

GIVEN A CHOICE

SCHOOLS from A1

Choice leaves public schools less able to compete, critics say

But as students exercise their options, the traditional public schools they leave lose basic state student aid, compounding other financial pressures. In urban and small rural areas, schools are closing, and families who stay are seeing their options within the public system narrow. In some ways, choice is undermining the regular schools and communities.

“I’m a big believer in public education,” Carpenter said. “It’s really a very complicated thing.”

A brief history of school choice

The godfather of school choice was former Gov. Rudy Perpich.

According to Dan Loritz, who was a key lobbyist for education reforms for Perpich, Perpich started thinking about open enrollment when, as a legislator in the 1970s, he would move his family to the Twin Cities during the legislative sessions.

One year, Loritz said, Perpich tried to move his kids from the St. Paul schools into Roseville, but St. Paul officials wouldn’t approve the transfer.

Gradually, in legislative struggles from 1985 to 1990, Perpich won new laws allowing students to take college credit courses, and finally full opportunities to cross public school district boundaries.

But the open-enrollment debate led to more questions: So what? Is one district that much different from its neighbor? Thus emerged the notion of independent but public charter schools, which would get state funding like other public schools but operate free of most school district rules. Minnesota became the first state to authorize charter schools, in 1991. St. Paul’s City Academy, still in operation, opened later that year.

“The job wasn’t done unless we had different choices,” said former state Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge, who led the charter school effort in the Senate. “If all the options are vanilla, what good does access to choices do?”

For Perpich, Junge and others, school choice was a matter of social equity — an attempt to make educational options available to all people, not just those who could afford private school. That made the idea appealing to leaders in minority communities. The Minnesota Business Partnership was also an early advocate, excited by marketplace notions of competition in public education.

Yet school choice has been consistently opposed by teachers unions — usually a DFL ally — who have viewed it as union busting and a step toward vouchers for private schools. Teachers and school administrators have also criticized choice as a destabilizing force that drains public education of resources.

For some, a boom; for others, trouble

Perpich might have been surprised by the growth in school choice. Loritz, now a Hamline University associate professor and vice president for university relations, said the late governor had figured the system would be quickly self-correcting — that

once students started leaving some districts, those districts would make competitive adjustments to lure them back.

But open enrollment has nearly doubled and charter school enrollment increased more than elevenfold in the most recent decade. There are 88 charter schools in Minnesota this year, with another 21 set to open next year. Enrollment in those choice options and home schools has come close to matching enrollment in private and parochial schools, which has held steady.

For the 2002-03 school year, all those options together accounted for about 18 percent of the state’s total elementary and high school age population of about 933,000.

In Minneapolis, which may have the most choice options in the state, nearly 21 percent of school-age students opted out of district schools last year, almost twice the rate as in 1994-95. And that’s had an effect on those who have decided to stay. For example, dozens of parents opposing a recent proposal to close as many as 10 Minneapolis schools noted that their choice — to send their kids to relatively small neighborhood schools — could be eliminated.

St. Paul, which has always had high private-school enrollment, saw its percentage of opt-outs jump from 21.4 percent in 1994-95 to 28 percent last year. As in Minneapolis, most of that increase was due to charter school enrollment, which rose from 152 to 4,742 during the period.

As most had predicted, suburban districts have been far less restive. Steve Dess, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, noted that 46 percent of the state’s charter schools are in Minneapolis and St. Paul, 39 percent outstate and 15 percent in the suburbs. But of the 21 approved to open this fall, 11 are in the suburbs.

The vast majority of school-age kids in the state still attend a traditional public school. But another 180,000 attend area learning centers and alternative schools — small public schools for at-risk or otherwise marginalized kids. Those are growing at about 15 percent per year, according to Glory Kibbel, alternative program specialist for the state Department of Education.

Some say that instead of forcing the traditional public districts to compete and innovate, choice has made them less able to do so.

