

From Reigeluth & Karnopp (2013), *Reinventing Schools: It's Time to Break the Mold*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Minnesota New Country School (EdVisions)

The Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) is a public charter school located in Henderson, Minnesota. It was founded in 1994 and has about 110 students in grades 6-12. Due to its success (described next), the MNCS received a \$4 million replication grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with which they formed EdVisions, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping other schools to adopt the MNCS model. EdVisions has now helped more than 40 schools to adopt the MNCS model, which is described in this case study.

Evidence of Effectiveness

MNCS reports the following effectiveness metrics in its 2010-2011 Annual Report:

- The ACT average composite score for all graduates from MNCS in 07-08 was 25.7 (the national average was 20.9).
- The ACT average composite score for all graduates from MNCS in 10-11 was 25.0 (the national average was 21.1).

EdVisions reports the following performance metrics on its website:

- The ACT average composite score for students from EdVisions Schools in 07-08 was 22.3 (the national average was 21.0).
- The SAT average composite score for students from EdVisions schools in 07-08 was 1749 (the national average was 1518).
- More than 82% of EdVisions graduates went on to two or four year degree programs in 08 (the national average is 68%).
- Alumni from MNCS, the flagship EdVisions school, report 69% are graduates of two or four year degree programs, and 22% are still enrolled – a total of 91%!
- Of MNCS alumni, 92% report they felt better prepared for college than their peers.
- Eighty-three percent of graduates of EdVisions schools in Minnesota felt competent in working toward their goals.
- Of MNCS alumni in the workforce, 72% said about their jobs that they either “like it a lot,” or “love it.”

EdVisions also offers nontraditional measures worth noting. For life skills, an alumni survey of MNCS graduates reported percentages of alumni who graded the school as good or excellent in instilling the following skills:

Skill	Percent of Alumni Grading MNCS as Good or Excellent
Creativity	100%
Problem-solving	95%
Decision-making	91%
Time management	87%
Finding information	100%
Learning to learn	91%
Responsibility	92%
Self esteem	84%
Social skills	79%
Self-direction	92%
Leadership	84%

Core Ideas

Table 3-1 shows our rough estimation of how thoroughly MNCS has implemented the core ideas described in Chapter 2. A six-point rating is used; 0 indicates that the core idea is apparently not used in the school, and 5 indicates that the idea is, in our opinion, exhibiting an excellent level of application. The

table is followed by a description of the core ideas as implemented in the MNCS. More information is available about MNCS and EdVisions at these web-sites:

<http://www.newcountryschool.com/>
<http://www.edvisions.com/custom/SplashPage.asp>
<http://www.whatkidscando.org/archives/portfoliosmallschools/MNCS.html>

Table 3-1. Core ideas in the MNCS

The number indicates the strength of the core idea, with 5 representing excellent implementation of the idea.

1. Attainment-based system	Attainment-based student progress	5
	Attainment-based assessment & certifications	5
	Attainment-based student records	5
2. Learner-centered instruction	Customized (personalized) learning	5
	Project-based (task-based) learning	5
	Collaborative learning	3
	Individualized instructional support	5
3. Expanded Curriculum	SCANS curriculum	4
	21 st century skills	4
	All aspects of development	5
4. New Roles	for teachers (guides)	5
	for students	5
	for parents	4
	for technology	3
5. A nurturing school culture	Small school size	5
	Strong relationships	5
	Multi-year mentoring	5
	Multi-age grouping	5
	Enjoyable learning	5
	Learning by guides	3
	Family services	0
6. Organizational structures	Schools as clusters	5
	Learning centers	3
	Choice for students	5
	Choice for guides	5
	Administrative structures	NA
	Governance structures	NA
	Ties to other family service systems	4
	A learning cooperative	0

Core Idea 1. Attainment-Based System

Students' progress in this school is based on successful completion of projects. After students complete a project, they must present and defend the project before a panel consisting of a parent, the student's advisor, and two

other advisors (what we call guides in this book) – the same panel that approved the proposal for the project.

Each student develops his own detailed, self-assessment rubric for each project. The rubric includes three main categories: project skills (e.g., task completion), critical thinking skills, and performance skills (e.g., organization). Instead of a grade, the student receives credits for her project work. The panel decides how many credits the student will receive, based on demonstrated achievement through authentic assessment.

