

Lesson plans, pain

Create a new school, from scratch. That was the challenge this summer for the organizers of one of Minnesota's 23 new charter schools.

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One morning last month, Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins led a phone service representative to the utility room of a St. Paul school to examine a plastic box with protruding wires.

I hope you know what to do with this, she told him, because I have no idea.

Meet the facilities manager at one of Minnesota's newest public school districts.

She's also the finance director, health consultant and real estate negotiator.

Bausman-Watkins is in charge of operations for one of the 23 charter schools opening this fall in Minnesota.

Traditional public school districts have staffs to handle each aspect of running a school system, but in Minnesota each charter school is its own district.

On many days this summer, that has meant the district is Bausman-Watkins.

For the third year in a row, Minnesota is seeing a record number of charters opening, and these public, tuition-free institutions are increasingly attracting students away from the school districts in which they are located.

Many are started by interested amateurs — often parents and educators like Bausman-Watkins and her colleagues at the Twin Cities German Immersion School. The Pioneer Press decided to follow them around for a month to see what goes into getting a charter school off the ground and some of the surprises organizers encounter.

AUG. 3

'Please don't tell me you took out every single phone jack in here!'

Bausman-Watkins is standing in what will be a classroom when the school opens this Tuesday.

She has come to check out the school building — a former union hall on Eustis Street in the city's St. Anthony Park neighborhood — and it's clear it will need some rewiring.

By far the biggest challenge for people starting charter schools is finding a facility, according to a survey sent to the organizers of this year's new schools by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota.

In the German school's case, organizers found the building pretty early, but "we didn't like it," Bausman-Watkins says.

It was missing windows, and it was too small for their plans to expand from a kindergarten/first-grade school to a K-8 operation.

But parents loved the location, across from playing fields and shielded somewhat from Minnesota 280 by a noise wall, and administrators figured it could be a good first step.

"It's going to get us started," Bausman-Watkins says.

AUG. 4

Start small. That's the advice given most often to people starting charter schools.

Minnesota had the nation's first charter school — City Academy, which opened in St. Paul in 1992 and now educates about 115 students — and this year will have 125 in operation. A dozen more already are approved to open next fall.

Other states have more charters than Minnesota, but the rate of growth in recent years is higher here than most other places, said Morgan Brown, director of the division of school choice and innovation at the state Department of Education.

The demand for public-school options in Minnesota is growing, he said, as is the number of people interested in starting charters and the resources available to help them do so.

Despite the go-go climate, 23 charter schools have failed in the state, in some cases because of expectations that turn out to be unrealistic.

For Bausman-Watkins, 42, and Marcy Zachmeier-Ruh, 47, the school's curriculum director, the two years of planning have been an exercise in constantly keeping the vision for the school in line with reality.

From phone service to copy machines to leasing the building, the question for Bausman-Watkins is always: "What's the minimum we can start with and be a functional business?"

Zachmeier-Ruh, who fell in love with the German language in the ninth grade and is raising her three daughters bilingually, has been spending her time designing what she describes as her dream school — the first German-immersion program in the state.

We just need to get the place launched, she says during a conversation in early August in the school's temporary office space. Once it is under way, parents and kids will love the program so much that it will thrive.

Bausman-Watkins disagrees.

"We can't do it just on kids," she says, emphatically.

To make it in the long term, she says, the school not only will have to bring in enough students but also make connections in the community that will lead to outside funding.

The biggest reality check so far has been the size of the first-year enrollment: 46 kids, a little more than half the number Bausman-Watkins and Zachmeier-Ruh had hoped for. It wouldn't have been enough kids to open the doors had the state not come through in July with an unexpected \$50,000 in aid, Bausman-Watkins says.

It turns out there's a big difference between the number of parents who support a school in concept and those willing to sign on with a startup. "What we're appealing to are early adopters," says Bausman-Watkins.

AUG. 9

The school's board of directors has had its own share of reality checks.

At a meeting the second week of August, three board members report on a recent state-mandated training session.

"I got scared about the responsibility that we actually have," says board member Sabine Engel, a program coordinator at the Center for German & European Studies at the University of Minnesota.

Charter school sponsors — in this case, the St. Paul-based Germanic-American Institute — are immune from legal liability under state law, but school boards may sue and be sued.

The school's 11 board members, like its two co-directors, are mostly learning on the fly when it comes to the fine points of school administration.