“It’s very much a downward spiral,” said Natalie Siderius, a member of the school board in Winona, which recently moved to close an elementary school in Dakota, on the far south end of the district, only to have parents organize to keep it open as a charter school, sponsored by the state Department of Education. “Parents want small classrooms and schools, and we’re looking at closing them. The kids that remain in the system have to bear a larger and larger percentage of the costs.”

But choice advocates say the debate should be about classroom opportunity, not about the built-in expenses the public districts have. “School boards have a choice, too,” said Bob Wedl, who was commissioner of education under Gov. Arne Carlson and a deputy commissioner under Perpich. “They don’t have to own and operate all those buildings.”

For many, the bottom line on school choice is better academics, and so far it’s not clear that has been achieved. To take one group, charter school students did worse on the state’s basic-skills reading and math tests than did non-charter students in 1998 and 2001, but better on the 10th-grade writing test. But this year’s test results, released this week, showed that charter school students lagged well behind their regular public school counterparts in all three.

A loss for Winona’s public schools

In Winona, a district with about 4,000 students and three charter schools already, the school board voted to close the 70-student Dakota Elementary to help deal with a \$2.4 million budget imbalance. But when the school opens this fall as a charter school with state sponsorship, the district will be required to



Kids enjoyed an early spring recess at Dakota Elementary, a Winona public school that is being converted to a charter school for next year. Organizers of the charter school expect that most of the 70 children at the school now will enroll at the charter school.



Barb Carlson has taught first- and second-graders at Dakota for 17 years. She will move to another school when Dakota converts to charter status, but other teachers with less seniority may lose their jobs with the district; they may end up teaching at the charter school.

School choice can hit hard

These Minnesota public school districts had the highest percentages of school-age children opting out of the district’s own schools in 2002-03. The list includes only districts where students took advantage of all available choices — open enrollment, charter, home and private schools.

District	Public school enrollment*	Charter,** private, home school enrollment	% out via school choice
Sleepy Eye	659	595	47.5
Balaton	65	35	35
Nicollet	293	146	33.3
New Ulm	2,371	1,147	32.6
West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan	4,708	2,096	30.8
Winona	3,793	1,592	29.6
Norwood	1,046	424	28.8
St. Paul	39,181	15,283	28.1
St. Cloud	10,246	3,440	25.1
Wabasso	419	136	24.5
Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton	590	187	24.1
Faribault	3,791	1,172	23.6
Caledonia	961	280	22.6
Wabasha-Kellogg	717	199	21.7
Gibbon-Fairfax-Winthrop	866	238	21.6
Minneapolis	41,725	11,001	20.9
Glencoe-Silver Lake	1,769	463	20.7
Fergus Falls	2,840	741	20.7
Waconia	2,321	603	20.6
Cass Lake-Bena	1,179	305	20.6
Marshall	2,302	564	19.7
Sauk Centre	1,204	287	19.2
Minnnetonka	7,570	1,762	18.9
Rochester	16,153	3,720	18.7
Roseville	6,247	1,433	18.6

*Reflects net gain or loss via open enrollment
**Charter schools are public schools but are considered separately here
Source: Minnesota Department of Education
Star Tribune

pay transportation costs and some costs for special education students. The turn of events has rankled district officials even more than having to provide a taxi to get some kids to a charter school, as they did recently. “It’s frustrating,” Siderius said. In her view, the state is “creating two public school systems.”

Organizers of the charter school feel differently. Linda and Darren Shepardson, whose three kids will be walking there this fall, said their aim is to offer students more art and language classes than the public district could, and to offer teachers more opportunities to shape curriculum. “It’s healthy that the local district does not have a monopoly on education,” said Linda Shepardson.

Teachers, meanwhile, can be caught in the ambivalent middle. Barb Carlson, who’s taught first- and second-graders at Dakota Elementary for 17 years, will be leaving for

another job in the public district, protected by seniority. But several younger teachers, who will be losing their district jobs, may want to stay on when Dakota becomes a charter school.

“It will be a difficult thing to face,” Carlson said. “I’ve enjoyed being here. And they’re going to have a lot of fun.”

