

## Obama encourages widespread use of Minnesota education ideas

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You probably can't count it as a holiday present, but President Elect Barack Obama gave the nation good advice last week, based in part on pioneering Minnesota education programs.

As he introduced his Arne Duncan, Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools as his Secretary of Education, Obama explained:

"We need a new vision for a 21st century education system — one where we aren't just supporting existing schools, but spurring innovation; where we're not just investing more money, but demanding more reform; where parents take responsibility for their children's success; where we're recruiting, retaining, and rewarding an army of new teachers; where we hold our schools, teachers and government accountable for results; and where we expect all our children not only to graduate high school, but to graduate college and get a good paying job. "

Obama also praised Duncan for many things, including the fact that he had "championed good charter schools."

This is NOT just a column about charter public schools — but about the willingness of some educators to examine and rethink their efforts, use what's working, and try new approaches. Give credit, for example, to the Forest Lake district, which responded to parents and strong research by creating Central Montessori Elementary.

Last week I was in Edina, talking with Superintendent Ric Dressen and high school principal Bruce Locklear. Both pointed out a number of things that the district does well. Both US News and World Report and Newsweek have named the high school as one of the best in the US.

At the same time, Dressen and Locklear recognize that the schools have not met the needs of all its students. So rather than criticize students or their families, Edina educators have created, for example a new approach to math for some students. Making extensive use of technology and focusing until students master key topics, Edina educators report that many students formerly "turned off" of math are now succeeding.

Edina also offers a French Immersion Elementary School, based in part on requests from families and in part of research showing the ease and value of learning a second language while still in elementary school.

The Montessori option in Forest Lake, Anoka-Hennepin's STEP program or Edina's French Immersion Elementary, are just examples of school districts that are doing what Obama suggests: "spurring innovation," not just supporting existing schools,

The charter idea, which Obama has long supported, has helped encourage some districts to improve, change and add new options within their district. The charter idea began in Minnesota, and has now spread to more than 40 states. While some educators attack charters (and some charters have made mistakes), these small, focused public schools are popular with growing numbers of families — in Anoka Hennepin, Elk River, Forest Lake, the south metro or greater Minnesota.

These thoughtful innovations — whether run by districts or charters — are helping keep Minnesota's public schools at or near the top of the nation. People are noticing — including President-elect Obama.

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