

# Positive School Culture

Students and their families help answer the question: *'How are Minnesota's chartered schools doing?'*

*The second in a series of reports on the changing face of public education in Minnesota*

**August 2003**

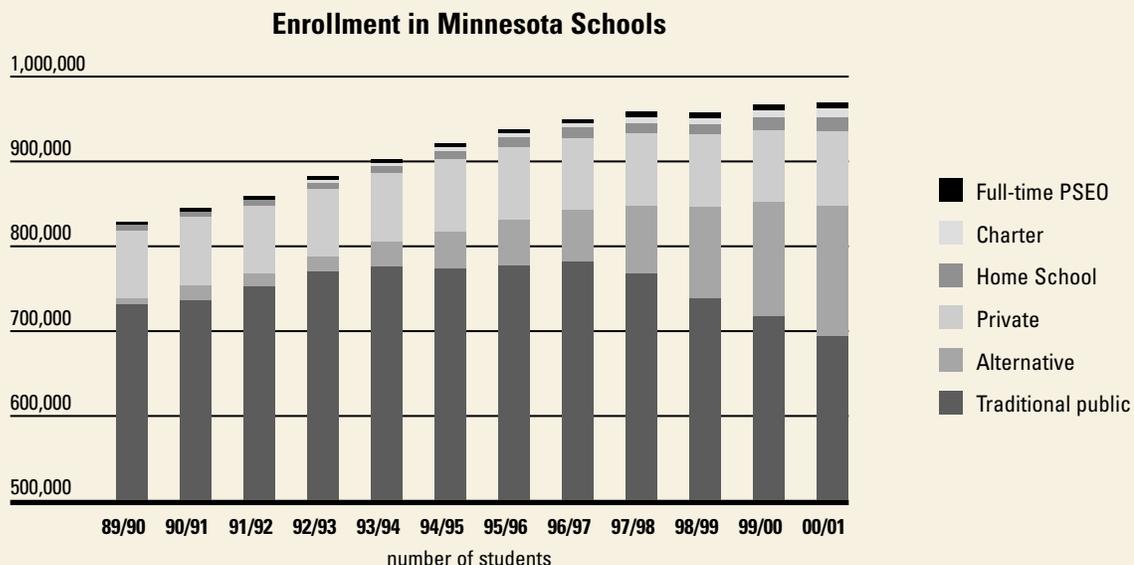
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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

America's policymakers, educators and families are now using two parallel sets of strategies for changing and improving K–12 education. One set relies on a variety of incentives and consequences to try to **change and improve the schools we have**. The second seeks to create an environment that focuses on **creating new and different schools** and, with them, **new choices for students and families**.

For almost two decades, Minnesota has experienced significant growth in a number of new and different educational choices, new schools, and new educational programs—both inside and outside the traditional district setting. These trends are documented in the bar graph, below.



This report is the second in a series exploring a variety of the organizational spaces being developed under this second strategy. These reports are designed to inform policymakers, educators, families, and others on what's been happening in Minnesota to create new and different schools.

The first of these reports examined what we generically call **alternative-education programs**. It documented their growing share of Minnesota's K–12 education market—particularly among secondary school students. It also identified a number of public policy implications of what has been a largely unknown and unaccounted-for sector of K–12 education at a time when all public schools and programs are under increasing scrutiny and pressure to demonstrate results.

This second report now turns to Minnesota's much smaller, but still growing cadre of **chartered schools**. As the first state to pass a charter law—in 1991—Minnesota's chartered schools have received more than their share of scrutiny from a consistent chorus of skeptics and critics that include policymakers and the media. To casual observers, the public record of our state's chartered schools has been mixed—with a combination of both high profile successes and disappointing, well-reported failures.

This report focuses on the question, "How are Minnesota's chartered schools doing?" It does that through the eyes of public affairs generalists and the voices of students, parents, teachers, school founders, and other staff—not through traditional academic research. Profiles of ten Minnesota chartered schools reveal that positive school culture overshadows other, more traditional, ways of measuring a school's appeal or success.

Both of these reports are notable for reporting the observations and opinions of students attending alternative and chartered schools. Education/Evolving contends that the growing scrutiny and analysis of all public schools and programs frequently fails to include what students think. Aiming to reverse this trend, we're working to bring students' voices to decision makers through our reports and other venues. We believe students can help us better explain and understand the complex forces and changes now going on in public education in Minnesota.

Education/Evolving welcomes your comments and reflections on this and other reports in this series. Please direct them to [info@educationevolving.org](mailto:info@educationevolving.org).

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## Introduction and Major Findings of this Report

Minnesota's first chartered schools are now more than a decade old. They're well past the curiosity stage. But, they're still generating a close watch from policy makers, the media and education insiders—both in Minnesota and from around the country.

In 2001, Harvard's Kennedy School recognized Minnesota's charter law as one of the ten top innovations in government for that year. By fall 2003, about 1,500 students will be attending a diverse collection of more than 85 chartered schools—ranging from schools serving the state's newest urban residents to schools drawing on learning opportunities found in Minnesota's deepest north woods. And, although at a more moderate pace than in some states, they keep coming. Eleven new schools opened in 2002 and at least 16 more are approved to open in the fall of 2003 or 2004.

### Confusion about what 'success' really is

Many of Minnesota's existing chartered schools have documented solid gains in student achievement. And, some have garnered statewide and even national attention for their programs. A unique school teaching deaf and hearing impaired students using American Sign Language . . . a small rural high school with students that spurred millions of dollars in federal and state research on deformed frogs . . . an urban school that's making creative use of technology to form replicable models that address a variety of moderate to severe learning disabilities . . . a dozen or more schools that parents and new leaders formed in new communities to improve 'school' for students with diverse cultures and languages.

Yet, if one were to judge Minnesota's chartered schools only on what makes news, one might wonder whether, on balance, this was such great idea after all. And, it's true that we've had some spectacular failures—including failures of management and sponsor oversight—among the dozen or so Minnesota chartered schools that have closed.

Our state's initial efforts to monitor how well students are performing on standardized math, reading, and writing tests have also produced a mixed record on how Minnesota's chartered schools are doing. While not universally accepted as an accurate measure, these or similar

tests are slated to play an increasing role in measuring school and student performance under the "No Child Left Behind" legislation signed into law by President Bush in early 2002.

### So how do we measure 'school success?'

With such mixed public perceptions, how do we answer the question "How are Minnesota's chartered schools doing?" Education/Evolving decided to ask the people who might know best. We interviewed and observed students, parents, teachers, school founders, and other staff from ten Minnesota chartered schools in their school settings. The objectives were to describe each school and to listen and report on the insiders' perspectives about their school's many features and on the results—however defined by the goals they each set forth in the contracts they have with their sponsors. We set out to put together a document that policymakers, families, teachers, journalists, and others could turn to if they wanted to understand the very different types of schools that are being created under Minnesota's charter law.

As we began to evaluate interview responses, however, we realized that almost all of the interviewees from these very distinct schools were consistent in their message. They wanted us to understand: *culture matters*. And that the positive school culture developed and maintained at each of their chartered schools (through a variety of means within each school and between the various schools) is what's driving their success, both individually and as a school. These findings were so consistent that they drove us to change the focus of the report—which we appropriately titled, "Positive School Culture."

We now pose the question: If the number of chartered schools continues to grow, and the students and families choosing them believe positive culture is appealing and a reason they attend, then shouldn't we be including "positive culture" in our measures of school success?

### Profiles include ten schools and a consistent set of questions

The profiles that make up the bulk of this report were

prepared following one or more site visits to each of the following ten chartered schools:

- **Academia Cesar Chavez**
- **Avalon School**
- **Community of Peace Academy**
- **Coon Rapids Learning Center**
- **Cyber Village Academy**
- **Harvest Prep Academy**
- **High School for the Recording Arts**
- **Metro Deaf School**
- **New Visions School**
- **Twin Cities Academy**

Each profile includes:

- Contact information, statistics, and other background on the school’s sponsor, enrollment, staff, student demographics, and testing as self-reported by the schools in response to a survey commissioned by Education/Evolving in late 2001.
- A narrative based on observations and responses by the school’s leadership and staff to questions about each school’s history, setting, facilities, learning environment and program, tests and other assessments, as well as operational structure including partnerships, sponsorship, staff, and governance. Most narratives include comments from teachers and other staff.
- Students’ reflections on what they like and don’t like about their school, and on how their current school differs from previous schools they have attended. Students also reveal what they believe their parents and friends from other schools think about their school.

This report was never intended to be a comprehensive study of every chartered school in Minnesota. After reviewing raw data on all of Minnesota’s chartered school student and staff demographics; evaluation strategies; missions; learning programs; governance and operational structures, the Education/Evolving team selected ten schools that seemed to be doing something distinctive from the traditional settings—something that might not have been possible if the charter law did not exist.

The schools we selected are not the only schools doing something unique, however. So, this should not be interpreted as a report that identifies the “ten best” or the “only ten showing success” or the “only ten doing something distinctive.” This project also wasn’t intended to be a

formal research project that meets all the methodological expectations of traditional academic researchers.

Education/Evolving believes that listening is important, and that we can learn a lot by reporting on the perspectives of people who are highly involved and impacted by chartered schools.

### **For students, parents, and teachers, whether school is “enjoyable” matters.**

A quick reading of the students’ comments in this report might lead one to conclude these schools are popular with students—especially high school students—because they now “enjoy” going to school. That, in turn, might lead a casual observer to conclude that these schools don’t place adequate emphasis on academics—or at least on the rigorous level of academics needed to produce the knowledge and skills that will be required in college, at work, and in life. If students “enjoy” going to school, one might even conclude they must not be learning.

Of course, generalizations involving schools and students are risky considering the varying nature of these schools and the students who attend them. Nevertheless, by their own analysis, the students interviewed were clearly not succeeding in their previous school environments. In fact, a number of them had left their former schools, either involuntarily or on their own accord. While many students succeed in traditional settings, it seems that for large numbers of today’s students, just being enrolled and staying in school is a significant goal and a critical prerequisite to producing needed levels of academic knowledge and skills.

Sometimes chartered school environments offer them a way to learn and attend school that they couldn’t access before—such as a work-related component, flexible hours, ability to set their own pace, ability to overcome a disability without missing school or appearing ‘different’, or ability to keep up with academics while learning English. Without these environments, students say they might not succeed academically or might not attend school at all.

Beyond attendance, student attitudes and motivation are also critical to producing needed academic gains and overall achievement. And, in school after school that we visited, both students and their parents reported significantly higher levels of motivation and significantly

improved attitudes about going to school. We also found schools that place a very high priority on actively engaging, welcoming, and respecting the role of parents—another critical factor that can contribute to improved academic achievement. And, we found—in teachers and other adults working in these schools—a degree of optimism and positive attitudes about both school and young people that is too often lacking in many of the educational environments that these students have left behind.

In fact, students, teachers, and parents that we talked often made stark contrasts between their chartered school and the much larger and less personal schools they formerly were associated with. They often cited school size as a critical factor inhibiting the creation of positive school culture in a more traditional school environment. They didn't blame individuals for the lack of positive culture, but explained that maintaining order and control must be the natural emphasis in larger school environments.

Many of the students we interviewed made a particular point of citing their feelings of personal safety in their smaller chartered school environments. They said that their schools create safe environments less by rules and other traditional “control” mechanisms imposed by adults and more by giving students a positive sense of “ownership.” Teachers and parents feel more ownership as well.

Especially at the high school level, many of the students we interviewed fit demographic profiles we normally associate with lower levels of academic achievement—particularly students from lower income and highly mobile backgrounds. But we want to be clear that this is not the only population of students seeking something distinctive from their schools. We found growing interest and enthusiasm in—at least some of the profiled schools—from bright students with more affluent backgrounds, who were bored or otherwise not engaged in more traditional learning environments.

In the adult world, employers spend billions of dollars a year trying to create work environments that will attract, retain, and motivate high caliber, productive employees. Why, then, wouldn't we want students to feel positive about the educational environments in which they spend a good part of their lives? If productivity is related to an appealing, motivating environment, shouldn't we—as policymakers, taxpayers, educators, and leaders in our communities—rejoice that the charter law is allowing people to create learning environments where previously unengaged students now actually enjoy going to school?

As one respected district school superintendent reflected one day after visiting a chartered school in southern Minnesota, “What strikes me most is that these kids are working really hard and don't even know it.”

## **‘Positive school culture’—a new indicator of ‘school success’**

Our most important finding, then, includes what we hope will be an important addition to our state and national discussion and understanding of chartered schools and how their success or failure should be determined. That finding is that the most significant unifying and distinguishing characteristics of Minnesota's chartered schools are not their curriculum or their learning programs—at least not to many students and parents—and at least not for now.

Instead, most of the students and parents we interviewed placed highest value on a number of characteristics of their schools that we've grouped under the general heading of “positive school culture.” These characteristics seem to result in better attitudes, increased student motivation, a greater feeling of safety, better behavior, and higher attendance.

Chartered school students and parents also cited a number of factors that seem to produce this “positive school culture”—factors like the small size of the schools and classes, the familiarity and regular contact between fewer numbers of students and teachers and other adults, the individualized instructional methods, the school's mission or focus, more flexibility in scheduling and in the pacing of student learning, teachers' increased role in school-level decision-making, and, overall, a more positive and welcoming environment for students and their families.

These anecdotal results seem particularly prevalent for the low-income or low-performing students who were not regularly attending, fully engaged, or succeeding academically in their previous schools. But, as noted above, there may also be a growing number of very bright students from more affluent backgrounds who are simply bored and unmotivated in traditional teaching and learning environments and are longing for something more challenging and engaging—something that they can “enjoy.”

Overall, we were surprised at how much emphasis students, parents, teachers, and founders place on positive

school culture over other more traditional ways of measuring the appeal or success of individual district schools. Perhaps this helps explain the growing diversity of students in Minnesota’s chartered schools as well as their high levels of student and parent satisfaction.

## Why is ‘positive school culture’ so important? And, what does it mean for policy makers?

The profiles of ten Minnesota chartered schools that follow each speak for themselves and deserve to be read without a lot of editorial comment. These schools are all so distinctive that it’s also risky to make broad generalizations about what our basic findings about the importance of positive school culture may mean for the long-term—particularly on matters involving public policy. At the same time, there are at least four important lessons to be gleaned from this inquiry . . .

**First, Minnesota students have a huge diversity of needs, wants, and learning styles that must be represented in the choices we make available to them in our K–12 system of education.** For far too many of our students—many of whom do not stay in school until graduation—there have been too few choices. Chartered schools are being eagerly sought out and are much appreciated by many of those students—and by their parents. This is a very powerful idea, indeed. There need to be more of these choices and many of them need to be different from schools our state’s students are now attending. While many students are succeeding in the traditional environments, we must provide new and different options for the thousands of students who are not.

**Second, the role and importance of “positive school culture” as an attraction and as a positive asset in chartered schools needs to be continuously monitored.** We noted, for example, that a positive school culture now appears to have greater influence on attitudes of chartered school students than other more traditional school assets—like college level courses, high levels of traditionally defined academic achievement, a modern and well-equipped facility, or extensive extra-curricular offerings. This may partly result from the relatively small number of choices available to students for whom those assets are less important than a positive school culture. To learn if this is true,

an important question to keep asking is, “Will student attitudes change as more chartered school choices become available that emphasize both such assets and a positive school culture?” Additionally, “As there get to be an increasing number of chartered schools that also have a rigorous curriculum and high levels of academic achievement, will more traditional school assets become a higher priority for more students in making choices among competing chartered schools?” In other words, is getting the culture piece right for the students not succeeding in traditional environments the key to unlocking their long-term interest and achievement in academics?

**Third, Minnesota students and their families need varied and in-depth information on a number of school options in making wise school choices.** Families can obtain the usual checklist of school features from a brochure or off a Web site: the curriculum offerings, extra-curricular activities, teacher qualifications, test scores of students, age and location of the building, and all the rest. But, it’s also important that families can evaluate schools based on information about each school’s cultures, as reported by students, parents, teachers and others who help create that culture and know it best. For many students, culture is critical to academic success.

**Finally, multiple, relevant, and accurate indicators must be used in evaluating each chartered school—beyond those common indicators used and required for all public schools.** Some of those indicators must be assessment methods that match the unique mission and goals of each school and the students it attracts—a practice already in place for at least some chartered schools. Surveys, focus groups, and other ways of gauging the views of students, parents, staff, and others about the culture of each school should be included. And, whatever assessments or other indicators are used, they should measure gains for individual students over time—not just for charters, but for all public schools.

## Implications for an ongoing public policy agenda for Minnesota’s chartered schools

These findings are of interest on their own merits in helping us understand both the growth trends and the challenges Minnesota’s chartered schools have experienced

over the last decade. Properly understood, they could also be helpful in building and acting on an ongoing public policy agenda for strengthening our state’s chartered schools in the future. At a minimum, that policy agenda should include:

**Establishing and/or maintaining teacher quality criteria, academic achievement criteria, and other measures that do not discourage innovative practices influencing the role of teachers and how students learn.** The new federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation includes new mandates for states, districts, and individual schools to improve both teacher quality and student achievement. These are laudable goals that are shared by individual chartered schools and their advocates. However, these mandates should not be implemented in ways that force all schools to look and act alike. Schools should be able to create distinctive roles for teachers and distinctive methods that students use to learn. In particular, the competencies required of teachers should recognize the kinds of interdisciplinary, technology-rich, and project-based learning models that are emerging in a number of chartered and other smaller high schools. In some cases, these models will be needed to make small rural and other schools financially feasible in the future. And, as noted above, the measures used to document student achievement gains should include assessment methods that are relevant to each school’s mission and culture and that document achievement gains over time.

**Equitable financing for facilities that encourages both innovation and holding down costs.** Minnesota is ahead of most states with charter laws because the state provides—through its Building Lease Aid Program—explicit financing for chartered school facilities. As the number and enrollments of chartered schools has grown, so has the size, visibility, and vulnerability of annual state appropriations for this pioneering program. What’s needed now are innovative strategies—like building ownership and access to lower-interest bonding—to reduce the long-term cost of facilities for chartered schools and, ultimately, the state. Ideally, such financing should be flexible enough to recognize a variety of ways of teaching and learning, including less capital-intensive schools that allocate more money to technology and/or on learning that takes place away from traditional school sites.

**Sponsorship options that are both rigorous and pro-active in approving and overseeing chartered schools.**

Minnesota allows a more diverse array of sponsoring authorities for chartered schools than any other state. Yet, most prospective chartered schools still spend an inordinate amount of time finding a sponsor and securing its approval. The quality and rigor of the approval and oversight process also varies greatly among Minnesota’s 40-plus charter sponsors. And, most sponsors consider their role to be outside their core mission and grossly under-compensated—two factors that cause them to limit both the number of schools they will authorize and the staff and other resources they will commit to the task. To address these shortcomings, Minnesota needs at least some sponsors that have both the explicit mission and sufficient resources to do this complex and essential job well. Minnesota could also benefit from having sponsors that are proactive in identifying unmet student needs and seeking proposals for schools that have a particular mission to address one or more of those needs.

**Fair and equitable opportunities for students in all types and sizes of public schools to participate in a broad range of extra-curricular activities.**

The emergence of viable small high school options makes it imperative that students attending such schools not be denied reasonable opportunities to participate in sports, music, drama, and other extra-curricular activities. To the extent they are available, all chartered school students should have the option of participating in such activities in a district public school. And, as small high school options are made available to increasing numbers of students—including new or reconstituted district high schools—new options should be actively explored for organizing sports and other extra-curricular activities on a geographic basis and in partnership with community-based organizations, park and recreation departments, and other prospective partners.

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These findings and policy implications suggest the value of ongoing listening and learning from the experiences of each of Minnesota’s 85-plus chartered schools—and especially the value of listening to their students and their families. This report—including the ten profiles that follow—is an excellent place to start.

## ACADEMIA CESAR CHAVEZ

## Summary and Background

930 East Geranium  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55106  
Phone: 651-778-2940

**Contact:** Ramona de Rosales

**Sponsor:** University of Saint Thomas

**Opened:** 2001

**Grade Levels:** K-6

**Enrollment:** 158

**Class Size:** 18-21

**# of School Days:** 174

**Staff:**

9 Teachers

1 Licensed Specialist

6 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**

1% American Indian

0% Asian

91% Hispanic

3% African American

6% Caucasian

84% Free or reduced-price lunch

7% Special education

54% English Language Learner

**Tests:** Weschler Individual Achievement Test

**Other evaluations:** Work sampling, portfolio assessment, Minnesota Graduation Standards, and other progress reports

A group of Saint Paul Latino families inspired community leaders to create Academia Cesar Chavez (ACC). Families wanted the option for their children to attend a school that offers bilingual education and a curriculum rich with Latino history and culture. The families believed that the traditional school environments where they had been sending their children were only causing their children to fail. They were particularly frustrated with ways in which English was being taught to Spanish speakers. School leader Ramona de Rosales says she worked directly with Saint Paul Public Schools' and the Latino community to improve the environments, but ultimately decided that she would have a better chance of responding to community demands by starting an entirely new school.

De Rosales worked with others to create Academia Cesar Chavez. The school mobilizes strong community connections to improve access to resources, and consequently, to improve learning for Latino students. Connections include a family resource center, an after school program, partnerships with community and higher education organizations, and an affiliation with the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), a Washington-based organization attempting to expand opportunities for Latino students across the country.

## Setting

Academia Cesar Chavez is housed in a former Catholic school on the east side of Saint Paul. The brick building is located in a busy but relatively quiet residential neighborhood. The classrooms are traditional, lining each side of the school's hallways. Desks are set-up in rows.

A majority of students are Latino, and most speak Spanish—whether they are native speakers or whether they have learned it as a second language. Most receive free or reduced-price lunch. All students wear a standard uniform. The school day lasts from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

## Learning environment integrates Latino culture, the Spanish language, and academics

Academia Cesar Chavez is committed to integrating Latino culture and values into the academic program. The school educates the whole child—socially and academically—in a way that emphasizes the values of Cesar Chavez, the late Latino labor leader and social activist.