A student graduates from high school when he has completed all of the requisite state standards as well as 70 project credits, required life skills, and a senior project.

Core Idea 2. Learner-Centered Instruction

Students create their own academic programs through self-directed, individualized, and occasionally small-group learning projects. Each student works with an advisor to complete a project proposal form that specifies what she will do, the resources she will use, a timeline for completing project tasks, what state standards will be met, and how much credit she seeks for doing the project. The proposal must be approved by a panel (the same one that evaluates the project when it's complete) before the student may initiate work on the project. The approved proposal serves as a learning contract.

This process allows each student to explore topics that interest her in her own way and largely at her own pace. She then works with different advisors at the school (and often with other students) and experts from the local community or professors at the local university to carry out her projects.

The school offers "on-demand" seminars and "how-to" workshops to provide direct instruction and practice in support of student projects. Basic skills instruction is provided to individuals or small groups when diagnostic assessments reveal the need. Students engage in experiential activities, such as service-learning, place-based learning, internships, and even community college courses.

Children with cognitive disabilities have the same self-directed, project-based learning experiences as all other children. Rather than mainstreaming special needs children into a standardized classroom, the opposite happens here; all students receive personalized learning with individual learning plans.

Core Idea 3. Expanded Curriculum

Recently, MNCS established expectations for three areas: respect/responsibility, academic achievement, and engagement. Each area has four levels of development, and a student's privileges increase with each level.

For example, regarding responsibility, level-one students have supervised computer and Internet use, whereas level-four students use their personal computers with Internet access and email any time.

In addition to these three core areas, social, emotional, and other aspects of development are fostered through group projects, peace-keeping circles, life skills, a Restorative Justice program, and other means (described in the MNCS 2011-12 Annual Report).

Academic achievement is driven by Minnesota state standards, but students design their own interdisciplinary projects to meet those standards. There are clear expectations and rules, including the expected pace of 10 credits per year and 70 credits by graduation. A credit is roughly 100 hours of work, but that is adjusted based on the quality of the student's effort, making it less of a time-based criterion and more of an attainment-based one. Each student is also required to spend one hour each day on math and have a daily quiet reading period.

Core Idea 4. New Roles

Teachers are called *advisors* in the MNCS, and they serve two major roles: teaching and administration.

For the teaching role, the advisor is a facilitator of learning rather than a disseminator of knowledge. This means that advisors do not define the course sequence for students; they do not set the syllabus for each course; and they don't pick texts for student reading, assign work, create deadlines, measure progress, or give grades. In fact, there aren't any courses as we know them in the current U.S. educational system. Instead, students have control over these matters, with advisor guidance as described in the section on Core Idea 2 above. Each advisor serves a generalist role as a mentor/advisor for a group of 15-18 students, called an *advisory*, but also serves a specialist role for a particular subject area or two.

For the administration role, the advisors collectively run the school without a principal (find more on this in core idea 6 below).

Students are self-directed learners, and advisors contact parents fairly regularly by phone or email to encourage them to engage significantly in their students' learning. Students have a democratic role in the operation of the school through a weekly town meeting and a student senate that's made up of two elected representatives from each advisory group.

MNCS is a high-tech learning environment in which all students have their own personal computer with Internet access, and responsible ones have unrestricted access to the Internet.

The school adopted Project Foundry, an electronic standards tracking

and reporting system, in 2005 to help students manage their projects and learning progress and to help staff monitor and support student progress. It also supports electronic student portfolios. So technology plays an increasingly central role in MNCS and is used mostly for managing projects and accessing resources. It is not used much for direct instruction. Students are encouraged to learn from each other.

Core Idea 5. A Nurturing School Culture

The school is small; the student body totals about 110 pupils. Great effort is placed on building relationships among students, advisors, and people in the community. To this end, individualized computer-based instruction is minimized. The advisory groups are mixed-age and can include all age levels. There is no division into developmental levels. Each advisor gets to know his students very well and builds caring relationships. Family services are minimal. Great emphasis is placed on intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning.

Core Idea 6. Organizational Structures and Incentives

MNCS is a small professional organization that's centered on learning; EdVisions keeps its schools under 150 students. Advisors own and run the school without a principal and without supervisory control by a school district office. Therefore, it fits the definition of a cluster as described in Chapter 2.

