Review Charter Schools
Study Proposal 08.14

1. Describe your project idea, including clearly defining the problems and specific policy questions to be addressed.

In 1988, the Citizens League released the report "Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students". This report kick-started the charter school movement in Minnesota, and eventually throughout the country.

20 years after the Citizens League report on charter schools, the charter school movement has become a significant presence in Minnesota's educational landscape, but questions about the schools' purposes and efficacy remain.

The Citizens League should review what has happened since the 1988 charter school report. Have the schools solved the problems they were proposed to solve? What new innovations have occurred since the original legislation was passed? How successful are charter schools? What problems do they have, and how can those problems be solved?

2. Why is this problem important?

We don't know much about what is working well with charter schools and what isn't. In the meantime, students are leaving districts for charters and the political heat is rising.

3. How could the Citizens League make a unique contribution?

The Citizens League is perhaps the only organization that can offer a critical review of the charter school sector that will be trusted by those both inside and outside the charter school movement. Because we have historically been aligned with the charter school movement, we are trusted by that sector. Conversely, because of our relationship to the charter movement, proponents of traditional district schools would regard a critical analysis of the movement done by the Citizens League as credible.

4. What are prospects that project would yield recommendations that could be implemented and have a major impact on the problem?

Very good. There is a lot of expertise about charter schools at the Citizens League and in the Twin Cities area. A Citizens League process to bring together a wide variety of perspectives (not just the experts) would reveal problems and solutions that a different kind of study would not.

5. Explain how this problem can be addressed by data, research, and reason? Identify probable sources for data and research.

Data are available on student performance measures. Can compare charter schools to district schools. Can also compare spending on charters vs. districts, and student population changes. However, the meat of this project would not be in the data but in the analysis by citizens.

6. Explain how this proposal can be framed without partisan bias.

Charter schools are an issue that can turn partisanship on its end. Some on the right supports charters because they provide choice and local control to parents. Some on the left support charters because they offer progressive alternatives to traditional schools.

7. Why would this project be attractive to members?

Education is one of the issues that draws the most interest and attention from the public. Also because charter schools were one of the Citizens League's most important successes.

8. How would this project reach out to under-represented segments of the community?

Charter schools have a larger proportion of students of color and students in poverty than traditional district schools. There is a large pool of parents who might be interested in participating in this project.

Additionally, one of the interesting questions about charter schools is about schools that focus on one ethnic group (such as the Tarek ibn Ziyad academy, a school with an Islamic focus that has recently been in the news for potentially violating the distinction between church and state).

9. What is the potential for making this issue visible to a broader public? Why?

In recent legislative sessions, charter school issues have been a hot-button issue. There is likely to be a lot of attention paid to a Citizens League project on the subject.

10. What resources—funding, experts, etc. might be available to support this project?

Ted Kolderie and Education Evolving. Jon Bacal. Hundreds of administrators and board members of local charter schools. Thousands of parents of students in district and charter schools.