ACC's mission reflects these values, stating the school's dedication to a community-based approach that will help students achieve academic success. ACC strives to create a "familia," or family, by building a community with students, teachers, parents, and various stakeholders. Staff meets with students and their families in their homes at the beginning of each year to discuss ACC's mission and expectations and to develop relationships that will help facilitate student learning.

Parents indicate that ACC's culture offers a needed alternative to traditional educational settings, where there are often misunderstandings about Latino culture and frustrations between students and teachers who speak different languages. During a luncheon when a group of parents were honoring the teachers with a traditional Latino style meal, one parent conveyed her daughter's experience. A traditional district school determined that her daughter needed special help and assigned her to a remedial class. In fact, the woman's daughter only needed glasses. The girl is now thriving at ACC and really likes school. Her academics have improved and she feels more confident.

Teachers seem pleased with the community as well. Most of the teachers had taught in traditional district public schools before coming to ACC. One new teacher says that she was very reluctant to leave the stability she had in her district. She had heard that charter schools are unstable and that they do not use any curriculum. She was "pleasantly surprised" to learn that ACC offers a curriculum that works well for its students. She says that teaching at ACC has been a positive change.

## **Culturally appropriate program drives academic achievement**

Academia Cesar Chavez offers a learning program that integrates traditional Latino culture, language, and values throughout academics by utilizing thematic teaching approaches. To address language barriers that contributed to ACC students' lack of success in traditional settings, the school employs a dual language program. The program helps students who are learning English as well as students who are learning Spanish. All students, therefore, improve their skills in a world language not spoken at home. The program is designed to help students achieve full literacy in English and some literacy in Spanish. Teachers work to help every student speak English well.

The school's academic program is generally aligned with Minnesota's Graduation Standards<sup>1</sup>, but teachers approach lessons with Latino culture in mind. Content areas include language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In grades three, four, and five, teachers group students by math ability. The school offers some

<sup>1</sup> Minnesota's educational standards and testing requirements are now being revised, but, once implemented, will apply to all public schools including charters.

looping to keep students with the same teacher for more than one year. Also, ACC expects all staff to integrate computer use into their curriculum.

Staff views after-school programs and activities as an integral part of students' overall learning program. A program called Academia Puebla (ADP) employs an academic enrichment and dropout prevention strategy to improve the rate of retention among school-age children. Goals include strengthening students' skills in reading, writing, math, science, and problem solving as well as raising students' confidence in their ability to learn. The program also focuses on building students' pride in their culture. The after-school teachers communicate regularly with ACC teachers regarding each student's performance. The program served seventy students in the 2001–2002 school year and maintained a 95 percent attendance rate.

## **Tests and portfolio assessments contribute to individualized learning plans**

Academia Cesar Chavez uses the Weschler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT), a pre and post norm-referenced test, to measure students' yearly progress. ACC also evaluates students according to how they're progressing toward achievement of Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Teachers analyze all results to track student learning and fine tune students' individual learning plans.

## **Operational structure brings community and resources to students**

### **A family resource center provides support services to students and their families**

Academia Cesar Chavez offers a family resource center to provide support services and resources to students and their families. The school believes students have a better chance at learning if their basic needs are met. The resource center conducts food and clothing drives to obtain materials for families and serves as an immunization clinic. Also, the center organizes donation efforts to secure school supplies and equipment.

The resource center received a federal FAST grant to implement the Families And Schools Together Program. Parents attend nine weekly sessions to gain skills that will improve their children's success in school, home, and the

community. If families need additional assistance, they are referred to social service agencies.

ACC provides three additional workshops throughout the year to help parents in their role as active partners in their children’s education. Workshops build parenting skills and teach parents ways to reinforce what students are learning at school. Last year, 27 families attended.

To keep parents up-to-date on what’s happening with their students at ACC, the school holds teacher/parent conferences twice a year and seven open houses throughout the year. Some classrooms had 100 percent parent participation in conferences in 2001–2002. ACC involves parents as volunteers as well. The school asks parents to fill out a volunteer form at the beginning of the year. Some become members of committees that meet monthly to improve the school culture and operations.

**Partnerships improve students’ access to services and programs that improve learning**

ACC’s partnerships with community-based organizations such as La Familia Guidance Center and Chicanos Latinos Unidos en Servicios (CLUES) help provide families with social service needs such as food, housing, health services, counseling, and employment.

Partnerships with higher education institutions include the University of Saint Thomas Tutor/Mentor Program. Twenty-four Saint Thomas students volunteer at ACC three afternoons per week to work with students on homework and provide other assistance.

ACC also works with the Science Museum of Minnesota to expose students to science and laboratory work. The museum trained ACC’s after-school program teachers to deliver a nine-week forensic science program that included fingerprinting, chromatography, and observation.

El Arco Iris, a cultural organization, teaches students about folklore—music, dance, and culture of the Caribbean.

**Sponsor provides training and other services to ACC staff**

The University of Saint Thomas sponsors Academia Cesar Chavez. Saint Thomas faculty and staff provide development training and other services to ACC teachers.

ACC is transitioning from its start-up board to a permanent governing board. The state approved a waiver allowing additional community members to be part of the board. Without a waiver, Minnesota’s charter law requires that the school’s licensed teachers make up the majority of board members.

**Staff contributes new ideas to school policy and learning program**

ACC pairs each classroom teacher with an education assistant so language and content needs can be sufficiently addressed. Teachers say their insight and ideas are often incorporated into ACC policy and curriculum. A contract teacher who works with students receiving special education said that the ACC solves problems with an open mind.

**Student Perspectives  
Academia Cesar Chavez**

Students attending Academic Cesar Chavez believe they’re doing significantly better academically. They say the improvement is mainly due to their relationships with adults are more positive than they were in students’ former, district schools. They feel respected. One student said, “The teachers listen. I’m learning more. I gave up before, but the teachers [at ACC] really believe in us. We know the teachers pretty well.” “The teachers are nicer here. No yelling. Before, teachers yelled all of the time. We were automatically suspended after three times,” another added.

“The teachers at my old school used to say that we were the worst, baddest, kids. Worsen than kindergarteners. Teachers screamed at you. Here, we talk it out. It’s safe. The teacher tells us that he has faith in [us]. You believe that you can do it. I don’t remember this at regular school. They [adults] said that [my old school] would get better, but it didn’t.”

According to students, respect from adults and small class sizes have improved student behavior. One student said, “I am doing better here; no distractions. The other kids are learning and paying attention. I am on the bus patrol here. Before I was ‘written up’ on the bus.”

Students seemed happy to report that fights do not occur at ACC. “I feel safe. There are no fights here, but

before I saw 10 fights a day. Here we talk about it.” Another said, “There were more fights before. The kids are better and nicer here. They’re nicer because teachers

**Students said their experience at Academia Cesar Chavez is quite different from their experiences in traditional settings. Differences include:**

- **Positive relationships with teachers**
- **Improved relationships with other students**
- **Safer environment**
- **Learning program focused on Latino culture**

treat kids the way they want to be treated. The Golden Rule.” “It helps that in the morning we sit in a circle and express our feelings.” Some students described a simpler explanation for improved student relationships. “We get more attention,” they said.

ACC’s focus on Latino culture has improved students’ social opportunities as well as their attitude toward school and learning. “I like school because it talks about culture. I can communicate with my step dad’s family [because I’m learning Spanish].” “This school’s different,” another

added. “Only English was taught at my old schools. I like that both languages [Spanish and English] are taught here.” A third student said, “I like to come to school here. I didn’t like to go to school before.” Other students said the cultural focus is easier to respond to and understand. “I want to work harder here. Before, I just wanted to give up.” “The homework is to our ‘level,’” said another.

Students say their parents are happy to send them to ACC. “My parents notice a big difference,” one explained. “[When school’s out] I ask my mom when I will get to go to school again. I don’t like to stay home. I didn’t like school before. I hated it. But I will cry on the last day [at ACC].”

Students wish they could have a playground, but did not indicate that they disliked anything else about ACC. They hope other students will have access to schools like ACC, so they don’t have to go through the misunderstandings they experienced with many of their district teachers. “People should believe in us. Schools should believe in us,” they explained.

## AVALON CHARTER SCHOOL

### Summary and Background

1745 University Avenue  
 Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
 Phone: 651-649-5495 Ext. 200  
 Web site: <http://www.avalonschool.org>

**Contact:** Andrea Martin  
**Sponsor:** Hamline University  
**Opened:** 2001  
**Grade Levels:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 120  
**Advisory Size:** 18  
**# of School Days:** 170

**Staff:**  
 7 Teachers  
 1 Licensed Specialist  
 3 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 4% American Indian  
 12% Asian  
 4% Hispanic  
 13% African American  
 68% Caucasian

17% Free and reduced-price lunch  
 10% Special education

**Tests:** Stanford 9

**Other evaluations:** To graduate, students must complete 40 credits and a senior project.

A group of community members and parents founded Avalon Charter School because they wanted Twin Cities' students to have access to a learning environment that uses a project-based education program and that focuses on active citizenship.

The school is committed to core values of excellence and citizenship, which has led to a number of new and different decisions about how to operate the school. Teachers run the school as a cooperative, for example, allowing them to work with students to make decisions about the learning program as well as the budget, finances, and other administrative needs. Teachers are also accountable for the outcomes of their decisions.

This operational structure has resulted in student-directed learning, as opposed to learning that's instructor-

directed. It has also resulted in decisions that reflect the values of those at the site. Technology is largely available to students, for example, and evaluation processes for both students and staff incorporate peer review and feedback.

### Setting

Avalon is located in a busy commercial area along University Avenue. It shares space with two other chartered schools, occupying the second floor of an old brick building.

The interior space is mostly open with brightly painted orange and yellow walls. Cubicle walls separate "pods"—groups of students, from all grades, who have the same teacher-advisor. There are some smaller classrooms along the perimeter.

Students appear to be busy and engaged in their work. Some work by themselves at desks while others meet in small groups with peers and/or advisors in common areas with tables, chairs, and couches. Students are able to move around and talk as they please, as in many busy office environments.

### Learning environment fosters active citizenship and core values

Avalon's mission is to be a strong, nurturing community that inspires active learning, local action, and global awareness. The staff is intentional about building school culture and a set of core values centered on excellence and active citizenship. They place high importance on helping students develop both international and cross-cultural awareness.

Adults make students aware of the school's expectation that students be actively involved in their learning experience. Teacher-advisors strive to create leadership opportunities for students, and do so partially by allowing students to draw on their own passions and interests to create their learning plans.

Teacher-advisors also practice active citizenship in their workplace. They have chosen a cooperative model of governance, through which they work as a team to make all decisions about the operations of the school.

## **Broad practice of the mission and goals establishes a positive environment**

Teacher-advisors say that while there are a number of differences between Avalon Charter School and the traditional settings they came from, the most important is that all the kids want to be at the school. Avalon's 90 percent attendance rate backs up that observation. Teachers say that students express concern about what they'll do when school is not in session, and that many want to attend school over the summer. Teachers believe the statements are signs of students' sense of community and safety in Avalon's environment.

Teachers attribute the students' attitude to two things. First, everyone involved understands that attending Avalon means committing to the core values. From their very first contact with the school, families engage in a covenant process designed to establish clarity about the expectations between families and the school. Second, staff makes an effort to respect students and involve them in decision-making.

The commitment to this culture, teachers believe, attracts students and their families. Students come from great distances to attend Avalon, and there is a waiting list for enrollment. While the student body is somewhat diverse, they have had some trouble attracting and retaining students of color. Staff is making an effort to learn why and intends to address this issue in the coming years.

## **Project-based learning program allows for students to design their own learning plans**

### **Students develop their own learning plans**

Avalon's staff and board are committed to a project-based learning model in contrast to the instructor-directed models offered in most traditional settings. Teacher-advisors expect students to develop their own learning plans that incorporate individual and/or group projects, as well as seminars, such as math or reading. Projects must cumulatively incorporate all twenty-four high school standards required by Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Teacher-advisors are clear that the curriculum emphasizes depth over breadth, drawing on the passions and interests of individual students.

Teachers develop and adopt seminar curriculum and general project guidelines. They typically design seminars at the request of students. Some incorporate highly specialized subjects of interest to many students. Others provide basic instruction in general concepts, such as math and reading, to help students who wish to have more guidance in achieving Minnesota's Graduation Standards for these subjects.

Students who demonstrate they can work independently gain more responsibility and freedom. For some students, learning to work independently is a big challenge. Many are used to instructor-directed learning models that are more structured. In the traditional settings that most students are used to, teachers set deadlines. Individual time management is a very new opportunity.

Students are assigned to advisory groups made up of no more than seventeen students. Groups are made up randomly, with students from all grades (versus students from one grade, as in many traditional settings). Students may stay with the same advisor for four years.

### **Students can impact curriculum and operational decisions**

Staff indicates that they actively involve students in up-front decisions about Avalon's learning program. They admit they were somewhat reactive in the first year and did not involve students. They say they needed to "live together for a year" in the new environment to really get used to and formalize Avalon's core values and direction. But students are now involved in most aspects of the school.

Students also impact operation of the school through the Student Congress. Students helped develop Avalon's constitution, which guides school policy. The board and staff take the Congress' recommendations seriously. In fact, two students from Congress are members of the school board.

### **One computer for every two students**

At Avalon, there is one computer for every two students. Students keep their computers at their desks, and can access them according to the schedule they work out with their fellow user. Computers are viewed as a necessary tool for learning. Each student has an e-mail account and Internet access. Teachers clearly expect students to use

a variety of Web-based resources when preparing their projects.

Teachers and students indicate that Avalon must more aggressively pursue technology. Teachers express a need for increased technology training among both staff and students. Another goal is to eventually be a paperless environment. All say that there are plans to improve technology in the future, but staff indicates that they have necessarily prioritized other needs surrounding the school's start-up.

## Students have a role in evaluation

Avalon measures student progress using the Stanford 9 test, but is intentional about evaluating students on a more regular basis using more than just tests. They also clearly give students a role in evaluating themselves, teachers, and Avalon as a whole. For seminar courses, teacher-advisors write up student evaluations that accompany their assigned grade. Students have an opportunity to provide feedback.

For projects, students evaluate themselves first. If they worked as part of a team, they receive peer reviews from other students. After peer review, adult project advisors provide students with written evaluation. Both the grade and amount of credits granted can be negotiated. Student and parent surveys provide an additional opportunity to evaluate success of both the student and the school.

## Teachers are responsible for governance and operational structures

### Teachers use the cooperative model to preserve Avalon's intended environment

Avalon's teachers adopted a cooperative model of governance, meaning that they (not a separate administrative body) take on all responsibility for the operations of the school. And they're accountable for the results of their decisions. Teachers make decisions about the overall learning model, for example. They also create and monitor budgets and make decisions about allocation of finances, such as how much revenue finances technology and how much goes toward salaries.

As part of their decision-making, they opted to become part of a larger cooperative of teachers through EdVisions Cooperative. EdVisions provides its "sites" with a variety of services, from advice on running the school to adminis-

tering payroll. EdVisions takes care of many administrative functions but does not make decisions that govern its sites as a whole. In other words, they don't impose mandates on how to allocate revenue or how to design a learning program.

Most of the staff came to Avalon from area learning centers (alternative education programs associated with district) or traditional district schools. They explain that the cooperative model offers many opportunities and challenges. Many of them, for example, had never been responsible for budgets and finances. At Avalon, however, all teachers have some administrative responsibility. But the responsibility is welcomed, many say, in exchange for some of the positive tradeoffs. One teacher, for example, said she believes better decisions are made when the stakeholders can all agree. As a result of the positive tradeoffs, retention is high. All of the staff returned after the first year.

One teacher described her experience at the school after teaching at two different district schools. She had been bored in her previous teaching positions. There, she found that management overrode decisions made by the faculty and that the environment was very political. What was happening, she said, was not in the best interest of the students. She first heard about Avalon from a mailing. She loves the school. In particular, she likes the fact that all decisions are made at the site level by a team that is directly involved with the school and its students. The team making the decisions is also ultimately responsible for outcomes. The support for this new endeavor, she feels, is good. Parents, fellow school leaders, and other outside groups like EdVisions and Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) provide a large amount of encouragement and assistance.

The teacher review process is one of the many differences resulting from teachers' decision-making. They say its "360 degrees," meaning that teachers are reviewed by all of their peers. Each teacher works with a partner during the review process. The partner helps gather information before the formal review. Evaluations consider parent and student surveys as well as the perspectives of the overall staff. The entire staff sits down together to review each teacher, citing areas of accomplishment and areas where each could improve.

Like many chartered schools, and nonprofits in general, the teachers (who are the operators) have faced

some challenges while transitioning from governance by the founders. But a good sense of Avalon’s mission has helped them overcome the challenges, and the new operating structure is now going well.

### **Sponsor and board provide support for teachers’ decisions**

Hamline University sponsors Avalon Charter School. Avalon’s staff seems pleased with Hamline’s involvement. Hamline is interested in developing the cooperative model, and therefore provides support and ideas. Avalon says Hamline learns from them, too, and benefits from their association with an innovative new school. Avalon staff hired Hamline professor Walter Enloe to work with staff on developing some new initiatives.

Avalon’s Board of Directors is comprised of nine individuals: five teachers, one community member, and three parents. Members are elected with staggered terms. The board is responsible for working with teachers to set school policy, much like traditional nonprofit boards. They also make final financial decisions for expenses over \$5,000.

### **Parental involvement is a high priority**

Avalon encourages parental involvement, calling for parents to volunteer as many hours as they can during the year. Parental involvement is part of the covenant of expectations between Avalon and the families with students attending the school.

Avalon has a paid parent liaison hired specifically to work with parents. The staff member coordinates four parent conferences a year. Conferences typically generate 100 percent parent attendance. Avalon’s teacher-advisors say they know the parents.

### **Partnerships limit costs and allow students to take an active community role**

Partnerships allow Avalon to spend less on capital equipment while still providing students with access to modern facilities and community involvement. Staff says partnerships are particularly important to Avalon because of their commitment to active citizenship. The YMCA has a facility across the street from Avalon, and partners with the school to provide recreation space and classes such as aerobics and spinning. Saint Paul Neighborhood Network Cable TV works with Avalon to provide filming and editing opportunities. Students also partner with a number of community-based organizations to earn service-learning credits.

## **Student Perspectives Avalon Charter School**

Students attending Avalon Charter School have thought extensively about the differences between the environment at Avalon and the environment at the traditional schools they once attended. Most say they like Avalon better than their “old” school, and they have a long list of reasons why.

### **Small size, personal relationships are Avalon’s premiere features**

Topping nearly everyone’s list is Avalon’s small size, and the resulting personal relationships with teachers and fellow students. Students say they get more attention from teachers at Avalon, and that helps them to overcome issues preventing them from learning. “The people are different

[at Avalon]. Kids and teachers are more on the same level and they think the same [about relationships]. It’s not like, ‘listen to the teacher and do your homework.’” “Teachers get to know you more. There is more freedom because there’s more trust.” Others said: “It’s smaller. You know people—everyone—more in depth.” “It’s more personal than other schools. I used to go to Central, and you can’t get to know anyone.” “I feel more comfortable with adults now—we call them by their first names. We’re more equal. They know me on a personal level.” “At Avalon everyone is at one level. Teachers can talk to me directly and vice versa.” “[Teachers] are not so high up there—not so intimidating.” “We get to joke around with them. It’s like we’re buddies. At the regular high school, it’s not the same.” “[Teachers] are open. You can talk to them about personal problems.”

Other students agree that their traditional-school teachers didn't know them. They explain that the teachers may have good intentions, but the large settings prevent positive interaction. "The [traditional] school I went to had like 1300 students. It was big! And it was ok, but the teachers . . . You couldn't get enough attention. I mean, I'm sure they're nice people, but they're caught up in it. On average, they teach—what—45 people [per class]? Here, it's more like nine people per class." "[At traditional schools, the teachers are like, 'I don't care about you—but here's a good grade,'" another said. "We were like cattle. They even built ramps so more people could travel through one small space at the same time. It was ridiculous. And I had a number for everything. I had a lunch number. An i.d. number. . . ." Time to develop relationships is simply not available in traditional settings, according to students. "At the regular high school, you can't talk to [teachers]. I guess they would listen, but not for an hour."

Avalon's setting is quite different, they say. They don't have numbers, the environment is friendly and feels safe, teachers know their names, and they interact with teachers outside of classroom settings. "The environment is great. At Highland, it was cluttered—four times the amount of people. Here, there is nothing to worry about. And the colors are good—orange and yellow. We're talking about painting it different colors, but at least it's nice and bright." Some express that the environment is close to what they'll have in college. "There are chairs, a couch . . . not like school, but more like college commons."

The smaller, friendlier environment leads to positive student-to-student interactions, according to students. Students can get to know their peers, and there's a greater sense of mutual respect. "I'm really loud and friendly. But [at my former, traditional school] nobody knew me. [She pointed to another person in the group.] We went to the same school, and we didn't even know it. No one talked. And then the teachers would tell my mom, 'your daughter's shy. She doesn't talk enough!' My mom knew that wasn't right." Another student said, "There were too many fights [at my former school]. Something's always wrong. People are just gossipy. Or sticking to themselves. Or talking behind people's backs. Here there are no fights—I don't think I've ever seen one! It's more relaxed. I never get stressed here. I think it's cuz of the atmosphere." A

Hmong student who speaks English as a second language said, "Relationships are open. That's good. It makes you not feel left out/different."

