

Another North Minneapolis school program kicked out of Cityview

Written by Alleen Brown, TC Daily Planet
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For the third year running, children attending school in North Minneapolis's Cityview building are being uprooted. Minneapolis Public Schools plans to evict the two-year-old Minnesota School of Science charter school in one month, leaving the future of at least 325 children uncertain.

Two years ago, parents angrily protested a plan to close Cityview, the district school that occupied the building, and replace it with the charter school Minnesota School of Science. Last summer poor planning and coordination by both the district and the new charter school forced an abrupt end to an MPS autism program in the building and left the parents of 40 students only two months to choose a new school for their transition-sensitive children.

This year the reasons are different, but the results are the same: parents frustrated, kids destabilized, learning disrupted, all in a North Minneapolis community that has become far too familiar with educational instability and initiatives abandoned.

Minneapolis Public Schools' reasons for the eviction are twofold: they contend that MSS broke their lease with the district by failing to pay rent after state aid fell through, and they say concerns about the way the school is run prevent MPS from doing what it would take to free up the lease aid for the charter school.

Alleged cheating on state tests, poor delivery of special education, and failure to properly account for finances are among the complaints that the district has documented against the charter in the two years since it opened. Leaders from Minnesota School of Science say all valid complaints have been addressed. MSS board members contend that the lease does not require the school to pay the portion of rent that would have been covered by lease aid.

For parents like Debbie Howell, the bureaucratic entanglements behind the eviction are immaterial. For the first time in a long time, Howell trusts her child's school. She sees her third-grader challenged by teachers who show her they care. She says that's a big improvement over what she saw when her son attended the old Cityview. She says she's ready to picket, if that's what it takes to keep MSS open.

Parents interviewed described a school where their kids feel safe, where a sense of camaraderie among parents pervades, a school that sends children home with challenging

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homework. Students from the school have placed in regional science and math competitions.

"I feel like it's been so long since we had something good in this community," says Charles Reese, who has three children who attend MSS. "Whenever we have something good, it's taken away."

"Our main concern is to stay in that community," MSS board member Gene Scapanski says. "They have been failed by Minneapolis Public Schools in North Minneapolis."

The district is moving forward with plans to place a new district K-5 program in the building. Minneapolis Office of New Schools director Sara Paul said, "We care very much about the students and the families, and we are committed to providing a quality program."

State aid falls through, rent goes unpaid

It's true that Minnesota School of Science did not pay approximately half a million dollars in rent. Lease aid is funding from the state that most charter schools depend on to pay for their space. When MSS signed its lease with Minnesota Public Schools, both the school and the district assumed the charter would pay for 90 percent of rent with that aid.

Minneapolis Public Schools is not only MSS's landlord, but it's also the school's authorizer, in charge of making sure MSS provides the services agreed upon in their charter contract. This year the Minnesota Department of Education decided that authorizers could not receive lease aid from the charters they oversee. Advocates for the rule say that when authorizers act as landlords, they have a financial stake in keeping their renter school open, which could prevent them from acting if that charter had problems.

That means Minnesota School of Science did not get the funding they needed to pay rent. MSS did get lease aid last year, but that was a mistake, said the department of education.

MSS interprets its lease with MPS to say that they do not have to pay the portion of rent that would have been covered by the state. But Minneapolis Public Schools argues that the charter does have to pay, based on an amendment to the lease made last October. The legal interpretation of the lease remains an open question.

Minneapolis College Prep, another district-sponsored charter that rents from MPS, will not have to pay for its missing state aid, since the school's lease was not similarly amended.

At the time MSS's new lease was signed, the district was gearing up for a legislative fight over the education department's conflict of interest rule. Last spring, Representative Jim Davnie introduced legislation that would have exempted school districts from the rule, allowing them to rent to the charters they authorize. That measure failed.

With the rule unchanged, the only way for Minnesota School of Science to get lease aid would be if they dropped MPS as an authorizer. By January, MSS board members say they were already looking for a new authorizer. They began filling out paperwork to switch to Pillsbury United Communities, which authorizes a number of Twin Cities charter schools.

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But the district eventually refused to let MSS go, citing a laundry list of problems with the school's management.

Cheating, special education, poor accounting

Last summer the friction between MSS and its authorizer was made apparent when 40 students in an autism program were forced to transfer out of the Cityview building only two months before the school year started.

The district had signed a one-year contract with MSS, which obligated the charter to integrate high-needs district special education students into MSS classrooms for parts of the day. At the contract's July deadline, the charter notified the district it would not continue to provide those services to district students. The district was left scrambling to place the program in other schools. Although the action was within the charter's contractual rights, MPS was surprised, and parents were even more so.

But Minneapolis Office of New Schools director Sara Paul said the district's concerns about MSS arose long before that. What worries her most are complaints that allege the charter has failed to follow testing protocol.

Minnesota School of Science takes great pride in the extraordinary jumps in test scores they've recorded. School leaders cited a 300 percent jump in test scores last year over scores of students from the Cityview program that closed a year before. Those scores are at the heart of their argument for why the school should stay open.

Last year MSS threw out an entire classroom's test scores after hearing complaints that a test coordinator was coaching students on answers. This year an observer from the Minnesota Department of Education reported further violations of testing protocol. School representatives say the violations involved students talking and using the bathroom alone during testing hours.

The list of concerns goes on. MPS noted deficiencies in special education programming. At one point, the charter used a special education teacher as a general education substitute. Another complaint said the school improperly counseled one student to attend a different school. The district documented concerns about the school's financial records and about their management company, Concept Schools, which oversees more than two dozen charters across the United States.

MSS board members say they thoroughly addressed each complaint and that issues are bound to arise in a school's first years of operation.

Eviction

At the end of April, Minneapolis Public Schools notified MSS that their program would have to vacate the Cityview building by July 1. It wasn't until the end of May, though, that it became clear to MSS that MPS would not work with the school on alternative solutions.

MSS has not been successful in finding a different building in North Minneapolis. Minneapolis Public School officials say they will not offer MSS a cheaper district building in the area. More than sixty percent of MSS students live in neighborhoods surrounding the school.

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The district says the school's "deficiencies" make it irresponsible for Minneapolis Public Schools to consider handing MSS to another authorizer. Despite MSS's claim that Pillsbury is ready to transition into the role, Paul questions the likelihood that such a transition could be approved in time for next year. With its \$25 million budget deficit, the district cannot afford to wait and see, says Paul. The charter school's contract with MPS ends at the end of next school year.

Instead, Minneapolis Public Schools will start a new district K-5 program in the building, to be overseen by Paul's office. Older MSS students will have the option of attending Olson Middle School. On Monday, June 17, the district will hold an open house from 9 am to 7 pm at Cityview, where families can learn more about their options.

MSS does not intend to give up. Charter board members are still pushing the district and the state department of education to allow them to switch authorizers to Pillsbury. (Pillsbury United Communities declined to comment for this article.)

Parents like Howell and Reese plan to attend Tuesday's district school board meeting. They hope to convince board members to keep MSS in North Minneapolis.

Should MSS be forced to leave, Howell does not intend to send her son to any new district program in the Cityview building. "I don't want to deal with any kind of Minneapolis Public School system, period," she says.

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