

New charter schools face tougher state scrutiny

by [Tim Pugmire](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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Kindergarten students learn German at a new St. Paul charter school. (MPR Photo/Tim Pugmire)

Twenty-three new charter schools opened for business in Minnesota this fall. That's a record number for one year. State education officials say these startup operations have a greater chance for success because of tougher oversight and training requirements. The recent changes were designed to help new schools avoid some of the management mistakes that have claimed other charter schools.

St. Paul, Minn. — The nation's first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. The state total is now 125. Over the years, 23 charter schools in the state have closed. Last year, financial missteps forced three charter schools out of business. One of the schools lasted less than two months.

Eugene Piccolo, executive director of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, said the pattern was similar. Too few students showed up.

"If you look at the schools that have closed, it's always been because enrollment projections were higher than reality," Piccolo said. "And that creates a financial problem because unless you make quick adjustments into your financial plan, you get into a hole that gets very tough to get out of."

Charter schools are independent public schools, often run by teachers and parents. They're allowed to operate free from a lot of red tape as a way to encourage classroom innovation. But this year, charter school operators needed more than just good educational ideas to open their doors. The Minnesota Department of Education worked with three charter school advocacy groups to develop mandatory training programs for school board members, sponsors and administrators.

Morgan Brown, the department's director of school choice, said opening a charter school is complex work.

"You're opening up a start-up non profit and a new public school all at the same time," Brown said. "So, you have to think about everything from finding your facility, to hiring your director and your teachers, to marketing to families to come and attend your charter school, to putting in place all the reporting requirements you need to the state. It's just a lot of work. And so it take a lot of precise planning before that school opens."

First graders at the Twin Cities German Immersion School were singing and using basic vocabulary words after a just a few weeks of language instruction. The kindergarten through first grade school is located in a former union hall in the St. Anthony Park neighborhood of St. Paul and will eventually grow to a K-8 configuration. Forty-five students from throughout the metro area enrolled this fall.

The school's director of operations, Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins, worked hard to get the school open. The veteran educator also turned to other experts for advice.

"It's too much to hope for in one little school, we're only five staff members, that in essentially what is my job that I would have all the business experience necessary," Bausman-Watkins said. "But we've done a very good job of reaching out and pulling in volunteers and advisors. And I know who I can call if I have a question."

The new state requirements take time and add to the load of paperwork. School leaders feel the scrutiny. Julie Williams is operations director for the Minnesota Online High School, a new charter school serving 67 students from throughout the state. She said the focus on accountability is healthy for charter schools.

"It's a good way of developing a charter school," Williams said. "And I think there's been some situations in the past where that would have been very helpful for people starting up a charter school, and it just wasn't there."

State officials said 12 more charter schools could have opened this fall, but the school sponsors decided to spend another year on planning and preparation. Action is expected later this fall on another round of charter applications.