### **Student-directed learning program works well because students can exercise choice, learn at their own pace, and access teachers who are generalists**

Freedom to choose their own learning programs, and the ability to do hands-on learning via projects, is next on students' list of reasons why Avalon works well for them. "You get to learn about what you want to learn." "You can create your own projects. You learn about what you're interested in." "The system is project based. I like choosing topics to work on. I have picked automotives—I like cars." Students mentioned that at the traditional schools they were "frustrated," "overwhelmed," and "bored" due to repetition. "We're not forced to regurgitate facts—that's not learning." "We get to choose things, instead of having to do mandatory things." Some students said they like having the ability to make the learning program more specific. One explained, "We have painting instead of art. We have Shakespeare instead of English." Others prefer to stick with art and English, but like having options. Students also enjoy different opportunities, such as off-campus learning. "We get to go on field trips. Learning is just better, here."

Students say one important element of the learning program is the ability to learn at one's own pace. "You get to go at your own pace here. They don't shove you into curriculum." "There's lots of students working at their own pace and at different levels." Students express that math is a good example of how this works. Some like having extra time while others want to move ahead so they "don't have to suffer if others don't understand." Students who breeze through general subjects appreciate the ability to spend more time on subjects that are more interesting. More than a few said, "You have time to think."

Another important element of the learning program, according to students, is that teachers are generalists. "They aren't set at grade levels, or in specific subjects." "Each teacher is a generalist. Like our math teacher plays African drums." "There's one teacher no one gets [or understands]. She's an artist, and she tries to get us to 'see art.' But that's great. We get a wide variety of experiences—and all different styles."

### **Teachers respond to students' input about the learning program**

The third important element, students say, is that teachers and the board respond to their suggestions about how to improve the school and learning program. "We have a part in deciding what [the school] offers." They've seen teachers put many of their ideas into action. "If you think something is wrong with the school, you can change things to make it better for yourself or for the school. Like last year, there weren't any math classes. We did math together, in groups, but there weren't any classes. This year we have classes. We have a student government that we can get these things done through." "There's more discussion. Not, 'read this' or 'do these projects.'"

Students talked excitedly about their soon-to-come "coffee house". They'll turn the center of the school into a coffee house atmosphere to listen to bands on weekends. They're working on getting a new stage that the school will also use as an auditorium and theater. The young woman in charge of the committee said that students brought the idea to the board and secured approval. "We had a plan. They like that. The school is going to pay for half, since they'll use it too, and coffee house committee will pay for the other half [with earned revenues from the concerts]." Access to the board has improved since the school has "gotten on its feet." "Last year, there wasn't much we could put into it. But the community is better now. It pushes students to have a voice; to be involved in it."

### **Technology is a key to successful student-directed learning**

The final important element is regular access to technology—not just computers, but video cameras, scanners, and other equipment. In fact, they wish they had more access, though they realize they have much more access than they would have had in traditional settings. "I like the Internet—it's always there. I can flip back to windows and learn about cars, shoes, and I can take breaks to play games." "I like the technology, but would like better computers. The network is slow, and there's only two printers. Last year we got a virus and we're still dealing with that." "There aren't enough computers. We share computers with one other person. When they're using it; you can't get your stuff done." Another student added that it's not such a

problem. "You just have to work out user times. I know how hard that can be, because last year I had a partner who was on our computer all the time. I felt bad always having to ask her to get off of it. But this year I knew what to do, and I worked out a schedule right away." Still another added, "But there are no computers at other schools . . . like one computer for every 15 people? And it's not really for you." Students pointed out that they can also use Hamline's library and labs; and, if they get permission from their parents, they can go to the Saint Paul Library. These libraries have pretty fast connections to the Internet, though the server is sometimes slow.

Students like the fact that classes are starting to "go online". For their chemistry seminar, the syllabus, as well as readings, are posted on the World Wide Web. Math tests are computerized, so students and teachers can track the work and review progress each week. Students say teachers are good at helping them understand Internet research. Right now, they're doing a project where they have to determine whether sites contain factual, opinionated, or false information. Teachers launched the project because some students were having trouble telling the difference.

### **Student-directed learning works particularly well for self-motivated students**

Students sense that their learning experience is largely what they make of it. "We learn what we want to learn—so we have to like it. We picked it! If you have too much busy work, it's because you gave it to yourself!" "Before I came here they told me, 'There's no such thing as a grade. [Your progress toward graduation] depends on how hard you work.'"

While many easily create a successful and fun plan, others have a harder time. One needs to be self-motivated, they say. And for some, it takes too long to learn that skill.

"You have to be independent—this school is not for everyone. But this school prepares you more for the real world—college; business. You have to write things down. You have to be organized. It forces you to find resources. They're just put in front of you other schools. You need time management." Another said, "It isn't for everyone—it could be, but it isn't. You have to be responsible and motivated. If you're more like that, it'll work. Or you can get used to it. People come in and they're used to the old way of the teacher telling you what to do. You have to

learn independence.” “There’s not as much pressure to push yourself—to meet deadlines. You do better if you’re self-motivated. You have to ask for help when you need it.”

One student described that he is having trouble matching his work to requirements needed to receive credits. He is transferring back to his former, traditional school because his experience with Avalon is that students have to do much more work to earn the same credits. “Sometimes [Avalon gives students] too much freedom. This year, I gave it some thought. After looking at my transcript and total credits and grad standards compared to [what I accomplished] in 9th grade at Como, I made the decision to go back to Como. I feel it is two times as hard to hit the same things/objectives. Developing worksheets for yourself [is hard]. If you have lots of ideas, you’ll do fine. If you have the skills, too. But the amount of work is harder. To me, I feel better following directions.”

### **School stability, colleges’ perception of Avalon, and lack of extra curricular activities are main concerns**

Since Avalon is a chartered school, a number of students are concerned about Avalon’s stability as a public school, and about colleges’ view of their education when it comes time to apply. “Some charter schools shut down,” one said. “I hope that doesn’t happen.” Another said, “I’m concerned about the ‘alternative’ reputation. Will I have a problem getting into college? I’m still not sure.” “I’m afraid about whether I’ll get into college,” another said. One student replied that she thinks it will help with college, because colleges like people who are doing unique things.

Access to extra curricular activities is also a concern for some students. Others argue that it wouldn’t work at

Avalon—there’s only a few students who are interested, and there’s no money for uniforms. But teachers and students are finding creative ways to offer programs. Some students are starting a fencing team, for example. There aren’t a lot of extra curricular activities, such as sports, music, art, woodshop...” “The school doesn’t have a lot of money. These walls [cubicle dividers] were donated. There’s no science equipment; no theater.”

Another countered, “But we do get credit for outside stuff. Like, we have memberships at the YMCA across the street. They are flexible with our schedules so we can use the gym and take classes there. There’s a music room, too, if people want to practice.” One student explained how a peer went over to Central to be on their basketball team last year. “But this year that changed—they didn’t let her. But they should do that more! We could have a program, but the reason why we don’t is simple. We [Avalon] need the money to survive.”

Some students also wish they had school-sponsored transportation to school. Most take the city bus. Others said they don’t mind taking the bus, and believe that because they know how to use [the bus system] they can get places easily (like the Saint Paul library). But the bus can be scary, they say. “It’s crowded, and there’s some odd people.” Some parents drive students to school. “My parents didn’t want to drive here, but they’ve worked it out now. They know it’s worth it.”

Most students agree that the struggles are “worth it”. One student keeps asking himself, “Is this for real?” He continued, “I never fit in [at my former school]. People were mean. Then I shadowed a friend here. I couldn’t believe it! What a change! It knew it would work better for me.” And Avalon does work better, he says.

**COMMUNITY OF PEACE ACADEMY**

**Summary and Background**

471 Magnolia Avenue East  
 Saint Paul, Minnesota 55101  
 Phone: 651-776-5151

**Contact:** Dr. Karen Rusthoven  
**Sponsor:** Saint Paul Public School Board  
**Opened:** 1995  
**Grade Levels:** K-12  
**Enrollment:** 550  
**Class Size:**  
 (K-1) 16 students  
 (2-12) 24 students  
 # of School Days: 174

**Staff:**  
 28 Teachers  
 19 Licensed Specialists  
 18 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 70% Asian  
 4% Hispanic  
 19% African American  
 7% Caucasian

81% Free and reduced-price lunch  
 11% Special education  
 44% English Language Learner  
 11% Mobility

**Tests:** Northwest Evaluation, Minnesota Basic Skills Tests.

**Other evaluations:** To graduate, students must pass required courses and meet Minnesota Graduation Standards.

**Nonacademic assessments include:** Social Skills Rating System (SSRS); Individual Protective Factor Index (Grades 5–8); Comer’s School Climate Survey.

Dr. Karen Rusthoven founded Community of Peace Academy to apply the universal elements underpinning religious education (such as values and ethics) in a secular setting. The primary concept through which she married the two? Peacekeeping. Dr. Rusthoven, now the school’s principal, contends that the resulting culture has positively impacted student achievement.

Interviews with students and teachers support her contention. There is a strong sense of community at the

school that can be attributed directly to the strong mission and purpose Dr. Rusthoven created. Staff says this is particularly notable given the school’s location—an urban neighborhood on Saint Paul’s East side. A teacher who transferred to Community of Peace from a traditional district school just down the street said the established culture creates a significantly more successful learning environment with a very similar student and staff population.

**Setting**

The Academy’s building is broken into three parts. The older part is brick and formerly housed a Catholic grade school. The second part is a large addition that the school completed in order to add more classrooms and a state-of-the-art library. In 2002, a four story facility was added to house the high school program. This facility includes a multi purpose science lab, computer lab, art studio, and community space with a panoramic view in addition to eight full-sized classrooms and ten small classrooms for special education and ESL instruction. Generally, the school’s space is open and light.

The student population is ethnically and economically diverse. The Academy, which initially served primary grades K–5, now serves grades K–12 to meet families’ demand as students aged and did not wish to leave the “peace” environment. All students wear uniforms.

**Learning environment is centered around “peacebuilding”**

Community of Peace Academy’s learning environment is based on Dr. Karen Rusthoven’s belief that human relationships must be the focus of the school—and all else flows from the relationships formed. Rusthoven said that one cannot talk about academic excellence until one deals with the “human piece.” More specifically, how individuals behave—how they treat each other—is the most important thing to emphasize during the school day. Caring for the whole child is something Rusthoven believes is often overlooked in traditional settings.

Everyone involved with the school is asked to memorize and practice the “Peacebuilding Pledge” and “Code of Caring Behaviors”:

*I am a peacebuilder, I pledge...*

*To praise people, To give up put-downs, To seek wise people, To notice and speak up about hurts I have caused, To right wrongs. I will build peace at home, at school and in my community each day.*

*I will care for myself, I will care for others, I will care for learning,*

*I will care for things, I will care for the environment.*

Assistant Principal Louis Trudeau said that almost anything that happens during the school day can be tied back to and addressed by the pledge. The pledge provides a context from which to discuss everything from school rules and disciplinary issues to world events.

The pledge doesn't merely address the teacher-to-student relationship. It addresses all relationships, including student-to-teacher and student-to-student. It applies to all other student-adult relationships as well, including relationships with staff, parents, and volunteers. Everyone recites the pledge at the beginning of the school day during "circle", which is similar to homeroom. "Circle" is a time set-aside for reflecting and discussing important issues, praises, and concerns.

### **A strong mission drives the school**

Community of Peace has clear vision and mission statements around the peacebuilding theme, and all are expected to employ them as a foundation for all school-related activities.

Staff says that students, staff, teachers, and parents integrate both in day-to-day operations.

The statements are written to ensure education of the whole person—mind, body, and will; for peace, justice, freedom, compassion, wholeness, and fullness of life for all. The mission states that to create a peaceful environment in which each person is treated with unconditional positive regard and acceptance, a nonviolent perspective will be intentionally taught and all members of the community will strive to practice a nonviolent lifestyle.

Dr. Rusthoven believes that having a clearly defined mission is absolutely essential to the school's existence. She thinks it would have not have been as easy to create Community of Peace by working with a pre-existing district school setting. Starting from scratch, setting the mission, and then bringing everyone on board is what makes Community of Peace work well today. When everyone has a common understanding about the foundation on

which a school is based, the bottom line is clear and everyone can work to achieve it. Dr. Rusthoven said she recognized this model in Catholic schools, and knew she could apply it in the public sector.

### **The mission leads to a strong sense of community**

The Academy's mission encourages the staff to work together. Teamwork is expected—a big change for many of the teachers who used to work in traditional district schools. Teachers say that the clearly defined mission makes teamwork possible because it lays out an expectation for how colleagues will respond in mentor and peer roles.

One teacher described an experience at the traditional district school where he previously taught. After he asked for help from a colleague on how to teach decimals in a way that students would relate to, the teacher he consulted went behind his back and said things like, "Mr. X doesn't even know how to teach decimals." Another colleague warned him to be careful about asking for help because the culture was not to share information or help one another.

The teacher explained that from that point on he closed his door and did not share with any one else. In turn, he didn't receive support in teaching or disciplining students. He was going to leave teaching for good, seeing no opportunities to "make a difference" as he had wanted to when he first entered teaching. That's when he heard about Community of Peace. He decided to try it for a year, and then he'd quit teaching for good. But the culture was so different, so supportive, that he just entered his fourth year at Community of Peace.

Other teachers interviewed agree that the mission supports a cooperative spirit among staff. First and second year teachers are paired with a mentor teacher. They do not feel that they need tenure or a union in large part because they can self-select and can get the best and the brightest teachers. They feel that they are supported by the principal and by each other. The environment allows them to make a difference. One teacher said, "I can express an opinion and have an impact, something that would not have happened [in a traditional setting]."

### **Uniforms improve student-to-student relationships**

Staff believes that the uniforms seem to positively influence students' behavior. They have also eliminated some "clothing competition" found in other schools.

## Instructional methods were selected and developed with the mission and vision in mind

### Curriculum supports the mission

Founders and educators had the Academy's clear mission and vision in mind when they decided to train all teachers to use *The Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching and learning in order to foster a safe, challenging, and joyful school. The model requires all teachers to be flexible and able to address the individual needs of each student. *The Responsive Classroom* methods, detailed in full at [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org), include the following:

- The Golden Rule is the heart of the responsive classroom
- Morning Meeting: Each day begins with the morning meeting in each classroom
- Rules and logical consequences
- Use of time out and buddy teachers
- Role playing
- Classroom organization
- Guided discovery
- Academic choice

The school is heavily invested in developing students' skills in reading and mathematics. Using *The Responsive Classroom* concepts of meeting individual needs and guiding discovery, the staff is trying new approaches to improving reading and math comprehension. Greatly aided by available technology, staff strongly encourages student ownership of individual learning in these areas.

In reading, for example, teachers assess students to determine their reading ability and assign a program tailored to their needs. The students read books and use the computer to self test their comprehension. Assistant Principal Trudeau said that since the Academy instituted the program, library book circulation has gone up 100 percent. He is finding books all over the school—a problem he is happy to have. The school teaches math in a way that encourages discovery, trial and error, and problem solving skills. Teachers assign homework regularly—at least four days per week. Interviews with teachers made it clear that the staff is working hard to teach students to be self-motivated learners and decision makers.

Community of Peace makes service learning an integral part of each student's education. Each class had a yearly

service project for which they are responsible. This, too, ties back to the part of the school's mission that emphasizes connecting one's self with the broader community.

Besides academics, Community of Peace employs an ethics curriculum developed by Heartwood. "Peace and Ethics" is a regular course, much like reading or math. Teachers instruct students on principles of courage, justice, hope, love, loyalty, respect, and honesty through the use of multicultural folk literature, legends, and hero tales. Each month, they focus on a different virtue or ethical principle. During that month students are exposed to and asked to focus on a particular topic.

One teacher commented that it is sometimes a challenge to make the courses relevant to the mission. A number of teachers were frustrated that the school's size limits the number of courses that could be taught. They seem to understand that this is one of the trade offs they face working at a smaller school.

### Students have access to state-of-the-art technology

Community of Peace has two state-of-the-art computer labs with 50 computers, digital cameras, and other technical equipment. In addition, there are several computers in each classroom.

## Positive climate has positive impact on achievement

Community of Peace Academy serves a high population of low-income and English Language Learners; among the highest in the metro area and state. In its eighth year, the Academy's students are outperforming their peers on state tests in nearly all Twin Cities and state public schools with similar demographics.

Of the 48 eighth grade students at Community of Peace Academy, 75 percent passed the 2003 Minnesota Basic Skills Test in math as compared to the 72 percent state average passing rate. Sixty-five percent of the Academy's students passed the reading test. Community of Peace Academy was identified as one of the top twenty schools in the state, whose students' scores in math showed the greatest improvement between grades five and eight on the state mandated tests. No other school on the top twenty list had such a high concentration of low-income students.

Reading and math scores on the 2003 third and fifth grade Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) in math and reading showed that the Academy's students are making Adequate Yearly Progress in both subjects accord-

ing to the Federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Almost 83 percent of the Academy's eleventh grade students met or exceeded the state standard on the 2003 MCA in math. Eighty-four percent of tenth grade students met or exceeded the state standard on the 2003 MCA reading test. No other public high school in the state with similar low-income and Limited English demographics came close to meeting these passing rates.

In the spring of 2003, Community of Peace Academy held its first high school graduation. Twenty out of twenty-two twelfth grade students graduated. Of these, eleven are registered to attend college in the fall.

Community of Peace also notes the progress they see students making on an anecdotal basis. In other words, the school measures achievement using more than just test scores. Staff is very positive about the social progress that some of the students have made. One teacher commented that she notices major social progress among students once they're exposed to Community of Peace and have a chance to get used to the culture. Students who arrive "all tensed up" on their first day are eventually able to effectively engage in positive personal relationships and academic interactions with adults and peers. With time, these interactions result in improved academic performance.

Tests used to measure the progress of Community of Peace students include the standardized Minnesota Basic Skills Tests and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT-7). In 2002, staff replaced the MAT-7 with the Northwest Evaluation. The new evaluation was selected because Academy staff believe it allows for faster and more targeted results. High school students are required to complete Minnesota Graduation Standards and pass required courses.

Other assessments and evaluations are used to gauge nonacademic progress, including the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Individual Protective Factor Index (5–8), and Comer's School Climate Survey.

## **Governance and operational structures maximize available resources**

### **Staff has decision-making authority**

The teachers' role in the operation of Community of Peace is limited only by time and effort. Dr. Rusthoven said that the entire staff makes all decisions concerning the school.

They, and parents, make up the Academy's Board of Directors.

There are 45 regular staff members, including 37 licensed teachers and specialists. Decision-making authority allowed teachers to form a policy of "looping" with students, meaning that, for grades 3–8, each teacher instructs the same group of students for two years. At the high school, teachers serve as advisors to the same students for two years. Looping provides the staff and students with some consistency and an opportunity for ongoing relationships. Most important, one teacher said, is that teachers were able to create an environment where they can know the whole student.

Saint Paul Public Schools sponsors Community of Peace.

### **Parents have a role in supporting "peacebuilding"**

Parents are viewed as the primary educator of the student. Their role is very important. Community of Peace has a policy of visiting each student's home once a year. This helps the staff to better understand the environment that each student is coming from and to better communicate with parents. At Community of Peace, every student's parent or legal guardian acts as the student's academic and spiritual mentor. Staff asks parents to sign a Mentor Contract and a Home/School Compact outlining the mentoring responsibilities.

The staff surveys parents periodically to gather input on various proposals concerning the learning environment. The uniform policy came about as a result of parent action. The parents initially requested the uniforms and continue to be pleased with the results.

Community of Peace makes a concerted effort to regularly provide parents with information about current school news and news specific to their child. The school sends a newsletter to parents once per month. A family handbook, published and distributed each year, lays out the school's mission, code of behavior, expectations other policies and general information. The school holds teacher/parent conferences three times per school year, in August, November, and March. The school also holds monthly parent nights.

### **Partnerships**

Saint Paul Public Schools provides food and bus services. Metro Transit bus service is very helpful in retaining students who otherwise might not be able to get to the school.

A reading program, funded by an America Reads Grant, pairs University of Saint Thomas work-study students with the Academy’s 2nd and 3rd grade students.

A professor from the University of Saint Thomas teaches at the school, and Saint Thomas students regularly volunteer as student-mentors.

Volunteers from Piper Jaffray’s Saint Paul Division will tutor students in reading during the 2003–2004 school year as part of Mayor Randy Kelly’s Education Initiative.

Hamline Law School set up a program where law students teach conflict resolution at Community of Peace. Additionally, Community of Peace hired a number of mentors from Hamline University’s ESL Department to mentor classroom teachers. In 2003–2004, an ESL professor from Hamline will teach a course for the entire teaching staff.

Community of Peace contracts with Health Start to teach family life courses for four years, twice a week.

## Student Perspectives Community of Peace

Teachers at Community of Peace are clear that their students are well behaved. Students agree, and say that their good behavior comes from appreciation and thorough understanding of the school’s mission to practice and promote peace. They take the mission seriously, and realize its importance to the learning environment made available at the school.

What’s the students’ favorite part of the day? “The Peace Circle,” said a number of them. Students explained that The Peace Circle is a ritual they hold with their peers and teacher every morning. They sit in a circle and talk about current events, or anything that is on their mind, and discuss how it relates (positively or negatively) to their school mission of peace. Sometimes they do a “fish bowl”, where students can ask questions, or challenge their peers to behave better or think differently about an issue, while remaining anonymous.

The results? A sense of community; of acceptance; of safety. “At my old school people would make fun of me because I’m small, and I would get in fights a lot. Here, people accept me and like me. We all get along, even though we’re different.” Some said the peace mission works because it is combined with small school size. “It’s easier—not as crowded. We don’t get picked on.” Another student said, “At my old school the class sizes were so big—it was intimidating! I’d end up procrastinating.”

Students say their positive relationships with the Academy’s teachers and staff make the school distinctive from traditional settings. “The principal talks to you,” one student explained. “Principals at other schools are too scared to come out!” Others added comments about their teachers: “Teachers are more friendly. You can talk with all the teachers.” “Teachers are more understanding.” “They’re strict, but it eases up—they’re not as strict as in high school.”