But they are drawn from a wide variety of professional backgrounds, and the message they received at state training is to focus on financial oversight and long-term vision and leave operational decisions to the directors.

One thing is bothering board member Jim Pearson tonight, though.

It is four weeks until the school opens, and there is no kindergarten teacher.

"That is the No. 1 stressor for me," he says.

The teacher the school had lined up by Memorial Day didn't work out as the summer went on, and the plan now is to start the year with an interim and switch at some point to an as-yet-unidentified replacement.

That means parents won't be able to meet their child's teacher at next week's open house. As a parent, Pearson is worried.

We'll just have to tell parents the best thing we can, says board member Michael Sampson, a lawyer from Vadnais Heights: "We have a plan, but part of the plan is we might deviate from the plan."

AUG. 17

The open house is one day away, and as Bausman-Watkins, office manager Brian Schnese and a group of parents clean the school, their goal is to get the two classrooms in shape.

"That feels important to me," Bausman-Watkins says. She has scrimped elsewhere, but in the classrooms, all the furniture will be new.

As for the rest of the building, it's pretty dusty, with tools and boxes still scattered about.

The certificate of occupancy that was supposed to come the day before was withheld because some doors and interior glass are still not in, but Bausman-Watkins has told the landlord the open house is going on regardless.

There are also some immediate concerns.

None of the bathrooms has toilet paper, one of the sinks is stopped up, and someone is going to have to bring a stool so the kindergarten and first-grade boys can reach the urinals.

As it starts to get dark outside, Bausman-Watkins thinks of another thing for Schnese's list. "Brian, lightbulbs."

AUG. 18

If school officials worried about how parents would react to seeing the building for the first time at the open house, they needn't have.

It seems that for most parents, the chance to have their kids taught in German more than makes up for some clutter and dirt.

"Obviously, there's still work to do," said Carl Bostrom, who was checking out the room where his son, Konrad, will be in first grade. But Bostrom says his main concern is safety, and it looks pretty safe.

"This looks good," said Ndeoya Mungure as he scanned the room where his daughter, Naomi, will come for kindergarten. "In days to come, it will look much better."

Mungure says he isn't troubled by the lack of a kindergarten teacher.

"That's quite a normal thing," he says. "Always, the beginning is hard, so we don't expect everything to go smoothly."

SEPT. 1

Two weeks after the open house, with the start of school six days away, the focus is on getting the building in shape to open.

"Functionally, I think we're close," says Bausman-Watkins. "It just could use a little cleanup."

The new elevator won't be installed by Tuesday, when the kids arrive, but there won't be a need for one right away, and the school received its certificate of occupancy earlier in the week.

The other good news is a kindergarten teacher has been hired.

She's a recent college graduate and lacks the years of experience the school might have preferred, Bausman-Watkins says, but she's licensed for pre-kindergarten through third grade, taught in Germany the past two years and speaks excellent German.

"We got a lot of what we wanted," Bausman-Watkins says.

With the kindergarten teacher in place, school officials' last-minute concerns are things like getting a doorbell installed, ordering supplies and making sure the software that tracks student data is up and running on Day 1.

Any worries that when the doors open Tuesday, the students won't show up? Bausman-Watkins is asked.

"We have been going over that (enrollment) list daily," she says. "I'm not going to be awake at night wondering who's coming."

Her worries are more long term.

The school is currently a \$520,000 operation that intends to add a grade every year for the next seven years. It's in a building that's too small for its plans and will lose its current grant money after next year. A lot of things have to come together to make it viable in the long run.

There's no question the educational program is solid, Bausman-Watkins told Zachmeier-Ruh in a meeting back in early August. "My concern is, can I carry it?"

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SO YOU'RE THINKING OF STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL...

Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins and Marcy Zachmeier-Ruh offer this advice:

- Spend at least two years planning.
- Carefully assess your market. Are you offering something that doesn't currently exist?
- Make sure you have a community of interested people in place to help.
- Make sure someone in your organization has experience with contracts, financing and other aspects of running a business.
- Rely heavily on available resources as well as other charter schools and vendors that specifically serve them. Here are three resource groups:

Minnesota Department of Education:

http://education.state.mn.us/mde/Academic_Excellence/School_Choice/Charter_Schools/index.html

Minnesota Association of Charter Schools: www.mncharterschools.org

Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota: www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change