Minneapolis interim Superintendent David Jennings, who as Republican Speaker of the House in the mid-1980s supported school choice, said the state’s encouragement of educational options has become unbalanced.

While charter schools get start-up money from the federal government and help paying rent from the state — in addition to standard per-pupil funding — they face less academic scrutiny than regular public schools, Jennings argues. Meanwhile, he points out, their governing boards are unelected, directors need not be licensed, and

the schools don’t have to pay their nonunion teachers as much as public districts pay their well-organized ones.

“With those kinds of rules, I’d be more creative, too,” he said.

Winning: St. Anthony-New Brighton

Adjacent to Minneapolis, the St. Anthony-New Brighton district was about to dry up and blow away not long ago. In 1988-89, it had fewer than 1,000 students in its three schools. This year, it has 1,675, the difference due entirely to students from other districts who have entered through open enrollment, many from Minneapolis. Among districts in which students have exercised all the major choice options, it’s the state’s top net gainer.

Superintendent Bob Duncan said that despite its growth, it also has the advantage of its small size — one of two factors that, along with academic rigor, led Carpenter to choose St. Anthony for her daughter.

Duncan said the district next year will reach its capacity, but that there are no plans for new buildings. “If we start becoming bigger, we might start losing some of the reasons for coming here,” he said.

In Sleepy Eye, meanwhile, Superintendent Arla Dockter said this is a good year for the public district, because only half of the district’s school-age kids are going to other schools.

Many years, slightly more than half go to any of several parochial schools in the area. That’s the highest outflow in the state.

“I think it’s good for our community,” Dockter said. “Not many communities this size have so many options for parents to send their kids to.”

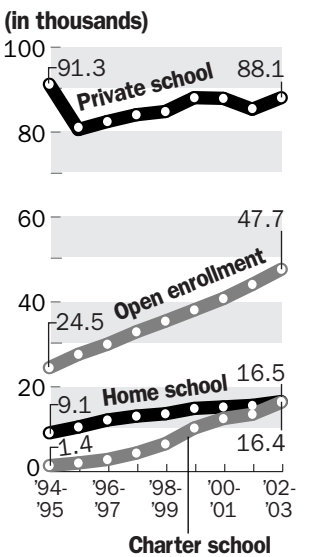
In other small communities — Dakota, Echo, Nerstrand, Milroy — charter schools formed to replace schools that were closed or about to be closed are likewise being embraced as tools of community survival.

In Dakota, a town of 329 people, Darren and Linda Shepardson said that if the school had closed, many kids from the town would scatter to schools in several districts.

“It will create more stability for the community by being a charter school,” said Linda Shepardson.

School choice explodes

The newest options to traditional public school elementary and high school enrollment continue to gain popularity among students and parents in Minnesota. The enrollments in this chart represent about 1.8 percent of the 933,000 school age children in Minnesota in 2002-03.



Source: Minnesota Department of Education
Star Tribune

What’s next? More choices likely

Despite the outcry from regular public schools, there is no evidence that school choices will be limited any time soon. There may be more.

Last year the Legislature recognized a new school option — “online learning” — by providing state aid to districts offering courses online to students from other districts, which lose their share.

“I sense tremendous growth potential there,” said Morgan Brown, director of choice and innovation for the Minnesota Department of Education.

This year proposals enhancing public school choice are also bouncing around at the Legislature. Among them are measures that would:

➤ Mandate that charter school students be allowed to participate in extracurricular activities in their home district.

➤ Have the state establish five nonprofit agencies whose sole purpose would be to sponsor charter schools.

Indeed, education has become much like the telecommunications industry — a field of brisk competition, and rapid change and innovation — according to Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

“I’m not sure there is going to be a balance,” Nathan said, when asked to describe the school choice landscape a decade from now. “I think it’s going to be very dynamic. I think many of the districts will respond, and create schools within schools, small, focused schools, or schools within agencies. My prediction is that many of the districts will adapt some of the best ideas. This is all about competition, and the flip side of competition is opportunity. The opportunities have opened up.”

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Coming Monday: In Minneapolis School District, there are indications of trouble, but also signs of hope.

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