Some students indicate that positive relationships are directly related to better academic performance. “Teachers are more friendly. You can talk with all the teachers.” “My grades were worse at my old school. Mine look like all A’s now. They pay more attention to one student here.” “The teachers work one-on-one with us. At my old school, if you were failing, no one was watching.”

Students believe, too, that Community of Peace has some distinctions from traditional schools that are disadvantages. One disadvantage is that students in the same grade at traditional schools seem to get ahead of them in math

because teachers at Community of Peace have to wait until all of the students understand the material before moving on. “Teachers help all the students to keep up, so sometimes I hear that the kids at other schools are much farther ahead than us—like in math.” Also, some find the more “peaceful” approach to discipline a bit lax. “There’s not enough suspension and detention,” one said. And finally, students believe they lack certain freedoms, “[Students at] other schools get to go off campus for lunch in high school.” Another said, “More independence would be nice. We’d learn more responsibility.”

Most Community of Peace students say they would be willing to trade the privileges, preferred discipline style, and slower paced learning for an environment where people practice the “peace” mission, however. “Everyone just gets along here. It’s better,” they said.

**Students say Community of Peace offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **An environment where there is a strong, practiced mission to promote peace**
- **Smaller school size**
- **Good, one-on-one, relationships with teachers who monitor their learning**

## COON RAPIDS LEARNING CENTER

### Summary and Background

11294 Robinson Drive West  
Coon Rapids, Minnesota 55433  
Phone: 763-862-9223  
Fax: 763-862-9250  
Web site: <http://www.crlc.us>

**Contact:** Kay Despard  
**Sponsor:** Bethel College  
**Opened:** 1999  
**Grade Levels:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 200  
**Class Size:** 12  
**# of School Days:** 174

**Staff:**  
9.4 Teachers  
2.5 Licensed Specialists  
3 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
5% American Indian  
1% Asian  
0% Hispanic  
2% African American  
92% Caucasian

17% Free and reduced-price lunch  
13% Special education  
0% English Language Learner  
90% Mobility

**Tests:** Minnesota Basic Skills Tests; Lifetime Library, Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests

**Other evaluations:** Student surveys; Bethel College is conducting a longitudinal study of student success.

Coon Rapids Learning Center serves high school students for whom traditional settings were not a good match. The school believes that many students need a program that is tailored to meet their individual needs instead of a program that requires students to fit into a standard mold. Coon Rapids Learning Center built its program around research showing that flexible hours, a vocational component, and heavy use of technology often capture the interest of students who don't succeed in traditional, instructor-driven, settings.

### Setting

Coon Rapids Learning Center is housed in part of a small commercial mall. The area is suburban, with convenient access to public transportation. An additional building nearby, formerly a state vehicle inspection station, is used for student projects, such as constructing kayaks from scratch. The school's interior is bright and busy.

Eighty percent of students come from the Coon Rapids area. The population is largely Caucasian.

### Mission to reach dropouts and other students not succeeding in traditional settings is at the forefront of all decision-making

The mission of Coon Rapids Learning Center is to recapture students who have dropped out of high school and to assist students who have not been successful in traditional school settings. All staff decisions are meant to achieve that end. They believe they are able to do so because the autonomy granted by Minnesota's charter law allows the Learning Center to focus more specifically on keeping potential dropouts in school. In traditional settings, they point out, schools need to serve many types of students. Often, traditional methods that serve a good number of students well are favored over methods that help at-risk students learn well.

### Small size and improved sense of community are key to serving at-risk students

Coon Rapids Learning Center is a small learning community by design. The students who come to the school have viewed their education as over. They have "checked out." Staff says their challenge is to reenergize and reengage the students. New energy often leads students to take responsibility for and complete their education. The best ways to engage students, staff says, are to keep the school size small and emphasize personal relationships.

Staff attempts to get to know each student from their first experience with the school. Before a student may attend the Learning Center, staff conducts an "intake interview." During the interview, staff explains what the Learning Center expects from students and families and

what the families can, in turn, expect from the school. Staff believes this process helps establish trust from the very beginning, and starts to break down students' negative experiences with adults who do not believe in some students' ability and will to succeed.

Families expect, for example, that staff will not tolerate any violence or chemical use on the site. As a result, there has not been any violence and 96 percent of the students report they feel safe at school. Staff says students seem to want to preserve the different environment that the Learning Center provides. Students tell them they sought a friendlier, smaller learning environment than what was offered at their traditional district schools. Staff has deciphered that the environment—not the curriculum—attracts students to the Learning Center.

Sometimes teachers who worked with Learning Center students in traditional settings are surprised to learn how well their former students are performing in the new and different setting. “A teacher came over here one day for something or other and saw [John Doe] sitting with his lap top and quietly writing, and said, ‘Is that [John Doe]?’ We said, ‘Yes. He’s great . . .’ The teacher said, ‘No! That can’t be. That’s [John Doe]?’ And we said, ‘Yes! That’s him!’ The teacher replied, ‘We kicked him out five times!’” Staff members view this visit as an illustration of the need for nontraditional school environments.

The small environment works well for the staff, too. The staff has a close bond, having worked together for a number of years. They also feel very secure in their jobs—the Learning Center has increased the number of staff from 4 to 18 since the school opened in 1999. One teacher explained that the mission contributes to his job satisfaction. He feels like he can truly reach students who are at risk because of the community structure and the learning program. “This is the way school should be,” he said.

## **Learning program includes student choice, vocational component, hands-on learning, and access to technology**

The Learning Center's staff describes the learning program as individualized, hands-on, and project based. While the Learning Center uses almost the same curriculum used in the Anoka-Hennepin School District, students direct their own learning pace and select the methods through which they'll learn each subject. While instructors are available

to assist students as they develop their syllabi, the students are the most active creators of their learning methods and the facilitators of their day-to-day learning.

Students complete high school when they've finished 160 units, 28 of which are awarded based on hours spent with the material and passing tests for each unit—no matter what the pace. This is different from traditional settings where credit is awarded at the end of each semester. Students must include a service-learning component to earn some of their credits.

Students, ages 16 to 21, attend school for one-half of each day and are at work sites for the remainder. Classes, offered to help students navigate math and other lessons, are filled with students from all age groups.

Students seemed to work well in this setting. All were very busy. Some worked alone and others worked together on their various papers, worksheets, software, or projects.

### **Vocational program is part of 'school'**

Coon Rapids Learning Center helps students find and maintain jobs that give them practical experience, better resumes, and money. The school also offers flexible hours—so students can have jobs during traditional school hours and still keep up with the curriculum.

### **Access to computers is central to flexibility**

Coon Rapids Learning Center intentionally uses technology so students have more flexibility in accessing assignments despite the variety of paces and schedules. About eighty percent of the students have a computer at home, so they are able to balance school, work, and home life according to their own preference.

Most students use computers to accomplish their work, whether they access assignments, complete writing assignments, or produce videos. All students work on computers during teacher-led classes. The computer is their “desk”. When students are not taking classes, they often stay on site, using laptops or the graphic arts equipment to complete assignments. At times, students work individually, using headphones to block out the bustling sounds of many students learning different subjects at once. Other times, students work in groups. Much of the learning activity takes place in a big room where a teacher sits at a nearby desk, rather than standing at the front of a room, in case students seek help.

The Learning Center's high tech graphic arts studio allows students to prepare highly professional videos. Staff

members said the studio has, “by far, the best equipment of any high school in the state.” Students learn to work with the equipment to communicate ideas effectively. Staff encourages students to prepare and submit at least a portion of their assignments using this medium.

### **Travel and other hands-on activities provide context and incentive for student learning**

Travel and outside activities, scheduled throughout the year, are a critical part of the students’ education. The purpose of the trips is to give the students some perspective and context for their learning. Trips also provide an incentive for completing projects and lessons.

Administration and staff have taken students all over the world for lessons in history, geography, sociology, and more. One group prepared their own kayaks for an expedition to the Everglades—sometimes working with Native Americans from whom they learned skills, history, and culture. They had to plan their kayak trips, navigate paths, and set up and run their camp. Another group traveled to Europe to learn history.

To learn about wolves, students don’t read textbooks. Instead, they go to the wolf conservatory and learn about the animals by working with them. They learn biology and chemistry by dissecting wolves to assist scientists in determining causes of death.

Students pay for the trips, sometimes using money they earned through their school-related vocational positions. Students can receive credit for the trips by producing videos that convey what they learned from their experiences. Many students have not been outside of the immediate geographic area, so traveling to different parts of the country and world is a new and significant experience.

### **Tests and longitudinal study measure both student and program achievement**

Students take all state required tests. Last year, 100 percent of the students passed the Minnesota Basic Skills Test for writing. The school also uses a testing program called Lifetime Library to track student’s progress. Students must test into and out of every level of the program. Tests are matched to the curriculum and Minnesota Graduation Standards. Each level takes about a week to complete. Students are motivated to do well—if they score 80 percent or more they can skip the unit and go onto the

next level. Staff believes the tests are an effective way to track progress without inhibiting students’ pace.

The school’s sponsor, Bethel College, is working on a longitudinal study that will track progress of graduates who leave the school to determine whether they go to college, work, or pursue other opportunities. This information will help the school determine whether the program contributes to students’ long-term success.

Staff members noted that one sign of achievement is the increased numbers of Learning Center students attending community and technical colleges.

### **Governance and operational structures contribute to the Learning Center’s ability to meet its mission**

#### **Partnerships help drive the Learning Center’s vocational aspect**

Native Americans and members of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) work with students to help them build boats and develop other labor skills. Students, who are required to complete service-learning units and vocational work, have helped bridge partnerships with other organizations that will pave the way for future students. Such partnerships include the Salvation Army, a local nursing home, and a food shelf. Also, the City of Coon Rapids matches students with senior citizens so students can learn from the seniors’ experiences and the seniors gain an outlet for sharing their wisdom.

#### **Parental involvement is increasing with time**

Coon Rapids Learning Center begins to form relationships with parents when students first consider attending the school, during the intake interview. From then on, staff communicates with families on a regular basis. In addition, there are quarterly parent conferences and an open house in the fall and spring. Learning Center staff plans to further increase parent involvement in the future.

#### **Sponsor and board actively participate in governance**

Bethel College is an active sponsor of Coon Rapids Learning Center. A representative attends all board meetings.

The board is currently made up of four teachers, a parent, a sponsor representative, and a community mem-

ber. The board has participated in the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools’ board training program.

**Staff contributes to decision-making**

The Learning Center staff has an active role in running

the school. They can provide input on how to improve both the school environment and curriculum and they are often-empowered to lead the change process.

An outside consultant is responsible for evaluating teachers.

**Student Perspectives on Coon Rapids Learning Center**

Students attending Coon Rapids Learning Center explain that they’ve had a choice to switch schools for almost the entire time they’ve attended school. But their choice was limited to transferring from one traditional setting to another via open enrollment. New and different options were not available until recently. Learning Center students wish that wasn’t the case.

The school serves students who are at-risk of not graduating. But Coon Rapids Learning Center students wonder if they would have been “at risk” in the first place if the traditional schools they attended were more like the school they attend now. Performing very well in their new, non-traditional, setting, many are starting to believe that the traditional structure just didn’t work for them—and that the responsibility for “poor performance” within that structure may not be their own.

One student has a very simple analysis of the situation. “At traditional schools you would sit in the same room for 85 minutes listening to someone talk, and you can’t leave. The building’s trashed. You had no computer for days. The teachers know nothing about anyone. That’s concerning.”

What works differently at Coon Rapids Learning Center? Students point to three distinctions from traditional settings: (1) Students can access hands-on learning opportunities like travel, boat building, and animal conservatories; (2) Students have various outlets through which they can prepare and submit their assignments—including via video; and (3) The learning program includes a vocational aspect.

**Vocational component allows students to earn needed money and experience**

Students place a lot of emphasis on the vocational opportunities. They appreciate that the Learning Center has flexible hours so they can have jobs during traditional

school hours and still keep up with the curriculum. “We do our homework during school hours, so there is more time for other activities—work or otherwise—later.” “We get to earn money,” said another. “It’s kind of exhausting! People might look down on this school [because it is an alternative for students who were doing poorly], but we end up working harder than [students in traditional schools]! With school and a job, I basically have two jobs—that’s about 80 hours per week. It’s good for our resumes and we do get [school] credit [for what is learned on the job].” A third student added, “What we do here will help in the future. We have so many opportunities—jobs, trips to Europe and all over the country, hands-on learning, computers. We’ll be well prepared.”

**Students enjoy flexibility and a sense of independence**

Students say that the Learning Center’s distinctions from traditional settings lead to many more distinctions in the school environment. The different culture works better for them. Students’ enjoy an increased sense of independence, for example. “Here no one looks over your shoulder to see if you’re doing the work. They know if you are doing it because they can tell by your homework.”

Many students said they had to “adjust” to the independence offered at the Coon Rapids Learning Center. They were used to teachers and staff telling them what to do and when to do it. “There is definitely an adjustment process. You’re more in charge of yourself here. You can get credits faster, but you can also get them slower. A lot of people come in here and think they can just get by, and cruise through. But you have to get work done, or there isn’t any credit. And they won’t yell at you if you go slower. You just don’t get the credit. Then you get motivated and figure things out fast.”

Students indicate a willingness to work harder at Coon Rapids Learning Center. “I work harder here than I did at my old school. Before, I didn’t care. But here I got to

work [vocationally] and graduate on time.” Another student expressed that he liked how the work program lengthens the days. A third said, “I didn’t care [at the traditional high school]. I had a bad attitude.”

**Community spirit and access to teachers improve learning**

Students also appreciate teachers’ willingness to work with them to help them understand the lessons. “Teachers [at the traditional schools] would move on, without half the class ever learning what was being taught!” “You get the help needed here . . . [It’s] the size. Teachers can’t help everyone at traditional schools.”

Students enjoy an increased sense of community as well. “Everyone gets along. Teachers and students. Students and students.” The student chuckled, then looked around at his peers, seemingly amazed. “I haven’t seen a fight in . . . I don’t think I’ve ever seen a fight here!” He seemed surprised at the realization.

**Outsiders’ perceptions are far from true**

Some students talked about outside perceptions of their school—judgments made by the state, parents, and students at traditional schools. Students’ self esteem and positive opinions about Coon Rapids Learning Center do not seem damaged by any negative remarks, but students are concerned about how negative public images about nontraditional schools may affect proliferation of such schools and students’ ability to attend them. One student had a sarcastic analysis of Minnesota legislators’ attempts to improve schooling, while policymakers seem to attack the ones that are working. “[Legislators] tried to have standards and make sure that every one learns everything [at every school.] And how many schools dismissed [the standards] this year? No one even did it! This school has a 100 percent pass rate on the [reading] test every year; but [the state] pick[s] on [our school]!”

Parents seemed skeptical of the students’ transfer to Coon Rapids Learning Center at first, according to the students. But it only took a short time for parents to learn that the school was better serving their sons and daughters. “My mom was cool at first. My dad thought that I would come here and just drop out. But now I’m getting good grades and credits, so he likes it.” Another student told me

that his parents seem better informed about his life, and progress, at Coon Rapids Learning Center. “[My parents] like this school, but at first they thought it was a ‘retard school’. Here, though, they’re involved. At my old school they never knew what was going on; the school never told them anything unless I was doing something wrong. They push parental activity in the school [at Coon Rapids Learning Center].”

Students say that their friends from traditional schools haven’t come around in their opinions of Coon Rapids Learning Center, however, largely because it doesn’t have the social opportunities available at the traditional high schools. “My friends think I go to a ‘loser school,’” one said. Another student added, “They wouldn’t come here because they don’t want to leave the social environment.

I miss it, but if I didn’t come here my stuff would not be straight, so . . .” “Students will talk about ‘charter schools’ not having after school activities, but that’s just school activities. We can be in [club] sports or other things, and we have more time for them!”

Students engaged in a discussion about Minnesota New Country School. They learned that New Country’s students design their own projects based on their interests and maintain their own cubicle-style desk area with their own computers. Teachers serve as resources and guides for the projects rather than stand at the front of the room to deliver a lesson. One student got very excited about the idea, but shook his head in disappointment. “If I started there, I’d maybe—no, probably—be ahead of where I am now.”

**Students said Coon Rapids Learning Center offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **Ability to both work (earn money and experience) and go to school**
- **Flexible learning environment, including school hours**
- **Creative learning opportunities**
- **More individual responsibility for completing assignments**
- **Better sense of community**
- **Better access to assistance from teachers**

## CYBER VILLAGE ACADEMY

## Summary and Background

1336 Energy Park Drive  
 Saint Paul, Minnesota 55108  
 Phone: 651-523-7170  
 Web site: <http://www.cva.k12.mn.us>

**Contact:** Bob Bilyk  
**Sponsor:** Minneapolis School Board  
**Opened:** 1998  
**Grade Levels:** 4–8  
**Enrollment:** 200  
**Class Size:** small groups and home based instruction  
**# of School Days:** 178

**Staff:**  
 7 Teachers  
 2 Licensed Specialists  
 3 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 0% American Indian  
 4% Asian  
 2% Hispanic  
 4% African American  
 91% Caucasian

20% Free and reduced-price lunch  
 1% Special education  
 0% English Language Learner  
 6% Mobility

**Tests:** Northwest Evaluation Association Assessments;  
 Minnesota Basic Skills Tests

**Other evaluations:** Minnesota Graduation  
 Standards; passing grades in core classes; teacher  
 recommendations; student evaluations; nonacademic  
 improvements (e.g. attendance).

Cyber Village Academy is a chartered middle school where, for three days each week, students connect to their classrooms and other work via home computers provided by the school. Two days a week, families drive for up to two hours to Cyber Village's school building in Saint Paul, where students participate in more traditional learning settings. While attending school from home, students sometimes complete very traditional assignments. Sometimes they electronically connect to a live audio-visual feed of a teacher giving a lesson—who answers questions through an audio

bridge.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes they participate in online discussion groups about their literature. Sometimes they use online curriculum and testing services. Sometimes they participate in a man's journey through foreign lands, making logistical and ethical decisions for him along the way.

Bob Bilyk, founder, originally set out to create a school that would serve seriously ill students who are home or hospital bound. As the Internet evolved, he hoped to use it to provide ill students with access to "school." He wanted to combine his teaching experience and technological expertise.

Minneapolis Public Schools asked Bilyk to start a charter school to serve their sick children and home schooled children. But the district did not refer any students to the school, so Bilyk and his team decided to start from scratch. They decided to charter a technology-based school that would be open to all students.

Today, Cyber Village serves 200 middle school students throughout the state. It targets self-motivated students who can be responsible for their work progress, primarily using technology. Many, but not all, students were home schooled before attending Cyber Village.

After launching the school, Bilyk found that serving home and hospital bound students would be more difficult than he once thought. "A big obstacle has always been the 'concurrent enrollment' rule in statute," he says. But that rule has now been removed, allowing Cyber Village to serve sick children without requiring them to come to school for five hours per week. Bilyk also currently trains educators of sick children as part of Cyber Village's services, and is creating a training and education model for home and hospital bound students that he believes can be replicated.

## Setting

Cyber Village Academy is located in a Saint Paul commercial/industrial park in a one-story building. The building also houses a small business. There is no unused space. Classrooms and offices line the perimeter and have lots of windows. Teachers also conduct classes in the middle

<sup>2</sup> Cyber Village is currently swapping out its audio bridge for a new synchronous ("real time") system which will be fully implemented in the 2003-2004 school year.

of the building. Though there seem to be a small number of classrooms for the number of students served, students rotate in an out of the school on two-day shifts. Some come to the building on Monday and Tuesday. Others come Wednesday and Thursday. All work from home on Friday.

A large computer room allows some students to follow a lesson on site while others log-on to a live feed of the same course while sitting at home. The feed shows the teacher on a dry erase board. The teacher can take questions from both sets of students via an audio bridge. The school has created a small, indoor gym out of a large warehouse attached to the back of the building. A second level of the warehouse serves as a school cafeteria.

### **Mission to provide distance learning and a small, safe environment attracts home schooled students to a public school setting**

Many families who would not ordinarily send their children to public school find that Cyber Village is filling an important niche. The school helps students make the transition from home school environments to public school environments. Since there isn't a Cyber Village High School, many graduates choose to attend traditional district or charter schools where they are fully integrated into a five-day a week school. But the environment at Cyber Village allows them to gradually gain social and classroom interaction skills first. Students learn time management and self-motivation at Cyber Village—skills that many need as they move out of a setting where parents guided their instruction on a full-time basis. Furthermore, because they are still at home three days per week, students do not need to give up daytime activities (such as ice skating) that they've been involved with for years.

Safety is a big concern for all populations, but staff and parents say safety is especially concerning to families who home schooled their children. Large environments where the students don't know everyone can be very intimidating when they're used to an extremely safe, family environment where they receive a lot of individual attention. Cyber Village's small environment allows students to be part of a hybrid home and school community. Staff clearly expects all students to treat each other with respect. The school instituted a zero tolerance policy for

violence, threats of violence, and disobedience. Staff holds students ultimately responsible for their conduct and deals immediately with all conduct needing discipline.

The Cyber Village staff says that there are minimal disciplinary issues and high attendance rates largely because of the demographics of the student population Cyber Village attracts. Attendance is high, with roughly 98 percent of students attending school 95 percent of the time.

### **Learning program uses technology to provide individualized plans that integrate home and on-site learning**

Staff builds a curriculum that integrates technology into every aspect of the learning program and into every classroom. The extensive use of technology allows the staff to tailor the project-based learning program depending on the student. As a result, they are able to meet a broad range of student abilities and needs.

Staff tests students on arrival to determine their math and reading competencies and then groups them by ability in those subjects so students can better engage in cooperative learning. In other subjects, they group students by ability when possible. For example, in a science class where students dissected sheep eyes, some students worked on more advanced level dissection and some on more basic. Staff says grouping by ability improves relationships between students of different ages because they all understand that "older" doesn't necessarily mean "better." Students have a mutual respect for "all" other students.

