

Winona Daily News



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Story originally printed in the Winona Daily News or online at www.winonadailynews.com

Published - Saturday, June 06, 2009

Al Fan: Entenza's Minnesota 2020 Report is politically motivated

By Al Fan / Guest view

Completely bogus. Political hit job. Specious. Fabricated out of whole cloth.

All of these statements accurately portray the report on charter schools put out by Minnesota 2020 last week, the think tank founded by former legislator and gubernatorial candidate Matt Entenza. In the report entitled "Checking in on Charter Schools: An Examination of Charter School Finances," the report suggests that 83 percent of all charter schools have at least one financial irregularity, thus leading to the final recommendation that "if charter schools can't run in a financially competent manner, Minnesota should reconsider whether charter schools are worth public funding at all."

Don't get me wrong, we need to improve the business practices and academic achievement levels for all public schools — charter and district. Tough, stringent fiscal management and accountability measures are an absolute requirement. And as has been reported recently, some bad apples have abused the charter mandate, thus allowing charter critics like Minnesota 2020 to say that all charter schools are suspect. Frankly, some poorly run charter schools that are not providing quality education should perhaps be closed down, as should some poorly run and low-quality district schools. But the vast majority of charter schools have strong management and accounting practices in place, and given the tough new state legislation, which was developed and passed with the assistance of key charter school leaders, even stricter accountability and business measures will be required of charter schools in the future. This is a good thing.

Also, successful schools are about implementing data-driven practices in both the business management and academic achievement areas. Sadly, Minnesota 2020's report has nothing to do with introducing new information or data that will improve the business practices of Minnesota's charter schools. It simply is a very, very poorly researched document that was clearly developed to push an anti-charter agenda.

Let's examine a few points outlined in the report.

What does "83 percent of all charter schools in Minnesota having at least one financial irregularity" actually mean? What it means is that Minnesota 2020's researchers looked at all charter school board minutes as well as internal audits and found this "red flag." But by definition, an internal audit conducted by qualified accountants, almost always lists recommendations on how a school could do certain financial practices differently or better. If a recommendation was given by the accountant, this was considered an "irregularity," according to Minnesota 2020's crack research team.

Morgan Brown, assistant state educational commissioner, in response to the report stated "it is not uncommon for both school districts and charter schools to have findings in their annual financial reports." Brown pointed to another failure in the report: "Forty-six charter schools had problems related to 'segregation of duties' — a provision meant to ensure that more than one person has control of financial operations — but so did 207 traditional district schools."

Guess what? The Minnesota 2020 report did not do a similar financial analysis of district schools.

Wonder why?

There truly is no other explanation for the report's rationale other than Entenza is using charter schools as a whipping boy and a prop to win the support of the anti-charter education unions in his bid for governor.

The bullying by Entenza and Minnesota 2020 extended to how they announced their study. It occurred outside Aurora Charter School on Minnehaha Avenue in Minneapolis, because the school was supposedly

one of the biggest offenders of the report's analysis.

Without the courtesy to give notice to the school that it was coming on to its property or to share the report beforehand so a response could be made to any specific allegations, Minnesota 2020 arranged for television cameras to swoop down on the school to get a comment — on tape — from school founder and director Cheryl Avina about the report's findings. But a very composed and professional Avina noted that Aurora Charter School has always had a positive fund balance, strong cash flow and met state fiscal requirements each year. Avina further produced on the spot the school's yearly management and financial report from its accountants, which documented the school's solid approach to financial and accounting practices.

Improving the fiscal management and business accountability is a must for all public schools — district or charter. Working together as a community of excellence is a much better way to achieve this goal of educational excellence in our schools rather than the political theatrics we saw on the streets of Minneapolis last week.

Al Fan is executive director of Charter School Partners (charterschoolpartners.org), a nonprofit organization with national and state foundation support.

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