MNCS has a 17,000-square-foot room called the Atrium in which all students spend most of their time, much like the one-room schoolhouse that characterized education in the Agrarian Age. The building also has small rooms that serve as specialized learning centers, including

- a science room where students conduct experiments
- an arts studio with a pottery wheel and kiln a recording studio, and materials for making stained glass and screen-printing t-shirts
- a greenhouse
- a wood shop
- a mechanics/metal shop
- a media center

All students who attend the MNCS made a choice to go to this public charter school. Also, at the beginning of the school year, students rank order the advisors that they want to work with, and they are usually assigned to one of their top choices. The advisors' jobs depend on the school attracting enough students. This provides great incentive for the advisors to meet their students' needs and listen to their students' parents. This is a *client-driven* element of the decision-making system. However, because the advisors make all the adminis-

trative decisions by consensus, there is also a *peer-based* decision-making element. Additional incentives for advisors come from performance-based pay, which is influenced by evaluations from peers, students, and parents.

The school calendar is designed to facilitate organizational learning. Normal operations take place throughout the year in five- to seven-week blocks. Following each block, advisors have a planning week that allows them time to talk and think about their approach to guiding student work. Peers, students, and parents complete advisor evaluations, which provide valuable information for advisor and organizational learning.

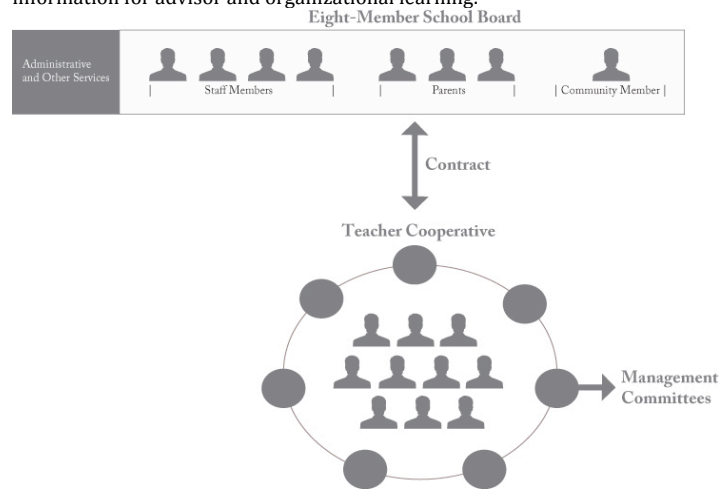


Figure 3-1. Organizational chart for MNCS.

There is no principal. The school is run, both instructionally and administratively, by a cooperative of advisors using a consensus model. The advisor cooperative has a contract with the school board to provide administrative and other services. Each advisor serves on at least two of the seven management committees that make all the decisions about instruction and administration in their school (including budget and staffing), within the limits of the law.

The school is governed by an eight-member school board elected annually. It currently has four staff members, three parents, and one community

member (see Figure 3-1). A finance committee handles the finances and signs checks. A single-purpose authorizer, Novations Education Opportunities, is now the authorizer (previously the local school district was the authorizer). The authorizer provides oversight to ensure that the school meets academic, budgetary, and administrative standards.

The MNCS contracts various providers but does not yet have a cooperative relationship with any. The school contracts the RiverBend Education District to be its Special Education Director and receives services that include a school psychologist working on site one day per week and specialists available as needed to address autism, hearing, speech, and transition (moving students with disabilities into life after high school) needs. MNCS also contracts Sibley County Public Health to provide a nurse one day per week. It will contract with other agencies as need arises.

Cost Effectiveness

The MNCS has a lower cost per student than the average school in Minnesota. Among other initiatives that save funds, the students clean the school every day, giving them more of a sense of ownership and pride, as well as money for educational resources.

Related Readings

- Aslan, S. (2012). *Investigating "The Coolest School In America": A Study of a Learner-Centered School and Educational Technology in the Information Age*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Dirkswager, E. J. (Ed.) (2002). *Teachers as owners: A key to revitalizing public education*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- MNCS (2012). *2011-12 Annual Report*. Available at <http://www.newcountryschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Annual-Report-2011-12.pdf>
- Newell, R.J. (2003). *Passion for learning: How project-based learning meets the needs of 21st-century students*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Thomas, D., Enloe, W., & Newell, R.J. (Eds.) (2005). *"The coolest school in America": How small learning communities are changing everything*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.