Students can access their assignments via the school's computer server. Teachers issue assignments once a week, providing a set of instructions and resources online. It is up to the students to manage their time in such a way that everything gets done, and teachers help guide them through the process. Every student can log onto the school Web site from any computer and check on course progress, complete homework, take tests, and communicate with their peers and teachers. For the most part, there are only few requirements to be online at a given time, allowing students to direct when they will accomplish their work.

Staff teaches on-site courses in a traditional classroom setting. Since students physically attend school at Cyber Village two days a week, the school provides every student

a laptop computer that they can take and use at home the other three days. The teachers teach classes on site and via live audio-visual feed for one-half day and are available to students online, to answer questions and provide guidance, for the other half. On Fridays, when all students work from home, the staff collaborates to improve the learning program. They are also available to students online. Students say they never have a problem getting a hold of teachers when they have questions. Teachers and students say they experience little disconnect between the home and school building environment.

## Technology allows for constant assessment

Cyber Village's association with technology allows for frequent assessment of student progress. Every Cyber Village student has an online profile on the school's computer server, which they can access via password to track their progress on assignments, assignment grades, test scores, teacher feedback, and course grades to date. Parents, teachers, and students can review the profile at any time to see if students are having trouble in particular subject areas or with time management. Students use the profile to manage their assignments and time. The technological system allows Cyber Village to track individual and overall student progress from year to year.

Cyber Village's annual report states that the school will be accountable not only for academic improvement, but also for improvement in other areas that are important to school success. Objective measurable goals for student and school performance include: increased student scores on Minnesota Basic Skills Tests; increased student scores on Northwest Evaluation assessments (with student scores reported as Rausch Instructional Units [RIT]); increased attendance; increased percent of assignments completed; and increased percent of homebound students served.

To measure whether the school is reaching its goal of improving math and reading scores by at least one grade per year, Cyber Village tests students on arrival and annually thereafter using the Northwest Evaluation RIT scores. The school also evaluates students according to the Minnesota Graduation Standards.

Teachers appreciate student evaluations, through which the school asks students for their opinions about what they did and did not like. Teachers believe the evaluations make it easier to improve the school and learning program.

## Parents, teachers, and community contribute to Cyber Village operations

### Parents are critical to the school's operation

Parents, who provide long-distance transportation to the school and home supervision, are critical to Cyber Village's success. Staff views them as partners who are tremendous assets. Since students are home three full days a week, parents play a large role in supporting and advising their children. Many parents previously home schooled their children, so the supporting and advising role is not entirely new. It does, however, mark a transition from their role as teachers.

Cyber Village holds three parent/student/teacher conferences each year. The school also seeks feedback from parents through an annual survey. In addition, parents participate in PTO meetings and/or on various committees. They help fundraise, write legislators, and organize events like "clean up day" to help the school. Some parents find it hard to participate, however, because they live far away from Cyber Village.

One parent said she is willing to drive her two daughters to the Cyber Village site twice a week because the middle school in Buffalo is too large. The other students intimidated her daughters, who she previously home schooled. When she heard about Cyber Village on a WCCO TV Dimension program, she decided to check out the school. She determined that it would be a good "transitional" environment between home school and traditional school environments.

The parent indicated that she likes many things about Cyber Village, including individual attention in both instruction and assessment. She also likes the overall sense of safety she has at Cyber Village because of the zero tolerance policies and the lack of student cliques. There are some trade-offs, she says, such as no physical education program and minimal extracurricular activities, but they don't outweigh the positives.<sup>3</sup> She thinks this is the perfect school for motivated and well-organized students who can be in charge of their own learning.

### Staff must be innovative and technologically savvy

Cyber Village has 12 full-time staff members who come from a variety of public and private school backgrounds. Bilyk says that to be successful at Cyber Village Academy,

<sup>3</sup> Cyber Village now has a full Physical Education program.

teachers must be enthusiastic and pioneering when it comes to incorporating technology in education. One of the school's stated goals is to provide staff with turnkey access to distance education, instructional technology, and education services. All are, or become, technologically proficient. Teachers must also be cooperative, learner centered, innovative, dependable, and excited about teaching children. They often work with community experts, who they bring in to expose the students to new concepts in technology and other areas.

Teachers say they carry a much greater burden at this school than they did at their former traditional district schools or private schools, mainly because they are involved in all aspects of education from management and curriculum design to classroom teaching. Teachers often work evenings and weekends. There is some concern that, because of the intense schedule and workload, some teachers will burn out. Yet, since the beginning, there has not been a great deal of turnover. Teachers like being part of a close and supportive team, which they believe is an important factor given the size of the school.

One teacher expressed her interest in being involved in the school from the ground up. She likes having an important role in starting something new. She says that the school environment is responsive to what teachers think will work because teachers get to be involved in decision-making as members of the board and via staff collaboration on Fridays. For example, teachers decided to "loop" the students, which means she will teach the same students year after year. She thinks this is an effective process because she really gets to know students. The process also allows her to reevaluate curriculum knowing how her particular students will respond.

### **Sponsor and board actively participate in governance**

Teachers, parents, and community members serve on Cyber Village's board, with teachers making up the majority. The board must not exceed twenty-one individuals, who are elected at the annual meeting for one-year terms. The board is involved in the legal, financial, and management aspects of Cyber Village as well as the day-to-day operations of the learning program.

Minneapolis Public School Board has sponsored the school since 1998.

### **Partnerships are leading to all school districts' ability to implement eLearning**

Cyber Village Academy has signed a strategic alliance agreement with Broad Education to operate as a national ASP (Microsoft Application Services Provider) for Microsoft Class Server, a Web-based learning management platform.

School districts nationwide will benefit from the strategic alliance. Broad Education provides comprehensive instructional, assessment, and authoring products from premium educational companies and other partners who develop such products, like Cyber Village. These resources allow schools to quickly and easily realize the power of Class Server to promote greater achievement for students and improved efficiencies for teachers. The partnership is helping give school districts affordable turnkey access to an excellent eLearning platform and thousands of learning objects from a variety of content providers. Schools can use Class Server without the challenges of implementing an enterprise application on their local network.

## **Student Perspectives Cyber Village Academy**

One eighth-grader really cut to the chase about why she attends Cyber Village Academy. "It's the only school I know where I can spend three days a week at home, managing my own time . . . I feel like I have more control over my time. I can work at my own pace. If I have a doctor's appointment, I don't miss any school. There is more flexibility."

### **Cyber Village is like the "real world"**

Many students say the advantage of attending Cyber Village is their access to "real world" experience, which means setting their own pace and managing their own time. "[Cyber Village] is like the real world. In the real world you can move ahead if you want, or take more time to learn something if you need to. You have to meet due dates, but people don't tell you when to do your work. We also learn time management. You need that for the

real world.” Another student added, “At the [traditional] schools, some kids get what the teacher is saying, but some kids don’t, and they get behind. Then we have to wait for them to catch up, or the teachers spend all their time with those kids. Here, we can work ahead if we want. We can do all of our assignments in one day if we want. If we need more time on something, we have that, too.” Still another added, “I can move ahead. I’m [a seventh grader] doing 10th grade level math. And [another student in the room, also in seventh grade] is in 9th grade math. We don’t have to ‘go slow.’”

Students believe that their parents, too, like the “real world” experience Cyber Village provides. Some mentioned that the school even allows students to complete their work while they’re on family trips, which works well for their families’ way of life. One student said, “My parents like that I am working with computers. That will help me get a job in the future. We know how to use all the Microsoft Office programs, and a lot of other programs.” Parental buy-in is important, as they are an important part of the school, students say. “Parents want to be here. Sometimes I think the school couldn’t run without the parents.” Another student explained, “Parents are like part of the staff. [Cyber Village] couldn’t operate without them. And they transport us. That saves [the school] money.”

### **Students enjoy the flexible learning pace, and like having greater control over their time**

While families seem to appreciate the flexible pace offered by the school, students indicated that it took some time to adjust to time management; but explained that they got better at it over time because they realized they held the responsibility to complete their work. Students are very proud of their improved time management skills, expressing their increased sense of independence. They believe some of their peers just don’t catch on, though, no matter what the teachers try to do.

Despite some students’ inability to keep up, however, students expressed that they appreciate how “everyone wants to learn” at Cyber Village. “I mean, it’s a charter school,” one student said. “If you care about learning, you will take the step to come here. If you don’t want to learn, you go to a [traditional] school. Here, everyone is getting it done.”

Do students use their flexibility to procrastinate? Several indicated that sometimes they end up working late the night before something is due. “[Our parents] get frustrated with us. They know when we get our assignments and how long we have to do them. It’s our own fault if we didn’t plan right.”

Students said that sometimes they don’t finish all their work because teachers assign too much. This could have been a problem, but they felt free enough to speak with the teachers and school director about their perception of homework levels. “Some of us got together with our parents and talked to [Bob Bilyk, the school’s head leader]. The problem is being taken care of right away.”

### **Cyber Village allows a social transition from a home school environment to a traditional environment**

Previously home-schooled students say that Cyber Village offers access to more curriculum than what was available at their home school, and that the environment provides a good transition between their home-school environment and the traditional environment they’ll experience in high school. One student said, “My mom wanted us to have access to more curriculum, but she still wanted us to be home with her. We can do that here.” Another explained, “Adjusting [socially] is easier here than it would have been [in a traditional school]. We are transitioning from spending all of our time at home, to only part of the time there.” Students assume they will attend a traditional high school, since Minnesota doesn’t have a cyber high school with a model similar to the one offered at Cyber Village.

#### **Students said Cyber Village offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **Ability to spend most of their learning time in a home environment**
- **Flexible learning pace, which leads to students’ having greater control over their time**
- **“Real world” experiences**
- **A learning environment that allows a social transition from a home school environment to a traditional environment**
- **An environment where most students are serious about learning**
- **Ability to maintain positive, adult-like, relationships with teachers**

### **Students appreciate having positive, adult-like, relationships with teachers**

Cyber Village students value their ability to maintain positive relationships with teachers. “I like how we call our teachers by their first names,” one said. Others nodded in agreement, and one added, “They know you. If you fall behind, they want to know what’s going on with you to make you not turn in your assignments.” Another said, “[Counselors] will ask you, ‘What’s going on?’ Then, your teacher will work with you after school or during lunch to get you caught up. The teachers always want to help.”

Students indicated that teachers are readily available, even when the students are at home. One elaborated, “You just e-mail them whenever you need help and they answer right away.” Students don’t experience any difficulty communicating ideas online. In fact, the notion that online communication might be difficult is “silly” to them.

### **Students also say Cyber Village has some gaps in what it offers**

Students say one of Cyber Village’s big negatives is that so many students are unable to attend. “Our friends want to go here,” they said. Several explained that not all parents can stay home, and the school requires that at least one parent be at home with the student. Also, the “seat time” requirement—a state regulation that requires students to be in an actual school building for at least a portion of the week—makes Cyber Village too far for some. Students explained that those who live too far away might be able to attend Cyber Village online five days a week. However, students appreciate the fact that the school makes accommodations for students who live with divorced parents who

have shared custody. The school gives such families one computer for each parent’s home, to make the transitions easier.

Another “negative” side to Cyber Village, according to the students, is that it doesn’t have a “real” gym. “Our ‘gym’ is a warehouse,” one said, “There isn’t room for a gym here . . . only academics.” When asked to design their “dream school”, a few students said they would create one just like Cyber Village, but with a gym and more sports. Students who will attend high school next year said they were looking forward to the extra curricular activities offered in a traditional high school.

### **The Cyber Village environment is preferable to traditional settings**

Since Cyber Village allows students to get ahead of their grade level in math, language arts, and other subjects, eighth grade students wonder about their transition to traditional high school. Will they be able to stay ahead? “I think I’ll be able to keep going at my pace,” one student said. “There are other things at the traditional high school, though, like theater and sports. We do one play here, but they do a lot of plays at the high school. I will be able to concentrate on those things more—focus energy there—because I’ll already understand a lot of the academics.”

But the eighth graders said they would prefer to attend a Cyber Village high school. If it existed, they would attend, even if it didn’t have theater and sports. The reason? They said they learn more at Cyber Village. One asserted, “After I got here, I knew this was the place I was supposed to be.”

**HARVEST PREPARATORY SCHOOL**

**Summary and Background**

1300 Olson Memorial Highway  
 Minneapolis, MN 55411  
 Phone: 612-381-9743

**Contact:** Eric Mahmoud  
**Sponsor:** Minneapolis Public School Board  
**Opened:** 1998 (converted from a private school)  
**Grade Levels:** K-6  
**Enrollment:** 379  
**Class Size:** 20  
**# of School Days:** 171

**Staff:**  
 17 Teachers  
 1 Licensed Specialist  
 13 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 0% American Indian  
 0% Asian  
 0% Hispanic  
 100% African American  
 0% Caucasian

60% Free or reduced-price lunch  
 3% Special education  
 0% English Language Learner  
 12% Mobility

**Tests:** Northwest Achievement Test; Scientific Research Associates Test; 8th Grade Basic Skills Tests

**Other evaluations:** Weekly progress reports; Standard of Behavior and Parental Satisfaction

Harvest Preparatory School is Minnesota’s only full-time, African-centered elementary school that is not part of a traditional public school district. The prevalence of African American culture throughout the school environment and learning program distinguishes Harvest Prep from the schools most adults once attended.

Ella and Eric Mahmoud, the school’s founders, have been committed to making a difference for African American youth since their days as students at the University of Wisconsin. They believe education is the primary vehicle for change. To achieve their goal, the Mahmouds opened a private preschool in their home in 1985. Their dream began with just 10 children.

In 1990, the Mahmouds decided to expand their reach by forming a private pre-school called Seed Academy. They secured a license to serve 23 pre-school aged children. In 1992, they expanded their school to include Kindergarten and first grade, so they could continue to serve the Seed Academy students. The Mahmouds called the elementary setting Harvest Preparatory School. In 1994, the school secured a former nursing home building on Minneapolis’ near north side, which allowed the founders to add grades two through six soon after.

In 1998, the Mahmouds decided they could reach a broader range of students if they converted from a private school to a public charter school. Enrollment doubled after conversion.

Several years ago, the state selected Harvest Prep to receive funding to establish a residential academy for students who would fare better living apart from their families. This allowed the school to add Synergy Academy—an on-site alternative to traditional out of home placement. Many of these students continue to have contact with their families while living at the school site. The program is unique in that the goal is to stabilize the children (so they can continue to receive education) while involving the family. The goal is for children and their families to eventually live together again.

**Setting**

Harvest Preparatory School is located in an urban neighborhood on the near north side of Minneapolis. The building, formally a nursing home, has been substantially renovated. Recently, the school added an addition that includes more classrooms, a gymnasium, and residential quarters for the Synergy Academy students.

African culture is prevalent throughout the Harvest Prep setting. The walls are decorated with quotes and pictures of African American leaders. The teachers tell the students to quiet down or return to their seats using African language. Students learn vocabulary words such as “underground railroad” and “Emancipation Proclamation.” Social Studies focuses on black history. Students learn about Harriet Tubman’s work to free slaves, for example. Students come to Harvest Prep from through-

out the metropolitan area, with the majority coming from the north side of Minneapolis. One hundred percent of the students are African American. All students wear uniforms.

## Mission uses African American culture to drive academic, social, and moral development

The mission of Harvest Preparatory School is to instruct, enable, empower and guide African American children to demonstrate superior academic, social, and moral development. Studies show that adults can best bring out a child's genius by guiding him or her through African culture, heritage, and community. Harvest Preparatory attempts to guide African American children in this way—filling a need that they believe traditional district schools do not meet.

The students, many for the first time, are exposed to an African American historical perspective and a context that reflects their values. African American leaders come to Harvest Prep to tell stories that will interest children in learning about their own history. Once the children have this perspective and context, their confidence can improve.

The environment and learning program are also partially designed to help African American children gain and maintain positive individual attitudes as well as a strong group identity. Many black children do not develop these qualities in traditional settings. Research shows that such students begin to experience a negative effect by age 10.

In the larger system, says Mahmoud, there is a lack of commitment to see that an individual student is successful. Once a student comes to Harvest Preparatory School, however, s/he understands that everyone expects s/he will succeed. The founders expect that the instructors and the school community at large will live up to the vision statement “it takes a whole village to raise a child.” They surround students with positive, African American adult role models that show students how to respect themselves and others.

In one observed classroom, sixth graders were preparing a song presentation for their graduation ceremony. The chorus rang, “Black butterfly, you can do most anything your heart desires. Freedom comes from understanding who you are. It's time to reclaim your place among the stars. Spread your wings.”<sup>4</sup> Administrators and teachers

referred to God openly. Many consistently praised and disciplined students—walking in and out of classrooms and the cafeteria at random. One teacher said that while traditional district schools often limit many of these activities to Black History Month, African American culture is central to everything, every day, at Harvest Prep. Students seem to respond well to the different environment. The attendance rate currently stands at 98 percent.

## Learning program incorporates a variety of instruction models, adjusted to focus primarily on African American culture

Staff and parents design Harvest Prep's curriculum to meet the school's mission of centering the academic and social environment on African American culture. The curriculum is based on research and observation that shows that socio-economically disadvantaged children are successful in school when the environment stresses academic excellence, structure, continuity, cultural awareness, and self-esteem. It includes elements of: *Direct Instruction*, the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, *Foss Science*, African history and culture, technology, and pro-social behavior. All students at Harvest learn computer skills.

*Direct Instruction*, developed in the 1960s, is a phonics-based approach to reading and math. The methods make teachers directly responsible for providing the information and structure that contributes to student's learning. Mahmoud encouraged staff and parents to use the methods after hearing that a school in Houston found *Direct Instruction* to be very effective in educating African American and inner city children. Students at the Texas school were reading two to three years above grade level.

Mahmoud said that *Direct Instruction* is working effectively at Harvest Prep, as well. On observation, it is very focused, intimate, noisy and repetitive. The students appear to be very engaged and interested in what is being taught. The teacher is physically close to the students and has them repeat answers as a group, sometimes calling on individual students.

The *Core Knowledge Sequence*, based on the research and teachings of E.D. Hirsch, stresses teaching common information that all people and cultures share, especially

<sup>4</sup> James Harris III and Terry Lewis wrote the song, “Black Butterfly.”

in social studies, literature, and math. The *Foss Science* approach is a hands on, project-based science curriculum that encourages building analytical and inquiry skills. It focuses on concepts with “real world” significance.

Staff organizes classes primarily by age with the exception of reading, which is partly organized by ability.

One of Harvest Prep’s challenges has been figuring out how to best incorporate special education services. The school is making progress, however. It now has a team that works to meet the needs of qualified students. The team includes two teachers with special education backgrounds, a contracted school psychologist and a contracted counselor. Harvest Prep also contracts with A Chance to Grow, an organization that provides speech and language services as well as occupational therapy.

## Harvest Prep measures both academic and nonacademic achievements

Harvest Prep currently measures academic achievement using the standardized Northwest Achievement Test as well as the Scientific Research Associates Test, which helps staff to place students and monitor progress in math and reading. The school also requires students to pass the eighth grade basic skills tests. To align assessment with African culture, Harvest Prep is reviewing and refining a comprehensive program of testing, evaluation, and placement.

At least for now, staff monitors students’ academic progress after every five lessons, or once a week. Constant assessment allows teachers to catch if students are falling behind before it’s too late to correct problems.

Staff also measures academic progress according to whether students reach a series of goals. One goal, for example, is for each student to achieve one grade level of academic growth for one year of instruction. About 99 percent of the students at the school reached this goal in 2000-2001. Another goal is for students to gain in-depth knowledge of social studies, math, and technology.

Harvest Prep is committed to assessing the school’s nonacademic achievements as well. Using a program called Standard of Behavior and Parental Satisfaction, which was developed in coordination with Washburn Child Guidance Centers, the school measures whether it is reducing behavior problems in the classrooms and

school, and whether it is increasing levels of parental involvement and satisfaction.

To meet expected achievement levels, Harvest Prep trains teachers with ways to improve classroom behaviors and reduce behavior referrals by up to 30 percent. The school also helps teachers learn ways to better engage parents.

## Staff, board, parents, and partners have a role in governance and operational structures

### Staff enjoy a sense of community, but would like to be more involved in overall decision-making

Harvest Prep teachers come from a variety of public and private backgrounds. They say they like the sense of community and the flexibility they have at Harvest Prep. One teacher wonders if the staff has too much flexibility, however.

Teachers would like to have a greater role in decision-making. They desire a better understanding of and connection with what the school’s board of directors is doing. Some said that they feel recognized and valued by their peers, but they don’t always feel supported by the administration. Staff does feel involved in the decision-making around curriculum.

### Board plays a role in meeting financial needs

Harvest Prep installed its board of directors in February 2000. Each of the five members, including three teachers and a parent, serves a three-year term with the possibility of renewal. Ella Mahmoud helps to staff the board.

The board is working to close the financial gap between the costs associated with operating the school and the funds provided by the state. The board also helps implement annual fundraisers that help support the school.

Minneapolis Public Schools sponsors Harvest Prep.

### Parents are partners in their children’s education and in Harvest Prep’s success

Harvest Prep expects parents to work in partnership with the teachers to administer policy and increase student success. Research has convinced Harvest Prep staff that active parental involvement in the school life of children improves grades, behavior, motivation, self-esteem,

attendance, and attitudes. Parental involvement also decreases tardiness and absenteeism.

Parents are not only partners in their children’s education, but also essential volunteers contributing to the overall success of Harvest Prep. Parents serve as mentors, leaders, and advocates for the school. Parental involvement has typically been very strong, though Harvest Prep recently experienced some loss of parental volunteers. Staff is implementing a plan to reengage the parents.

Staff appreciates that parents are involved. Parents’ ideas and expectations keep staff on a constant path toward improvement. One staff member commented that parents are “in your face, which is a good thing.”

Parents think the school does a good job educating their children. They are pushing Harvest Prep to add grades seven through nine so students can continue to benefit from the culture and curriculum, but Mahmoud says that the school is not yet ready. He would like to continue improving existing operations first.

