

How the Pioneering Charter School Story Can Transform Your Future

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Former Minnesota state senator Ember Reichgott Junge is author of the first charter school law in Minnesota and the nation, and the book, *Zero Chance of Passage: The Pioneering Charter School Story* (ZeroChanceOfPassage.com). A member of the National Charter Schools Hall of Fame, she is a national leadership and education policy coach, presenter, trainer and messenger.

Why is the Pioneering Charter School Story important to you? We cannot take chartering for granted. How do we insure that charter schools are here in your future?

As the Minnesota state senator who authored the first charter school law in Minnesota and the nation, I urge you to be the best educator and best charter school leader you can be. Both are essential to your future in chartering.

Why? As charter schools grow, so do myths about chartering. The best way to dispel the myths is to go back a quarter century and learn **why** charter schools were created, and the **struggle** that surrounded their creation. Then you'll understand how great a **pioneer** you are. Thank you for stepping up to chartering! It's not easy.

Let's set the historical record straight about chartering with highlights from my book, *Zero Chance of Passage: The Pioneering Charter School Story*. It all began on September 7, 1992, when the first charter public school in the nation, City Academy, opened in St. Paul, Minnesota, one year after the Minnesota charter school law passed.

The pioneering charter school story is a story of ordinary people like you and me taking an extraordinary stand for change. And the *results* 20 years later? Over 2.5 million students attend over 6,400 charter public schools in 42 states and D.C. One million names are on waiting lists. Chartering is supported by 70% of Americans according to the August, 2014 *PDK/Gallup poll*. Can you even name another issue supported by 70% of Americans today?

Charter school enrollment has grown 100% since 2007–2008. 32 urban school districts have more than 20% charter public school students, and this fall, New Orleans will have 100% of its public school students attending public charter schools.

Three visionaries contributed to the origins of chartering: First, a visionary Minnesota governor proposed, to great protest the first public school choice initiative in the nation—open enrollment—where students could attend any public district school in the state. He opened the door to chartering. Once we had more access to choices, we asked...what if all the choices were the same? We needed more choices to access. And parents wanted those choices in their neighborhoods.

Second, it was the president of the American Federation of Teachers—Al Shanker—who first wrote about charter schools in the *New York Times* as a way to provide teacher autonomy and professionalism. The union leader told us at an education reform conference in Minnesota “the districts can take their customers for granted.” He was right!

Third, a visionary committee of community leaders from business, education, and labor took up Shanker's idea. They developed the first legislative proposal for chartering. They didn't have a political agenda—chartering came from outside the political system.

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Why Chartering? To open up the K–12 public education system to more choices by allowing **groups other than local school districts** to provide public education. The key is to create choices outside the current system to make the K–12 public system *more responsive*. Note that chartering is a process of granting a charter to a school. It’s not a school or a building. It’s a verb. It is the **permission** for another group to deliver public education in ways they see fit to meet the needs of their students.

In return for independence, school leaders commit to accountability in their performance contract. They must live up to their performance commitments, or the school can be closed. That accountability is not present in district public schools. **Charters trade regulation for results and bureaucracy for accountability.** That’s the charter school bargain.

This idea of opening up the K–12 system wasn’t easy to pass at the legislature. Resistance came from everywhere. The powerful Minnesota teacher unions were opposed, creating political pressure on large Democratic majorities in our legislature—my political party. Our new Republican governor won election with support of the teachers union, in part because the incumbent championed open enrollment.

For me, a union-endorsed Democrat, it was a painful three-year journey. My constituent was president of the teachers union, and their lobbyist was my 9th grade math teacher. In the end, chartering passed by only three votes over intense opposition. How?

First, chartering came from the *middle* of the political spectrum. It was *truly* bipartisan. 42% of the majority Democrats and 56% of the minority Republicans came together in support. Second, the bill was so compromised that I was devastated. I thought there would never be a charter school because only the local school district could approve a charter. There was no alternate authorizer to make the system more responsive. I had to accept the compromise and vow to come back to improve the law. Now I know that without compromise, chartering would not have passed. So compromise was not defeat.

To my surprise, within days, Minnesota’s Republican US Senator David Durenberger and Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, head of the Democratic Leadership Council, took hold of the chartering bill as a bipartisan form of public school choice. They saw it as a centrist and pragmatic alternative between President George H.W. Bush’s proposal for private school vouchers and the status quo desired by U.S. House Democrats.

But the local school boards back in Minnesota did not see it the same way. As I feared, school boards *rejected* seven of the first nine applicants for chartered schools. One state official called it the “fox guarding the chickens.” The two chartered schools approved by local school boards were City Academy, serving youth who *dropped out* of the system, and Metro Deaf School, serving a special population. These rejections by local school boards created support to amend our law to add a state appeals process, and eventually alternative authorizers, essential for a robust charter sector.

Today, chartering is still controversial. But things are changing. In Minnesota, teachers are coming full circle to Al Shanker’s chartering vision, by creating the first **union-initiated chartered school authorizer**. My union opponents of 20 years ago now sit on the board of this charter school authorizer! And some school districts now collaborate with charter schools in their area. This debate need not be divisive.

Have you faced your own Zero Chance of Passage? Look what can happen when you take a stand for change! Use the origins of chartering to dispel the myths and transform your own future in chartering. Thank you for being today’s charter school pioneers!



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