying to win contracts in many cities often do. Also, with few exceptions, charter schools do not present ideological or constitutional questions -- like tuition vouchers for private or parochial schools do.

"The charter school idea seems to be bringing in people from every end of the political spectrum in education," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform.

Many charter schools are gearing their academic programs to troubled students and putting great emphasis on involving parents. As a condition for enrolling a student, some even require parents to sign contracts that outline their roles at the schools.

Some critics say that those kinds of pacts could become a subtle barrier to parents who are unable to become involved with the schools because of their work schedules or who have disengaged from their children's schooling by choice. Critics also worry that too many schools will cater to upper-class parents. And while many charter schools are entirely new, what concerns other critics is that some are former private schools that had been struggling financially and now stand to reap a gold mine in public money -- without doing anything to help public schools.

That worries Sarah Kass, too. A former public school teacher, she's a founder of City on a Hill, a new charter school in Boston whose primary mission is to teach citizenship and community service to junior high students. Every student there is required to do community work. Kass said she believes the greatest risk charter schools pose is that they will be a complete retreat from public schools, not educational experiments that help point to ways for public schools to improve.

"We can't just be excellent little boutiques of education," Kass said. "We have to try to work with public schools, not just be passive models of reform. That's the only way we'll get rid of the notion in public education that one kind of school fits all."

Kass also said that the new schools must be held strictly accountable. If states or school districts do not terminate the contracts of charter schools that are not performing, "We'll just wind up with exactly what we have now: public schools that don't work but never change," she said.

Teachers at St. Paul's City Academy have begun sharing with the public school system the secrets of their success with at-risk students. The academy is boasting high graduation rates, strong class attendance, has a lengthy waiting list and now has three more years to continue its work.

"It's too early to know whether the broad mass of charter schools are all going to be able to do that," Nathan said. "But the public desperately wants these alternatives."

The Washington Post, December 05, 1995

GRAPHIC: Pamela Miller enrolled son Joseph, 4, in the Bilingual/International School in August. There have been funding disputes about the District charter school.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: December 05, 1995