**Partnership with the adjacent Wyman church brings land and human resources**

Harvest Prep has strong partnerships in the community, with a variety of organizations and businesses. The Wyman church allowed the school to build on their land, and still operates adjacent to the school. The church provides volunteers who work with the students.

**Student Perspectives  
Harvest Preparatory School**

Students say Harvest Prep’s emphasis on African American culture is one of the major reasons they like their school. “We talk a lot about African Americans—our [mission] here is to learn about men, women, and children who are African Americans and what they did.” “Yeah,” another added. “We learned about how African Americans got whipped—like Uncle Tom.”

Students went on, engaging in a small discussion about Uncle Tom, and what they had learned about him. One said, “Learning about people like Uncle Tom helps you because you’re learning about you. You grow up and you see how African Americans learn—so you learn.” Other students agreed. “This school makes you stronger. We talk about racism—how it will be in the ‘real world’, and how to deal with things.” Another explained, “We learn better things here . . . like African History.”

A sixth grade student said kids behaved “badly” at her former, traditional district school. She said the bad behavior was a result of too few African American teachers. “There were barely any African American teachers. Here there are a lot. One of my teachers [at my old school] told us to ‘shut up’. He should have discussed things with us, and not yelled.” Another student explained that teachers at Harvest Prep relate better to the students. She said, “One of our teachers uses humor to teach us. He made up

this funny and creative rap to teach us decimals! I remember how to do decimals now, because of the rhythm!”

One student told a lengthy story about why she left her traditional district school to attend Harvest Prep. Her parents considered her former school’s teachers and staff to be racist. “I used to go to [a district] Junior High school, but I transferred here this year. My math and language arts teachers at the traditional school wanted my parents to come for a meeting because I wasn’t doing very well in some of my classes. But they were moving out of our house—it was not a good time for them. Then the teachers left a message saying, ‘She’s failing!’ When my parents were able to go in, they set up a meeting. At the meeting, the teachers lied and then my parents got mad. They said we lived in a condemned house and that the house is

**Students say Harvest Prep offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **An environment where African American culture is prevalent**
- **Teachers and staff who have a culturally significant understanding of teaching and discipline**
- **Ability to better avoid racism at school, and to learn how to deal with the challenges of racism in the “real world”**
- **A better sense of safety and community that leads to improved learning**

messy. They said that my parents left [my sibling] in a messy diaper for too long! So my parents left.

[My parents] started to find me another school and told me that I would [keep going] to [the district] school, but not those two [math and language arts] classes. My parents told me to sit in the office for those two hours. A lady came by and asked me what I was doing. I said, 'My dad told me to sit here during language arts and math.' She tried to make me go to class. She kept trying to pull me off the chair and dug her nails in. When I told my dad about it, he said I was never going back there! We just happened to walk by here one day, and my dad and I walked in and he asked about the school. He signed me up. This place is much better."

Students say Harvest Prep's distinctive culture improves their sense of safety and sense of community. "Everyone here tries to help me, even though I mess up sometimes." "I like most of the people here. I came in last year, and at first I just kept things to myself. I'm a lot stronger now. I was quiet at my other schools." "I have good friends here. It is a community. I wouldn't last a day in [traditional] school. I don't get in fights [here]. There isn't peer pressure."

Many students directly connect the environment to improved learning. "In academics, kids achieve more; and they build socially," one reported. Another stated, "Learning is based on trust, and people trust each other here." A group of students perceived that a difference between their former, traditional schools and Harvest Prep is that they teach reading at Harvest Prep. They said Harvest Prep has helped them improve several grade levels—but they haven't yet caught up to their own grade. They are excitedly working toward that level.

Harvest Prep does have some negative sides, too, according to the students. Students are opposed to the

school administration's consistent appeals for money, for example. They believe that Harvest Prep sometimes has legitimate reasons for asking, but appeals seem wasteful and perhaps inappropriate. A sixth grade student said, "My parents liked [Harvest Prep], but now they're just waiting for it to be over . . . There's a lot of money they want at the end. Like, we are wearing African attire for graduation, but we also have to wear a cap and gown in pictures. We've got to pay for it. \$100 for sixth grade graduation!" Another student said, "They want and need our money, but they are not as resourceful as they should be. There's a broken window that's just been taped up all year. One of the outside doors is broken—that's dangerous! Some of our computers are really outdated. There's a hole in one of the bathroom doors." One student said she had been locked in the bathroom because the doorknobs were so old that they did not work.

Some sixth grade students believe Harvest Prep's discipline is a little too strict. "Here, we get in trouble for petty stuff. If we're caught for something, we get a write-up and sometimes people are suspended." But a third grade student who recently transferred to Harvest Prep said just the opposite, believing her new school does a better job of helping to improve behavior and respect for the school, instead of simply suspending students. "At my old school, I was suspended a lot of times. You get more chances here. It is a proper school, so I try to do better. I don't want to get in trouble here."

A sixth grade student said that people should listen to the students' opinions more often. She wants to do everything she can to help get more schools like this, she said. "I am a different shape, size, and color," she concluded. "These differences shouldn't hold you back. And they don't here."

## HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE RECORDING ARTS

### Summary and Background

550 Vandalia Street  
 Saint Paul, Minnesota 55114  
 Phone: 651-917-6960  
 Web site: <http://www.hsra.org/>

**Contact:** David Ellis and Anthony Simmons

**Sponsor:** Saint Paul Public School Board

**Opened:** 1998

**Grade Levels:** 9-12

**Enrollment:** 120

**Class Size:** 10-20

**# of School Days:** 170

**Staff:**

3 Teachers

1 Licensed Specialist

1 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**

0% American Indian

1% Asian

11% Hispanic

65% African American

24% Caucasian

100% Free or reduced-price lunch

16% Special education

0% English Language Learner

62% Mobility

**Tests:** Iowa Test of Basic Skills

**Other evaluations:** Minnesota Graduation Standards;  
 a variety of nonacademic standards

High School for the Recording Arts integrates academics and the music industry to re-capture the interest of high school youth who don't find opportunities they're looking for in traditional settings. David Ellis, founder of HSRA and recording industry executive, chartered the school after seeing the potential of a good number of at-risk youth he was working with in his studio. Ellis noticed that the youth were very interested in the recording and business aspects of the music industry, yet they seemed unaware that they were educating themselves through their work. Instead, students, who dropped out or were expelled by districts, believed that education wasn't relevant to their future.

Ellis decided HSRA would connect academics with music so students would receive credit for what they were learning, and so they would begin to find a variety of subjects relevant and appealing during their journey toward graduation. Ellis also wanted the program to build students' practical production and business experience. As a graduate of the Saint Paul Open School, Ellis was aware that non-traditional options could make a big difference for students.

Studio 4 Enterprises, Ellis' recording studio, developed and launched a pilot project in December 1996. It contracted with Designs for Learning, a local education-consulting firm, to meet start-up needs. Fifteen students signed up right away, and word spread rapidly. Enrollment escalated, and Studio 4 quickly expanded the program.

### Setting

High School for the Recording Arts is located in a warehouse in part of an industrial park in Saint Paul's Midway area. It is not obvious from the exterior that the building houses a school, except that students are moving in and around the front entrance. A receptionist greets visitors when they walk in the door. The school has two recording studios, staff offices, an office from which students run a record company, and a number of small classrooms.

The student body is primarily African American. Virtually all of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Just over half of the students are from Saint Paul, a quarter of students are from Minneapolis, and the rest are from surrounding suburbs.

### Mission calls staff to create a new environment so students can overcome obstacles to success

High School for the Recording Arts engages students in an exploration of the music industry through its alternative educational program, job training, and positive mentoring. The environment, learning program, assessment, and operations are culturally appropriate, drug free, violence free, and adult supervised.

The school's staff believes that students, who are often tough and street smart, are attracted to the environment

partially because of the stability. A survey staff conducted in May 2000 showed that a quarter of students live on their own without parental or family support. Also, 14 percent were on probation and just over one third had previously dropped out or were expelled from traditional schools. While five HSRA students have died as a result of violence within the past five years, HSRA has not has any incidences of violence on site in two years. Staff attributes this to a learning environment where teachers have positive relationships with students and where students can access social services.

HSRA staff works to form relationships with students and understand their backgrounds so they can accomplish their mission of reaching students who didn't do well in traditional settings. Teachers have advisory groups of just 13 to 15 students. They want students to learn how to overcome setbacks to achieve their goals—in this case, graduation. Anthony Simmons, a school leader, said, “students need to be better prepared to be socially productive citizens so that when they leave they can take care of themselves.”

Staff members know they can't expect HSRA's population of students to learn that lesson if they run a traditional-style school. They believe that in traditional settings teachers often do not understand students' lives. HSRA teachers work to understand why students may not be able to meet certain deadlines, or why they might be too tired to participate some days. They help students learn how to cope with issues and they designed a flexible learning program so students can meet both their personal and academic needs.

To provide further stability, HSRA provides social services. The school pairs a social worker with a number of students. The social worker is helping students and their families of origin or new families to secure human services as well as jobs, housing, and basic healthcare.

## Project-based learning program works best for students

School leaders use a project-based learning program to closely tie academics to the music industry and vice versa, creating what they call a “seamless curriculum.” For example, students are learning history, social studies, and psychology through an examination of rap music. They learn how rap music influences society and how society

influences rap music. Students spend about half the day in courses or on independent study to accomplish academic work and spend the other half working on music production and business.

The school's staff indicates that HSRA's ability to change quickly because of true on-site management has allowed them to find a learning program that works for the students they serve. Before deciding on project-based learning, they tried a number of different methodologies that did not work well for the students they serve. While staff say that some might criticize this approach, saying the school is experimenting with students, HSRA contends that traditional settings have experimented too little to find programs that work well for different groups of students.

At first, HSRA implemented the independent, self-paced learning program used at many Area Learning Centers. But they learned that such an approach did not work well for students, so they tried a more traditional, structured academic approach with a variety of course subjects taught over a twelve week period. Students were not motivated by this approach, which they found too rigid for their chaotic and/or energetic lifestyles.

The project-based model is a good fit because students can be more involved in designing curriculum and setting deadlines. Students also have opportunities to work independently or with groups, and they can seek help from teachers who can guide them as they accomplish projects in their interest areas. Individual students can set a pace that works for them. Some, who need to move on quickly to better support their families, or who want to move on to their career in the music industry, can graduate early by working at a fast pace. Others, who need extra time to learn the material, can move more slowly.

Staff is proud that they involve students in curriculum planning. Simmons said, “We listen to them first!” As a result, staff is able to help students apply their interests to Minnesota's Graduation Standards in their project designs. Staff also marries student interests and state standards through both courses and independent study plans. Some courses and projects take place over a year. Others take just a few weeks. The school holds weekly meetings where student, staff, and administration come together to offer input and feedback on the preceding week. One result of these meetings is that students must earn the right to work in the studios by completing specific coursework.

Student projects include group and individual work to produce an annual public service compact disc recording for the HIV/AIDS/STD Awareness Program run by The City Inc. Students produce speeches and songs from many genres to raise awareness about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. They distribute the projects locally and nationally through their own record company, called Another Level Records.

Students work together on a number of other compilations of student performances, which they promote through their label as well. The label gives students an opportunity to work on both the production and business sides of the music industry, such as managing operations (e.g. designing and implementing business plans), designing covers, managing public relations, producing, distributing, securing rights, auditioning performers, and so on. All get experience operating a business, which the staff says is useful whether students stay in the music industry or not.

## Determining culturally appropriate assessment is a challenge

Just as it took time to find a learning program that works well for HSRA students, it is also taking time to find culturally appropriate ways to measure student achievement. While assessment of academic achievement is a priority, and students are tested using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, HSRA students have had trouble with testing and generally perform below grade level on state basic skills tests in reading, math, and writing. Staff continues to develop specific strategies improve student performance in these areas. To determine appropriate placement and overall ability, staff tests students before and after completion of units.

HSRA has determined that there are a number of ways to measure achievement, and not all measurements need be related to academics. HSRA evaluates whether the school is increasing the number of students in regular attendance, increasing the overall numbers of students enrolled, increasing course offerings, increasing the size of the library, and increasing the rate of students completing Minnesota Graduation Standards. High attendance rates are a mark of accomplishment, for example, because students have competing needs, such as jobs and families of

their own (a quarter of HSRA students have their own families). If HSRA strikes the right balance for students, they will attend school and graduate.

## HSRA must create new and different operational goals and structures to support the school's demographic population

### Culturally appropriate staff is not interested in charter school management

The small HSRA staff works hard to provide a culturally appropriate environment and learning program for students. The school's leaders indicate that it is difficult to find teachers who are qualified to work with the unique population of students within a very different school. Also, teachers who work well with HSRA students aren't necessarily interested in being members of the board, though Minnesota's charter law requires that teachers make up the majority of members. Teachers express that they got into the profession to work with students—not to make business decisions. Simmons said, "It's not their culture," meaning that, as teachers, they're not interested in business management.

The school's leaders have entered into an agreement with EdVisions Cooperative, an organization that—among other things (see profile for Avalon Charter School)—conducts educator development around project-based learning. EdVisions will work with HSRA staff to help them better understand the project-based learning model and to help better develop the staff's skills in working as a part of a team to manage the school.

### Partnerships expose students to numerous opportunities

The partnership with Ellis' Studio 4 Enterprises, a professional recording studio, is a key to HSRA's success. Studio 4 staff helped create HSRA and continue to provide managerial support. The studio also shares a space with the school. Studio staff helps students use recording and production equipment, and is aware of the need to teach students through the process.

Numerous music industry insiders speak to and work with students to expose them to opportunities outside the school. The community members are role models, who

show students what skills and life challenges are involved with participation in the music industry.

Students also seek and execute learning opportunities in the community, particularly in the area of music. A number of students perform publicly, for example. Some performed at the Science Museum, and others performed at Black Radio’s Exclusive 25th Anniversary Conference in Atlanta. Students also run an entertainment business, through which they provide services, such as disc jockey services, to the community.

Finally, staff members are developing job shadowing and internship opportunities for students.

### Parental involvement has been a challenge

Involving parents at HSRA has been difficult. Many of the students come from homes with some level of dysfunction or instability. Parents may be abusive, incarcerated, or

simply estranged from their teenaged children. As a result, about one quarter of HSRA students lack a traditional home life. Thus, in some cases, involving parents may not contribute to students’ success.

About 10 percent of parents attended teacher/parent conferences in 2001–2002. The staff has contacts with about 15 percent of the remaining parents. To keep at least this level of parents involved, HSRA has parent program updates four times a year. Since many involved parents work long hours to support their families, however, it is hard for them to participate in events.

### Sponsor and board support HSRA

Saint Paul School District sponsors High School for the Recording Arts. A five-member elected board made up of three teachers and two other community members help govern the school.

## Student Perspectives High School for the Recording Arts

At High School for the Recording Arts, students come in thinking they’d like to be performing superstars—the next Dr. Dre or Ashanti. They quickly learn that there are many more opportunities in the music business—from producing to owning a record company. “Truthfully, we know what we wanna do when we grow up—or at least the area!” one student said. “There are a lot of options, we know now. We get connections and opportunities here, and the network we get here is good. [That’s important because] the business is about who you know.”

The students are thrilled with their on-site record label office, and speak with great pride about how they worked to start the business themselves. “I had to write a business plan. I was in the library for days. I learned valuable things. I’m better prepared for the real world. I’m willing to work harder for these things. I’m going crazy for it!”

Failing to see the relevancy of much of the curriculum at their former, traditional school, the students appreciate having “hands on” access to professional recording studios and equipment, and lessons centered on music. At the traditional schools some of them attended, there were fewer opportunities to be involved with music production. And even if there was an opportunity, they often could not use the limited equipment until they reached a particular grade

level—no matter what their interest level or how well they performed academically. One sophomore said, “At Central High School, I was interested in audio engineering. But I [wouldn’t have been able to] get into the studios at all until I was a junior—even though that was my main interest.” Another student expanded, “[At HSRA] you don’t have to learn a bunch of ‘stuff’. Like, we’re learning the social psychology of rap music. Where the music comes from. What impact it has on society. That’s relevant to us.”

**Students said HSRA offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **Access to project-based learning centered around the music industry**
- **Access to equipment and networks in a business that’s about “who you know”**
- **Control over education, flexible learning pace, ability to exercise creativity**

Even with such a specific curriculum focus, the school offers students a lot of flexibility. A student explained how HSRA’s coursework has expanded her view of the opportunities available in the music industry. She also appreciates how the project-based learning environment has improved her willingness to get tasks done. “I have an opportunity here to get into the music business; and I’ve learned that this can be a lot of things on either end [performance or

business]. We are project based, so we get credit for projects that are tied to the state curriculum. But it's laid back. We can accomplish things on our own time . . . [What's interesting is that] here I don't procrastinate as much." Students went on to say that they can graduate early or late (based on the four-year tradition), but the built-in incentives of course work required to use the studio for specific purposes keeps them motivated.

Students say their parents and friends were initially skeptical about whether students would accomplish anything in such a flexible environment, but the skeptics have since seen the students' genuine interest in achievement. "[My parents] heard rumors—like charters and inner city schools aren't as good. They had questions. But now they see . . . we'll have a three day weekend, and I can't wait for Tuesday!" Another student added, "My mom is proud. She sees what I can do, though she didn't know [about the school] at first. My dad is a musician, so he thinks it is great. And they see that I'm doing better in a smaller environment. In a bigger school, there's more stuff that can go on."

Other students indicated that their parents really aren't involved in their lives, and that it only matters whether they think the school works well. Students had reservations about whether going to school was an option at all but decided to try HSRA as a last resort. They are glad they heard about HSRA's unique program, otherwise they wouldn't have gotten a high school degree.

Many friends' perceptions have changed over time. "My friends told me 'don't go' and warned me that I would fall behind. Now they're jealous. I want to go to school. And now they're a grade lower than me because I'm going to graduate ahead of schedule here. Now they say, 'I want to go!'" Some students noted that people who don't know much about the school "think we just

goof off in here." Also, some students' friends continue to express concern about a lack of social opportunities.

The social scene isn't much of a concern for these now business-savvy students. They put together what they think was a very exciting prom, where they the disc jockeys and band. "We got a boat," they exclaimed. "We planned the whole thing! And it was cheaper than other schools' proms!"

HSRA students were quick to say that this environment and culture would not work for all students. What works for some, won't work for all. "You can get guidance with project-based learning, but some need it [and don't know to ask for it]. Like, teachers [at HSRA] will come around and check on your work, but they won't look over your shoulder till it's done. Some people don't do well with that!" Moreover, they don't believe that the HSRA learning environment could be replicated in traditional settings. "[We get] individual attention. The faculty is different. We've got studios and even a pre-production room! The staff is really compatible with the students, so there are less communication problems. You can work on what you don't get to when there are 30 other students in the room. At my old school, they would move ahead without me . . . before I understood [the material]."

While some students found it challenging to adjust to being in charge of their own progress, most were willing to take the challenge head-on in exchange for freedom. "I'm always pretty busy. But I get 'equal value' for my work, in terms of credits. [I mean,] we aren't always waiting for the next lesson [so we can get credit for doing work during the structured time period set by the school] . . . we can just jump ahead."

Another put it more simply, "[At HSRA,] we get to control our education. We're allowed to be creative."

**METRO DEAF SCHOOL**

**Summary and Background**

265 West Lafayette Road South  
 Saint Paul, MN 55107-1628  
 Phone: 651-224-3995  
 Web site: www.metrodeafschool.org

**Contact:** Dyan Sherwood  
**Sponsor:** Forest Lake School Board  
**Opened:** 1993  
**Grade Levels:** Pre-8  
**Enrollment:** 72  
**Class Size:** 4-10  
**# of School Days:** 174

**Staff:**  
 15.5 Teachers  
 3 Licensed Specialists  
 11 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 0% American Indian  
 3% Asian  
 5% Hispanic  
 2% African American  
 90% Caucasian

30% Free or reduced-price lunch  
 100% Special education  
 0% English Language Learner  
 7% Mobility

**Tests:** Northwest Evaluation-MAP, SAT-10, Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment

**Other evaluations:** ASL Evaluation/Rubric (created by the school itself, this measures whether students meet ASL benchmarks for competencies from Pre-K to eighth grades), Minnesota Graduation Standards

Metro Deaf School offers the only Minnesota public elementary school where deaf students can receive quality instruction without being separated from their peers because of their differences or isolated from their families. Before founder and director Dyan Sherwood created Metro Deaf School, many families with deaf children found schooling options unsatisfactory. Students could attend traditional district schools, but they would have to use an interpreter to communicate with peers and teachers. Students could also attend the State Academy for the Deaf; but the location of the Academy forced many students to

reside on campus during the school week and they would only see their families on weekends. Another option was home school, but many families could not take on that responsibility.

Sherwood and a group of parents tried to secure new options for deaf students within the existing system. They spent a year working to establish a satellite school with the State Academy. They eventually found, however, that the state was not open to the idea, so they decided to take advantage of the then new charter school law in Minnesota. They believed that the autonomy the law provides would allow them to create an entirely new and different school. They formed a team of teacher, parents, and community members, and in 1993 Metro Deaf was born.

**Setting**

Metro Deaf is located in a commercial/ industrial area on Saint Paul’s West side. The building has a large central space with offices, activity space, and a computer area sectioned off by cubicle dividers. Classrooms line the perimeter of the building. A small lunch area is in the back of the open space. Since students and many staff are deaf, sound travel is not an issue at the school. Thus, the space can be divided in a way that best suits Metro Deaf’s needs.

Adults and students seem busy and quite focused on their work, yet the entire building was quiet except for the sounds of students’ hands moving against each other as they communicate with their peers and teachers using sign language.

Metro Deaf serves students from 32 school districts throughout the metro area and western Wisconsin.

