

SOUTH DAKOTA

South Dakota is quite different than its northern neighbor. Unlike the majority of Mid-Western states, South Dakota's population and labor productivity have been increasing over the last several years. South Dakota is projected to continue its population growth (and diversification), and with an economic climate favorable to business, it will continue to lure companies and job applicants. Sioux Falls city planners expect that within the next 20 years, an additional 100,000 people will move into the metro area, and business will undoubtedly follow. Population increases often strain education systems. South Dakota would be wise to prepare for this increased responsibility by enacting education reforms making their system more responsive to parent demands and overall becoming more effective and accountable to the taxpayers. Charter school legislation will fulfill those duties.

But to date, the Mt. Rushmore State has not heard much discussion of charter schools, despite some parents pushing the notion in the 1990s. The state has had an open-enrollment law, allowing students to attend any public school in the state since 1997, which is rarely used. So a debate on charter schools would be new, but not unusual for a growth state looking for new models.

South Dakota's K-12 education results fall just above the national average. National assessments show only 33 percent of students proficient in reading and 36 percent proficient in math. Eighth grade proficiency is 35 percent for both. The state's graduation rate between 2000 and 2003 actually declined almost 4 percent, and the state's aggregated AP scores were far below the national average. According to *Education Week*, although the state graduation rate was 74.5 percent in the 2002-2003 school year, the graduation rate for American Indians, the largest ethnic minority in the state, accounting for almost 10 percent of the state's overall population and more than 10 percent of the states K-12 enrollment, only graduated at a rate of 28.6 percent. American Indians are also the fastest growing segment of the state's population, and between 1990-2000, according to the state version the 2000 "Kid's Count," grew at an astonishing rate of 18.4 percent. Thus, the state is poorly serving its fastest growing and second largest constituency.



South Dakota's large Native American/Indian population makes it very similar to charter states like Arizona and New Mexico, which, although geographically far away are similar in population. When compared to New Mexico, both have close to 10 percent of their populations made up of American Indians, both have above the national average percentages of white people, and both have roughly the same distribution of minorities among the remaining population. They also are both extremely rural and both have far fewer people per square mile than the national average.

New Mexico adopted charter school legislation in 1993, and since then over 70 schools have opened and currently 62 are still in operation. Charter schools in New Mexico serve a variety of different students groups. Nine serve at-risk students in Albuquerque. Five charters use dual language instruction. Four operate under charters for Native American students. Four charters operate virtual schools. Arizona enacted its law, which is among the top three strongest in the country in 1994, and has almost 461 charters. These schools range in size and focus, and several originated with Native American tribes. For a state like South Dakota with growth that will need to accommodate a wide variety of learning styles and habits, these schools provide a mechanism to target groups of the population that are not being served by the conventional public school system, as well as provide an avenue for students and parents who want more control over their children's education.

Virtual charters would serve South Dakota's dispersed population well. In 2005, 446,350 people out of a total population of 775,933 lived in a rural setting. Virtual charter schools can provide an opportunity for students geographically isolated to experience choice and opportunity mostly reserved for children in urban environments. The High School of the Southwest Primary and Secondary Learning Centers in Albuquerque had a graduation rate of over 93 percent last year and its primary school had an attendance rate of almost 98 percent.

According to South Dakota's 2010 education program, the state "by 2010, will be the first in the nation for the percentage of students going on to college, technical school, or advanced training." Providing options for community leaders, municipalities or universities to start charter schools – with bricks or virtually -- can undoubtedly help the state achieve its ambitious goals. In fact, one of the priorities



for achieving this goal in the state's plan is to create a statewide virtual high school program. Instead of vesting large amounts of the state's resources into creating one huge school and implementing the one-to-one laptop policy, the state might consider chartering independent schools to meet the market demand for virtual education. Approximately 174 virtual charter schools serve students nationwide among the states with charter laws, and can meet and surpass the state's own goal of creating virtual education options. They will be more cost effective because they will be responsive to market demands, and they will operate more efficiently because they will be small independent organizations rather than one large state bureaucracy.

Charter schools have a proven track record of addressing specific segments of the Native American population. New Mexico's four charter schools targeting Native Americans provide South Dakota an excellent example.

Gallup Middle College Charter High School in New Mexico fulfills many of the goals outlined in the state's 2010 plan. While enrolled full time in the Middle College High School, students take college classes that satisfy the requirements of a high school degree while earning college credits at the same time (concurrent enrollment). In this way, upon earning their high school degree, students have also made significant progress towards a college degree. As a public school, students are not charged tuition for any classes. Similarly, all books are paid for by the Middle College High School. Another exemplar for the state of South Dakota is the Native American Community Academy, which tapped teaching talent at the University of New Mexico to instruct the students. Lessons include studying geometry using designs found in American Indian pottery, rugs or contemporary art. Students also are expected to read a nonfiction or autobiographical account of how their particular tribe or community was affected by events such as the Pueblo Revolt or the Long Walk. In physical education classes, students study American Indian social dances, identify the origin of the dance and are expected to re-create them in a presentation. To fill a language void in the Albuquerque Public Schools district, the academy will offer Navajo.

SD's legislature is knocking at the door of the goal line of creating a policy that can directly and immediately address not only the state's growth, but two important segment of the population most in need. Charter schools are that policy.