**Metro Deaf’s mission is to teach more than academics. It also teaches deaf culture.**

Metro Deaf School promotes academic excellence in deaf education using an innovative bilingual and bicultural approach. The school’s primary purpose is to help deaf students develop a sense of identity and pride, while providing them the skills and knowledge to succeed in the larger community.

Teaching students about deaf culture, which is recognized around the globe, is extremely important to the staff and the larger deaf community. Many deaf students never have a deaf teacher, and therefore never learn skills needed to live as a deaf person. To ensure students have role models for living within deaf culture, Metro Deaf School intentionally hires deaf teachers as well as hearing teachers who are fluent in ASL. Eighty percent of the teachers and all of the teaching assistants are deaf. Every classroom has a teaching assistant to ensure that the school reaches all students.

Teachers wish their own elementary school experience were like the one they're now providing to Metro Deaf's students. "The kids don't realize how lucky they are," one teacher said. Another pointed out that in a sense they do get to experience the new environment. They can relate to one another through the deaf culture, yet not be outsiders. Relationships with fellow teachers thrive because of the small "community-like environment" at the school. All expressed that the mission, the common belief and philosophy, contributes to their ability to work as a team.

## Teachers use American Sign Language and adapt traditional curriculum for deaf students

Metro Deaf's learning program is built on a bilingual and bicultural approach—in line with the school's mission. While most schools that educate deaf students use a combination of methods such as lip reading, spoken language, and various other communication modes. Metro Deaf has opted to use American Sign Language (ASL) and English as the primary means of educating and communicating with students.

When district schools use different interpreters for different modes, deaf students within the same school often have difficulty communicating with one another. This further isolates deaf students, who are already different from the majority of their peers. Metro Deaf's focus on ASL allows the staff and students to move beyond communication barriers and concentrate more fully on academic content and social development. Staff

incorporates English for purposes of reading and writing. Metro Deaf does not believe that students must have intelligible speech to be successful.

To help students build a foundation in using a pure language, Metro Deaf groups students by ability in reading and writing and by grade in math and other courses (with some modifications). Since all students receive special education funding, all students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that guides their education. Staff, home district, students, and parents work together to form the right plan for each student.

When students transfer to the school from elsewhere, they often lack a significant amount of education in deaf culture and ASL. As they adjust to Metro Deaf, they learn to appreciate and respect their culture and to be their own advocates. As part of Metro Deaf's bicultural emphasis, staff purchases regular curriculum and then adapts it for deaf students. Staff has tailored courses in reading, math, science, social studies, physical education and health, and spoken English. They have also incorporated coursework in deaf studies and American Sign Language. An after school program, funded by grants and donations, helps supplement the regular education program.

To ensure that bilingual-bicultural approach continues to be successful, Sherwood looks for teachers who are dual certified in deaf education and in elementary/secondary education. Teachers with such certification are able to both teach in their subject area and communicate with students via ASL. Sherwood says that Metro Deaf pays its teachers higher salaries than what is offered by Saint Paul Public Schools, measuring by the district's current salary schedule.

## Metro Deaf uses tests to measure student progress

Metro Deaf uses a number of tests to measure students' progress as it compares to students in other schools, including the Northwest Evaluation-MAP twice each year. Other assessments include evaluating student progress in using American Sign Language and progress toward the Minnesota Graduation Standards.

## Governance and operational structures involve staff, community, and parents to ensure Metro Deaf’s long-term success

### Teachers’ role on the board is critical for securing investment in the school

Sherwood says that in her experience teaching in traditional district schools, teachers did not have decision-making power. She makes a concerted effort involve staff in making decisions that affect Metro Deaf. A majority of Metro Deaf’s teaching staff serves on the school’s governing board. Sherwood says teachers’ participation is critical for gaining buy-in on important decisions made about the school’s operations.

Teachers say they’re happy to be in an environment that is committed to finding better ways to educate deaf students. In the Metro Deaf environment, they’re allowed to implement ideas they always thought would work better for deaf students. They explain that they have more power than they did as teachers in traditional schools. They say there’s a lack of red tape and bureaucracy.

The school has a goal of adding community experts to the board so they can continue to gain new and thoughtful insights that will improve the school.

### Partnerships allow families to benefit from experience of others in the deaf community

Metro Deaf has established a mentor program that matches members of the deaf community with families with children attending the school. Members of the deaf community are also highly involved with students at the school site.

### Parental involvement helps secure resources and support for Metro Deaf

Metro Deaf involves parents in decision-making. On a monthly basis, the school hosts a Parent-Teacher Group Meeting to collaborate on ways to improve the school. Parents also work as paid aides and as volunteers. Their work supports the school. In fact, it was a parent who secured sponsorship from the Forest Lake School Board through strong advocacy and awareness of the need for new options for deaf students.

Metro Deaf provides parent education classes to help families adjust to the school’s learning programs as well as to help them learn skills needed to parent deaf children. Staff holds formal conference with parents per year in addition to the annual IEP meeting.

## Student Perspectives Metro Deaf School

To the students at Metro Deaf, what’s distinctive about their school is just plain common sense. Those who attended traditional schools like the fact that they don’t have to speak with peers through an ever-present adult interpreter. And many of the students do not like the idea of residing at the State Academy. In that scenario, they explain, they could only “go home”—participate in family life—on weekends. Attending Metro Deaf, they are surrounded by peers and teachers who are deaf and/or understand deaf culture. Everyone knows they are capable and smart. And students get to go home at the end of the school day.

What’s more, Metro Deaf uses only American Sign Language. Students explained that this is very important, so everyone can communicate effectively and clearly. A student who previously worked with an interpreter says

it wasn’t easy. Other students, who have always attended Metro Deaf, find the idea of using an interpreter “scary”. Students think they would have difficulty communicating with one another. Teachers later confirmed that using a variety of sign languages in one building can be confusing, and can reduce the quality of communication.

### Students say Metro Deaf School offers options that they may not have received elsewhere. These are:

- Ability to communicate effectively with teachers and peers who are deaf or from deaf families
- Ability to live at home and receive a quality education, without isolation from family
- Easy access to extra-curricular activities that have coaches or facilitators who are deaf, and can therefore understand varying needs

As teachers suspected, some students seem unaware that the opportunities available to them are very different from what they might have had years ago, or even now in

traditional district or residential academy settings. One student said, for example, “There are a lot of opportunities. There is art after school, or drama. We’ve got sports, like the swim team. If you want something to happen, the school is willing to set it up.”

Parents and teachers who later learned about this statement explained that it made them feel they had accomplished their goals. Teachers who are deaf really had to navigate through “the system” to get the same, or lesser, opportunities that Metro Deaf students described as being so readily available. Before Metro Deaf, parents thought they would have to help their children learn to do the same. Also, teachers explained that they don’t just teach “swimming”. They teach students how to advocate for themselves as swimmers, which means that students learn not to let people tell them “they can’t,” or to treat them differently because they’re deaf.

Students listed a number of other features that they view as distinctive. Students say these features work well, and some who had attended traditional schools say some features make Metro Deaf “better”. The features are:

- Smaller size: “It’s a small school.”
- Better discipline, and an appropriate amount of work: “It is strict and there is more work here. But I like to work hard.”
- Better sense of safety: “It’s safer than other schools.” And, “It’s comfortable here. Others aren’t allowed in, so there aren’t any bad influences, like drugs.”
- More opportunities to be creative: “There is lots of creativity!”
- Good teachers: “We have good teachers.” “The school always wants to improve.”

## NEW VISIONS SCHOOL

### Summary and Background

1800 – 2nd Street NE  
 Minneapolis, Minnesota 55418  
 Phone: 612-706-5566  
 Web site: www.actg.org

**Contact:** Bob DeBoer

**Sponsor:** Minneapolis Public School Board

**Opened:** 1994

**Grade Levels:** K-8

**Enrollment:** 200

**Class Size:** 10

**# of School Days:** 171

**Staff:**

20 Teachers

5 Licensed Specialists

20 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**

5% American Indian

3% Asian

4% Hispanic

53% African American

34% Caucasian

69% Free or reduced-price lunch

46% Special education

0% English Language Learner

50% Mobility

**Tests:** Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests

**Other evaluations:** Minneapolis Public Schools  
 Accountability Plan

New Visions School is dedicated to accelerating the development of students whose potential has been robbed by severe socioeconomic conditions and learning disabilities. The school provides a comprehensive education to K–8 students who are making good academic progress, as well as to those who need extra help. The staff operates the school using the principles of choice, entrepreneurial opportunities for teachers, and accountability for achievement to demonstrate that disadvantaged children can excel in the classroom.

New Visions' founders say that between the increasing number of children growing up in conditions of poverty entering the school system and the increasing number of

children “saved” by medical technology who come to school with developmental delays, there is an explosion in the number of students entering public education who need expensive, specialized services. Since many schools do not offer such services, too many of America’s students are growing up illiterate—unable to adequately contribute as members of a democratic society.

Founders Bob and Kathy DeBoer believe, however, that schools like New Visions can help reverse this trend. They say that if schools can teach students to read while they’re young, society can end adult illiteracy in one generation. To help New Visions students learn basic skills and other academics, the school focuses on meeting students’ safety, security, and developmental needs first.

The school emerged from the founders’ outstanding personal commitment to and success with programs designed to help children who have special needs. Bob and Kathy DeBoer, both educators, started A Chance To Grow in 1985 to help their daughter and children who had special needs. In 1987, they quit their full time jobs to make the organization a 501(c)(3) agency serving 28 families with over 1,000 volunteers spending one hour a week with the children. The first program they created was a Medicare licensed home health care agency to provide Personal Care Assistants (PCAs) to work in the families’ homes in order to implement therapeutic interventions. Then they launched their Boost Up program for children who had reading problems in the summer of 1987. Students did Boost Up five days a week for two hours a day and made an average reading gain of 8.5 months in the seven-week period.

At the time, A Chance To Grow was leasing space from Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS)—in the same building where MPS had three Transition Kindergartens. At that point in time, about 10–12 percent of MPS kindergarteners were failing the kindergarten benchmark test. Minneapolis would have them repeat kindergarten in an all day format (known as Transition Kindergarten). Ninety percent would pass the benchmark test after the second year, but by second grade over half would be failing in reading. A Minneapolis principal proposed doing Boost Up with the three Transition Kindergarten classes, a move

which eventually led to a three-year collaboration between A Chance to Grow and Minneapolis Public Schools. In the first year, after doing 93 hours of Boost Up, the students read at the 82nd percentile of entering first graders and maintained those gains into second grade. The success of the collaboration with MPS led to the formation of New Visions School, first as a contract school (for one year) and then a charter school in 1994.

## Setting

New Visions School is located in the middle of a neighborhood in Northeast Minneapolis. The school leases 75 percent of the 52,000 square foot building. A Chance To Grow uses the rest of the building. There is a front office area that takes care of general administration and monitors who enters the building—guests must ring a doorbell and establish who they are before entering.

New Visions School was originally housed in a former Catholic school building. In the late 1990s, New Visions began to search for a permanent home for its services. A man donated a third (\$300,000) of a 40,000 square foot former sheet metal factory and financed the other two-thirds. Over a three-year period, founders raised over \$4.7 million to renovate the space into a 52,000 square foot multi-service building. The school purchased and completely renovated the building for \$95 a foot. The renovation involved a partnership with the Minneapolis Park Board through which New Visions was able to secure \$300,000 in after school recreation bond revenue to create a gymnasium and other public spaces that the school and park system share. The partnership allows people to use the building from 6:30 in the morning until 9:00 at night.

Most classrooms, on the first floor, are arranged in a traditional manner, with desks in rows. There are meeting rooms, a library, a computer lab, and a gym. Yet many rooms look very nontraditional—they're filled with padded mats and what appears to be playground equipment. Students use these rooms to complete structured, repetitive activities that stimulate their brain's processing capabilities and help their brain learn how to receive information more efficiently.

The second floor contains many of the services. One room, used for vision services, looks like a typical eye doctor's office combined with a store where one would

obtain glasses. Another room is a designated neurofeedback area. It is dark with a few small offices used by academics to study the program. In one part of the area, students lay on mats as an aide administers the program and helps students relax.

Half of New Visions students qualified for Title I services in 1999-2000, meaning that they are one year behind in reading. Almost half qualify for special education services because they were two or more years behind in reading, writing, or math. Sixty-nine percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

## Mission to help students overcome readiness skill deficits will impact New Visions students as well as students at other schools

New Visions is dedicated to the education of children with readiness skill deficits, including: developmental delays, reading difficulties, and various forms of learning disabilities. The mission of New Visions School is to help each child identify and cultivate his or her greatest potential and to provide a curriculum that will foster the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to live a successful, healthy, fulfilling, and informed life.

The school's staff wanted to create a learning environment that matches the mission. The result is a climate that is intentionally multi-cultural, gender-fair, and disability aware. Staff makes decisions based on their belief that all children are born with innate potential that needs to be nurtured and developed to help children grow.

In addition to serving students, New Visions is committed to promoting cost-effective, multi-disciplinary programs and models to help parents and professionals who serve learning disabled and delayed persons. Staff is committed to developing the programs so they can offer other schools and parents alternatives to medicating students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD). New Visions believes that families, working together with their surrounding communities, are the most important and powerful resource to help their children.

## Learning program integrates an intensive, developmentally appropriate stimulation program with multiple traditional pedagogical models

### **Traditional schools have not incorporated programs that work for learning disabled students**

According to New Visions' founders, approximately 10 to 15 percent of all children grow up with some type of learning disability, yet they believe traditional settings have not created programs that are sufficiently effective in helping learning-disabled students become literate. Once a child falls one year behind in reading, s/he qualifies for Title One services so s/he can catch up. The services employ the same unsuccessful classroom instructional methods, however—the only difference being that the instruction takes place in a smaller setting. If a child falls two or more years behind in reading, s/he qualifies for Special education services. Again, most traditional schools use the same instructional methods but in an even smaller setting than the one used to provide Title I.

Teachers in traditional settings also engage in one-on-one tutoring or instruct children to use other sensory pathways, e.g. ears, to help students overcome learning disabilities. New Visions School founders say that these methods are not acceptable. A learning-disabled child can learn to “read” books by listening to “talking book” tapes, but the world does not operate by sound alone. They point out that students must be able to read job application forms, street signs, and telephone books.

### **New Visions School's learning program focuses on meeting safety, security, and developmental needs first so students can successfully learn basic skills and other academics**

New Visions School believes that students can begin to reach their maximum human potential if they progress along a learning continuum, or if learning is based on a building block system. In other words, the school first meets students' safety, security, and developmental needs, so students can successfully learn basic skills and other academics. The New Visions School Learning Continuum is set up as a triangle, with safety and security at the base. To meet these needs, staff provides structure, respect, positive discipline, positive social experiences, social

workers, home visits from New Visions staff, youth and family advocates, an after school program, a lunch and breakfast program, and opportunities to improve family life, parental involvement in school, and physical health.

The next step up on the triangle continuum is meeting developmental needs. New Visions provides a number of specific programs designed to improve development in addition to vision and hearing screening, allergy counseling, home health care, speech, visual perception, classroom brain gym techniques, neurofeedback, developmental adaptive physical education, and more.

Next on the continuum is provision of basic skills. Basic skills include reading, math, writing, computer skills, physical education, Orton-Gillingham phonics, regular education, special education, and provision of Title I services. Academics is at the top of the triangle—the last block on the continuum. At this level, staff members teach students social studies, science, health, regular education, and higher order thinking skills. While students move along the continuum, New Visions facilitates constant communication with families. New Visions also engages in ongoing evaluation of each student to determine if the students are improving.

### **Staff combines a developmentally appropriate stimulation program with multiple traditional pedagogical models**

The curriculum and program content of New Visions School originated from a program called Boost-Up, which A Chance to Grow started-up in 1987. A Chance to Grow is a nonprofit organization dedicated to accelerating the development of brain-injured, learning disabled, and delayed children. Generally, the 1987 Boost-Up children were of average intelligence, yet they were failing in reading.

Through Boost-Up, children attended a three-hour program, five days a week for seven weeks. They participated in structured activities that stimulated their brain's processing capabilities and helped their brain learn how to receive information more efficiently. On average, students made an eight-month gain in reading over the seven-week program. Professional studies show that students retain the gains they make through Boost-Up.

New Visions founders view these results, and the results from subsequent Boost-Up sessions, as evidence for the importance of applying what is known about how

the brain develops to the classroom environment. They designed New Visions School to give students the opportunity to attend a school that integrates an intensive, developmentally appropriate stimulation program with multiple traditional pedagogical models. For instance, New Visions School's reading instruction ranges from sight word presentation to Orton-Gillingham phonics, to a whole-language approach depending on individual student's interests and mastery of reading skills. Founders also created New Visions to explore and develop effective practices and models for integrating stimulation programs into traditional curriculum so other schools can replicate what works well. As a charter school, we allocate resources to provide these services free of charge as a public school. Instead of a band program, for example, New Visions has EEG Neurofeedback.

Some of the unique services and programs New Visions provides to stimulate development are as follows:

*Boost-Up:* The program is explained above. Students participate in Boost-Up for 50 minutes a day.

*Hemisphere Specific Auditory Stimulations (HSAS):* Auditory processing problems are associated with attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, processing oral directions, and general hypersensitivity to auditory stimulation. The HSAS program involves an audiometric baseline evaluation and a series of tapes that stimulate the brain with various frequencies and intensities, thereby expanding the efficiency of the auditory pathways to the brain.

*EEG Neurofeedback:* EEG Neurofeedback measures a child's brain activity and helps a child make internal adjustments to get a reward from a computer game. This system helps children become more alert, more settled, and better able to control their internal brain function. This program is an excellent alternative to the use of stimulant medication frequently prescribed for ADD and ADHD.

*Vision services:* Many students who enroll at New Visions School exhibit signs of severe visual processing problems—a confusion that the brain makes of the message from the eyes. Visual perception problems are varied. Some cause children to see a blurry image. Others make it difficult for a child to keep their place. The most commonly known problem is dyslexia, a condition that causes the brain to receive messages from the eyes that flip or transpose words or letters. Having vision services on site allows students to access constant check-ups, glasses, and visual perception services as part of school. They do not need to

miss school for appointments, and teachers can plan for students' absences. On site services are especially important because many families with children attending New Visions are unable to take time off work to take students to appointments. They are also unable to pay for additional services. In many other settings, these students do not receive services until they are behind in learning.

*Special education:* This program primarily uses a phonics base to break down the skill of reading into its basic parts. New Visions trains teachers to use sight word presentations, Orton-Gillingham phonics, visual stimulation, and various tactile activities to help students find their best learning pathway. BLAST, a special program of the Special Education Department, works with students who have mild to moderate mental impairments. BLAST (Better Learning After Sensory Teaching) is an intensified approach to stimulate developmental and academic growth in the students of this program.

New Visions School's building block learning program is working well. Many students come from the bottom third of whatever classroom they were in prior to enrolling in New Visions. In spite of their many obstacles, New Visions' students made an average reading gain of one year and five months over the 1999–2000 school year.

### **The Minnesota Legislature and Federal Department of Education are providing funding and programs to help schools replicate New Visions' success with children who have special needs**

In response to all of the teachers who asked how they could replicate programs, New Visions approached the Minnesota Legislature to form the Minnesota Learning Resource Center (MLRC). The school proposed to train teams of teachers from traditional public schools to understand how the brain develops as well as how brain development affects learning in the classroom. New Visions would also train teams how to identify learning readiness skill deficits and how to implement the curriculum designed for students who have special needs (developed after the collaboration with Minneapolis in the 1990s). The legislature accepted the proposal.

Today, New Visions professionals travel to each of the schools on a monthly basis to mentor the teams and to ensure quality control of the implementation of the programs. In the first year, 16 traditional schools contracted for this training and mentoring. For the 2003–2004 school

year, the MLRC will be working with 53 schools throughout the state. The MLRC funding has been renewed twice since its original allocation.

In 2001, New Visions School received a dissemination grant from the U.S. Department of Education in Washington to replicate the Boost Up program. Currently, New Visions is working with another 75 schools throughout South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin to implement these services. Professionals travel to those sites on a monthly basis as well, to provide mentoring.

### **Sponsoring school district requires New Visions to use its accountability plan**

Minneapolis Public Schools requires New Visions to use the same evaluation and review process that its traditional schools use. The district's accountability plan calls for each school to produce an annual report that includes information and data from the previous school year. New Visions' report summarizes the school's success in meeting requirements for student achievement, in achieving specific goals and outcomes set by the school, and in meeting requirements for fiscal management. The school also includes an evaluation of student attitudes, behaviors, and achievement against baseline data to demonstrate whether change has taken place. In addition, New Visions must provide an evaluation of selected curricular/instructional areas to the Minneapolis School Board, parents, and the State Board of Education.

The Minneapolis School Board reviews management and administrative procedures and student performance standards. Minneapolis Public Schools also looks for quantifiable gains in student achievement on specified measures, learning climate (including perceptions of safety, student attendance, turnover, suspensions, and so on), family involvement, community confidence, attraction and retention of students, quality of curriculum, and perceptions of instructional effectiveness.

New Visions School uses innovative evaluation methods to determine how to best help children who have special needs. The school evaluates the readiness skill

deficits children have, which often are the developmental basis for their struggle academically in the classroom. This includes identifying visual and auditory perceptual problems and biochemical imbalances through the various clinics. Once these readiness skill deficits are identified and resolved, students can successfully express their natural intelligence in the classroom.

### **Governance and operational structure involves parents and community organizations**

#### **Parents reinforce at home what is taught in the classroom**

Parents are involved with New Visions via a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO). The school encourages parents to volunteer at the school and to reinforce at home what is taught in the classroom. Parent teacher conferences have very high participation rate.

#### **Board and Sponsor**

New Visions' board includes five members: three are teachers, one is a member of the A Chance To Grow Board of Directors, and another a New Visions staff person. The Board approves all policies and procedures for the school. Day-to-day management is turned over to the Principal and her leadership team.

Minneapolis Public Schools, the school's sponsor, meets once a year to receive New Visions' annual report. Otherwise, there is little to no contact with the district.

#### **Partnerships**

New Visions partners with Caravan Kids to administer the school's hot lunch and breakfast program. The school pays Caravan Kids provide the food, and New Visions staff serves it. Families with students who do not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch can pay for the meals.

The school also engages in successful collaborations with the Minneapolis Park Board, Eastside Neighborhood Services, PACER, Hennepin County Services, and other schools.

## Student Perspectives New Visions School

Students say they attend New Visions School largely because their parents decided that the traditional neighborhood school did not offer a climate and curriculum that was appropriate for the students. The students listed a number of reasons why they prefer New Visions to their “old” school.

Teachers, and how they teach were a big point of distinction for New Visions students. “Learning was difficult [at my former, traditional school]. They didn’t teach

**Students said that New Visions School offers features not available in many traditional settings. These are:**

- **A learning environment designed to help students who have trouble being successful in traditional learning settings**
- **On-site access to equipment and programs that can improve students’ ability to concentrate**
- **Access to teachers and students who care about them and learning**

you the way you want to be taught.” Another added that “so much was going on” at his traditional school that the teachers didn’t have time to spend with students who weren’t understanding the lessons. “[The teachers] couldn’t explain the lesson. They were always rushing, even when we got in groups.” “The teachers were cranky,” another explained. “Maybe they don’t get enough sleep. They’re

exhausted. They gave detention for nothing [or no reason]. They’d give assignments and I would be left behind. I think that’s not good for you.”

Students believe they learn more at New Visions. One student said, “Here, I’m always ‘getting it’. Sometimes I don’t get it, but I like the teachers. They work with me until I understand it. They’re nice, and generous, and funny.” Another explained that he was definitely doing better at New Visions. “At this school, I like the teachers. I like that there’s a lot of stuff to do—fun activities. I mean, we’re always taking field trips. There’s a good library with lots of books, and a good gym.” Students say they look to their peers as a source of help in learning. “There are nice kids here. They help you. At my old school, kids didn’t care about anything.”

Students also like having access to resources that help them overcome their disabilities. They spoke favorably about EEG Neurofeedback, for example. Students said the

treatment is “cool”. “It helps with headaches. It gets you focused. It calms me down. It helps me.” Another student said he is comforted that there is a vision center within the school. He likes the fact that the center is readily available to help students overcome vision problems that may be impairing their learning. Students also indicated that they really like the Boost-Up program “because it’s fun”, though it can get too loud in the small rooms.

According to students, their parents like New Visions better than traditional settings. “They couldn’t help me with my homework at my old school—sometimes I couldn’t remember what I was supposed to do. Then, they would work it out with my teacher that I could turn the work in late. But I was always behind!” The student went on to say that her parents are now relieved that she’s learning the material.

New Visions has some downsides, too, students say. One student cares a lot about missing out on the social activities, and some other privileges he had at his former school. He misses his friends, and “Fantastic Fridays” where they got to dress silly and have fun events. He also misses the three choices of milk—including skim, 2% and chocolate that he had for lunch at his “old” school. A number of students said the lunch program has something to be desired—students generally wish they had more, and healthier, options. They would also like a big swimming pool.

But none of the students said they would trade going to New Visions for better lunches, a pool, and “Fantastic Fridays”. One student summed up the distinction between his former learning environment and the one at New Visions, “This school is for people with disabilities. We’re going to a better school.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the students indicated that they felt comfortable and accepted at New Visions.

<sup>5</sup> The student shared his belief that, compared to his former traditional learning environment, New Visions is better designed to serve students who have trouble learning in traditional ways. He perceives that since New Visions has a more intense focus on using programs that help him, that the school is specifically “for” learning disabled students—and he indicated that he appreciates having a school that addresses his learning needs. It should be noted, however, that New Visions’ expertise in helping children who have trouble being successful readers in the classroom includes helping students who are *not* necessarily diagnosed or labeled as learning disabled. Founder Bob Deboer says, “In fact the Boost Up programs help the bottom 40 percent of the students in any classroom in Minnesota public schools. Most of these students are not labeled as learning disabled. In my 30 years as an educator, I’ve seen generations of perfectly smart children be failed by our school system. Boost Up and other innovations are aimed at unlocking the potential for all children, including learning disabled. We need systemic change in our public schools. I want people reading New Visions’ profile to understand that labeling our school as “for students with disabilities” can immediately cut us off from a huge number of children we can help.”

**TWIN CITIES ACADEMY**

**Summary and Background**

486 View Street  
 Saint Paul, Minnesota 55102  
 Phone: 651-205-4797  
 Web site: <http://www.tca.k12.mn.us/>

**Contact:** Liz Wynne  
**Sponsor:** Saint Paul Public Schools  
**Opened:** 1999  
**Grade Levels:** 6-8  
**Enrollment:** 168  
**Average Class Size:**  
 Grade 6, 20 students  
 Grade 7, 25 students  
 Grade 8, 26 students  
**# of School Days:** 177  
**Length of School Day:** 9:15 A.M.–4:00 P.M.

**Staff:**  
 13 Teachers  
 2 Licensed Specialists  
 0 Non-licensed Staff

**Demographics:**  
 0% American Indian  
 15% Asian  
 5% Hispanic  
 15% African American  
 65% Caucasian

32% Free and reduced-price lunch  
 10% Special education  
 18% English Language Learner  
 11% Mobility

**Tests:** MAT 7, Stanford 9, Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment, Minnesota Basic Skills Tests

**Other evaluations:** Developmental reading power, academic achievement, attendance, teacher recommendations

A group of determined individuals started Twin Cities Academy (TCA) so students could have the option of attending a school that offers a specific, shared core curriculum. They also wanted to connect learning to active citizenship. One of these founders met Liz Wynne, a veteran Twin Cities district school principal, at a conference. Impressed with Wynne’s credentials, the founder wondered if she would be interested in the principal position at TCA.

Wynne had never heard of charter schools, but was intrigued by the opportunity to create and develop an entirely new school. Two other things attracted Wynne. One was the school’s mission to develop productive citizens via academic rigor and community partnership. The other was the ability to hand pick TCA’s staff.

**Setting**

Twin Cities Academy is a middle school housed in a former Catholic school building, adjacent to a parish in a mixed residential and commercial neighborhood in Saint Paul. The building also houses a daycare center. The school is relatively small. The atmosphere is very quiet.

The halls are filled with inspirational quotes and student artwork. There are lockers, but students don’t use them. A bulletin board is full of slips of paper where teachers wrote how they “caught” students doing something good. Classrooms are bright, and organized in a traditional manner—students are in rows of desks facing a teacher at the front of the room. Students raise their hands when they would like to speak.

The church basement doubles as a school cafeteria. Cubicle walls separate the teacher and student eating areas. When lunchtime arrives, students just set their belongings on tables or along the walls. Students say this is because they trust that no one will take anything while they’re away. The principal supervises lunch herself, taking time to interact with students. She dismisses tables by which one is quietest, and the students aim to please—encouraging their peers to be quiet so they could be dismissed. The principal knew every student by name.

While students come to Twin Cities Academy from all over the metropolitan area, most are from Saint Paul. Students’ average daily attendance is 93 percent. The student teacher ratio is 15:1.

**Learning environment supports TCA’s mission to develop productive citizens through academic rigor**

Twin Cities Academy’s mission is to develop productive citizens through academic rigor, and build character in partnership with parents and community. The board and

staff make decisions about the learning environment and other aspects of the school with the mission in mind. When families choose to send a child to TCA, staff asks the family to sign a covenant that lays out, up front, the expectations that TCA has for families as well as what families can expect from TCA in return.

One aspect of the covenant is that staff is committed to modeling behavior. Both staff and students wear uniforms for example. Staff and students also live by and work to better achieve a list of virtues to achieve what they call “CRISP VICTORY.” The letters stand for: Citizenship, Respect, Initiative, Scholarship, Perseverance, Visionary, Informed, Compassionate, Tolerant, Obligated, Responsible, You! At the end of the school year, staff gives out “CRISP” awards to students who meet these expectations.

To build a school community that supports the mission, TCA hosts a team building retreat for all students and staff at the beginning of each year. This year, they went to two sites—Wilder Forest and Camp Ihduhapi. On retreat, all participants engage in a range of activities to improve communication, cooperation, and problem solving skills. They also build creativity, group trust, and individual self-esteem.

Principal Liz Wynne says that creating this type of environment, and making changes to other elements of the school, may have been possible in traditional settings, but the process would have taken “a lifetime.” One of the primary reasons TCA can change more quickly, she says, is that all stakeholders understand that they are part of a larger contribution to the whole. All work to achieve common goals of character, academic rigor, and citizenship. Stakeholders also work to maintain a climate where there is flexibility to modify the school, and all are committed to adjusting to changes.

When students’ reading test scores came back lower than expected one year, for example, staff decided to add a reading class to the curriculum and quickly made compromises and took on extra responsibility to implement their plan. Another time, staff doubled the time spent on math, which resulted in ten point differences in TCA math test scores. Wynne explained that in a traditional school environment, considering an idea and implementing change would have called for a very time consuming and bureaucratic process.

## Staff uses the Core Knowledge Sequence to maintain academic rigor

Staff bases much of the learning program on the *Core Knowledge Sequence*, a learning model and education reform strategy developed by E.D. Hirsh in 1986. The sequence allows staff to provide students with a solid, specific, and shared core curriculum that will help them establish strong foundations of knowledge. Students learn specific content in a variety of subject areas and they are required to demonstrate that knowledge in practical ways. Staff makes sure that the content is aligned with Minnesota Graduation Standards.

The *Core Knowledge Sequence* emphasizes specific subjects by grade level. Each year, students focus almost exclusively on a new subject that adds to their comprehensive knowledge base. This is different from traditional learning programs, where students learn all subject areas in every middle school grade level.

At TCA, students learn a small group of subjects (taken from language arts, history, geography, mathematics, and fine arts) in sixth grade, another small group in seventh grade, and a third group in eighth grade. By graduation, students share a strong base of knowledge, including cultural literacy, in each subject. Staff says that the *Core Knowledge Sequence* prevents repetition in instruction and gaps in knowledge. To support the curriculum, staff groups the students by grade in all subjects except math and reading, where they group students by ability (determined by test scores).

In addition to the core academic program, students take elective courses. TCA also requires students to be regularly involved with service-learning projects that benefit the community. Technology is available in a lab setting, and is directly incorporated into the learning program. Staff highly encourages students to use technology for their presentations, however.

Staff teaches the core content in creative ways. In math class, for example, students worked to landscape an area and then double the size. A language arts teacher asked students to draw pictures to help them remember vocabulary words for an upcoming test.

Staff makes a point of teaching students self discipline. As a result, students tend to focus on their work, and not on each other, during class time. Students also learn that

getting good grades requires time investment. A math teacher passed tests back, explaining to her class that students had not done well. She offered students an opportunity to retake the test if they first invest more time in learning the concepts. Finally, staff empowers students by offering them some input into project methods and timelines.

## Assessment involves standardized tests, but progress is measured in a number of ways

Twin Cities Academy assesses students using the MAT-7, Stanford 9, and Basic Skills tests. Students who need to improve test scores can access TCA’s Enrichment Classes. The student test scores consistently surpass city and state averages.

The school measures its own performance by retention rates, attendance rates, behavior levels, service levels, and scores on in-class work. TCA also uses annual surveys to measure families’ perceptions about how the school is serving their children. The staff reviews all responses and uses them to facilitate improvement and changes in the following year. Saint Paul Public Schools also evaluates TCA. In 2002, the district’s audit of TCA resulted in overall review and renewal of the school’s charter.

An analysis of the most recently reported Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment test score results provides further documentation of the achievement gains being experienced at Twin Cities Academy:

- TCA got the highest average test scores in math and reading of any charter school, and the highest score differential from fifth to eighth grade of any public school in the state with a 30 percent or more enrollment of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch. They also received the highest score differential out of Minnesota schools with a substantial percentage of students of color (40 percent).
- No other public school with over 14 percent students of color made the “20 top improvers” list in both math and reading, and only one other school (Community of Peace Charter School) did in either category.
- TCA’s growth scores were eighth overall in math and 14th in reading, out of all public schools in the state.

- TCA had 90 percent of all students passing the state exam in both reading and math.

## Community, parents, and staff are key to TCA governance and operations

### TCA believes parental involvement makes a difference for students

Principal Liz Wynne firmly believes that parental involvement makes a difference for students. TCA requires parents to volunteer for 50 hours per year, and keeps them up-to-date with opportunities via a sign-up book placed at the school’s entrance. Additionally, a parent group, called “Voices,” helps raise funds for the school and helps organize parents. Taking these opportunities, parents logged a total of 5,400 hours of volunteer service in 2001. Staff members find that parental assistance helps them do their jobs.

TCA also keeps parents involved in their children’s education via parent/teacher conferences. Ninety-seven percent of parents participate.

### The board includes community members to gain experience in governance and fundraising

A twelve-member board with an executive committee is responsible for most of TCA’s operations. Four community members sit on the board because staff and parents appreciate their different experiences and perspectives. To secure the ability to have more community members than teachers, TCA received a waiver from the state. Minnesota’s charter law otherwise requires that teachers make up the board’s majority.

The board emphasizes sophisticated financial management. TCA has had a small budget surplus for the past two years. The board hired an accountant to manage school fund and requires an annual audit. TCA expects all board members to help fundraise. Most board members, including the teachers, contribute to the school themselves.

Saint Paul Public Schools sponsors Twin Cities Academy.

### Staff works well within a small environment

Wynne hires the teachers, and the board must approve her decisions. All teachers must be certified. Some of the staff came with Wynne from her previous school while others were new hires from public and private schools.

Staff says that the school sets high expectations for its teachers and administration, but they are happy to meet them. They appreciate that TCA gives them bonuses for reaching goals.

The small school size attracts teachers, because they believe decisions are made more quickly and duties are shared across the group. They also have better access to the principal, more opportunities to give input, and a

better sense of community. “Everyone knows each other,” one said.

### **Partnerships bring more opportunities for students**

TCA partners with the University of Saint Thomas to secure resources. Student teachers from Saint Thomas spend about 30 hours a week helping in TCA classrooms. TCA students participate in science labs on Saint Thomas campus.

## **Student Perspectives Twin Cities Academy**

Students say that they like Twin Cities Academy because of the small size and the positive relationships with teachers and classmates. “The other [middle] schools, like the ones my friends go to, are really big. I wouldn’t want to go there.” Comparing TCA to traditional settings, students said their traditional settings were “big” and that they have “too many discipline problems.”

Students also said, “They [teachers at traditional schools] don’t help you.” But, of TCA, they said: “I like the teachers.” “I like my friends.” “Everyone is nice, here.”

The *Core Knowledge Sequence* is desirable to Twin Cities Academy families. Students expressed that accessing the curriculum is the reason why they attend the school. One said, “You learn a lot here. We didn’t have *Core Knowledge* at our other school.” Another added, “My dad looked at this school and he saw that they teach *Core Knowledge*, so he sent me here.” Said a third, “My mom likes this school, because it’s just like a private school except you don’t have to pay for it. Like, we wear uniforms and they’re strict here. They use *Core Knowledge*.”

Not having a bus system that accommodates school hours is disappointing to TCA students. Students talked about this issue for some time. They explained that the school is not able to get buses until late morning and late afternoon. Classes don’t run late, yet many students must stay at the school building until the late afternoon buses arrive.

During the layover time, students participate in extracurricular activities or do their homework. Some students like the available opportunities, but others are upset that staying late prevents them from participating in club sports and other outdoor activities. This is particularly disappointing to some students because TCA does not have a playground or any sort of recreational area on site.<sup>6</sup> The late hours also separate students from other young people in their neighborhoods, who arrive home in the early afternoon.

Students wish they had recreational facilities. “I don’t like that [TCA] doesn’t have a playground.” Another added, “We should be able to go outside.” They also wish they had more lunch options. They have limited options, they say, because the school is small. “[Lunches] are the same every week. It gets old. At my friends school, they eat all sorts of things.” Others thought the discipline during lunch was too extensive. One student explained, “[The teachers] pick on some more than others.” She pointed out how the staff watched the students very closely. The student made it clear, while rolling her eyes, that she was very annoyed.

In general, however, students were quite positive about Twin Cities Academy. “Kids at other schools think it’s too strict here. They don’t like that we wear uniforms. But we like it. We learn here.”

<sup>6</sup> TCA principal, Liz Wynne, indicates that teachers take students to a local park for physical education and competitive sports when weather permits.

## GLOSSARY OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Throughout the profiles, a number of assessment tools for measuring the progress of students and schools were mentioned. To prevent repetitive descriptions of these tools, and to help readers further understand each one, we've assembled the following very basic characterizations. Please note that these descriptions are not intended to be exhaustive, nor comparative.

**Comer's School Climate Survey:** The school climate surveys measure concepts such as achievement motivation and academic focus as well as factors that tap into the social climate of the school. The survey respondents are asked to think about consistent patterns in their current school relationships before answering the questions. The report groups the questions together under broad categories referred to as 'variables.' These categories enable you to frame questions about your school climate, such as "What does it mean for our school that the students perceive the school as having strong Order and Discipline but average Student-Teacher Relations?" This and other information is available at the Comer School Development Program Web site: [http://www.med.yale.edu/comer/research\\_evaluation/schoolclimatesurvey.html](http://www.med.yale.edu/comer/research_evaluation/schoolclimatesurvey.html)

**Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests (GMRT):** The GMRT are screening tools that use scientific research to provide valid and reliable, norm-referenced data about K–12 students' and adults' reading ability. One can assess the general level of reading achievement of students throughout their entire school careers and screen students for placement by using the GMRT. This and other information is available at the Riverside Publishing Gates-MacGinitie Home Page: <http://www.riverpub.com/products/group/gmrt4/home.html>

**Individual Protective Factor Index:** The index measures family, home, and community influences on behavior, such as a student's: exposure to violence; family environment (e.g. adaptability, bonding, cohesion, relationships); quality of life; quality of neighborhood.

**Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS):** ITBS is a norm-referenced test which compares the performance of students with that of a national norming sample. The test measures reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, with several sub-tests in each area. Scoring on

the test is based on a normal distribution of test scores generated by the original norming sample. Thus, each year, students who take the test are compared against students who were involved in the initial administrations that were used to set the scoring tables.

**Lifetime Library:** The Learning 2000 Lifetime Library is a series of comprehensive multimedia programs in reading, writing, math, and algebra. The Lifetime Library provides an individualized educational experience for any learner through its interactive, multimedia teaching platform. All the programs incorporate an instructional video that lends itself to the complementary media of text, illustrations, and computer interaction. The mix of media provides variety and appeals to all learning styles. Learning 2000's programs allow each student to learn at their own pace, and in their own style. This and other information is available at the Learning 2000 Web site: <http://www.learning2000.com/index.htm>

**Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT-7):** The Metropolitan Achievement Test is a nationally standardized (norm-referenced) test given on an annual basis. It tests all students' learning in the basics of reading, language and math, and in certain grade levels also assesses their knowledge in science, social studies and research skills. The scores for each school are released as percentile rankings based on how well that school's students performed on the test when compared to the national average score. The gain index is a measurement of how much of a gain in learning students made last school year. It's based the MAT-7 test scores. A percentile ranking of more than 50 means students at that school learned more than the average student from the gain index school area—and therefore made a better than average gain on the MAT-7. A percentile less than 50 means students learned less than the average student—and therefore made a less than average gain on the MAT-7.

**Minnesota Basic Skills Tests (BST):** The Minnesota Basic Skills Tests measure how an individual student is doing compared to Minnesota Graduation Requirements. The results of these tests determine if an individual student has mastered skills determined by the state to be necessary to

function in adult society. The tests include reading, math, and written composition. All Minnesota public school students are required to pass these tests prior to graduation. The Minnesota Basic Skills Tests for reading and math are given for the first time in eighth grade. The written composition test is given for the first time in tenth grade. Students receive scale scores for each test taken. A scale score of 600 or higher is required to pass for graduates in 2001 and beyond. (The passing level for graduates in 2000 was 590.) Students receive a holistic score of one through six for the written composition test. A score of three or above is required to pass.

**Minnesota Comprehensive Achievement Tests (MCA):** The Minnesota Comprehensive Achievement Tests were created by the state of Minnesota to measure the progress being made by schools and districts toward achieving Minnesota's high academic standards. Grade 3 students are tested in reading and math. Grade 5 students are tested in reading, math, and writing. Test results allow comparison of the average score for buildings, districts, and the state. Districts also look at the percentage of students achieving in each of four categories, from Level 1 (at-risk) to Level 4 (exceptional). Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments for the high school grades are currently under development.

**Minnesota Graduation Standards:** The information from this report was gathered in 2001 and 2002, prior to the implementation of Minnesota's new academic standards for math, language arts, and the arts. Science and social studies standards are being developed. Standards apply to all public schools including charters. This and other information is available at the Minnesota Department of Education Web Site: [http://education.state.mn.us/stellent/groups/public/documents/translatedcontent/pub\\_intro\\_acad\\_standards.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/stellent/groups/public/documents/translatedcontent/pub_intro_acad_standards.jsp)

**Northwest Evaluation Assessment (NWEA):** Achievement Level Tests are a series of tests, aligned with local curriculum and state standards, that provide accurate information about academic growth and student learning. Level tests are designed to assess every student fairly. NWEA's computerized Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) combine the benefit of technology with level tests. While an individual student is taking a computerized adaptive test, the program customizes the test to the student's achievement level. MAP is a system that allows each

student to receive a unique test, which is dynamically developed for him or her as the test is being administered.

**RIT Scale:** Short for Rasch Unit, honoring George Rasch, the Danish mathematician who developed the underlying theory for this type of measurement. The RIT Scale is a curriculum scale developed by Northwest Evaluation Assessment that uses the individual item difficulty values to estimate student achievement. Advantages to the RIT Scale are that it can relate the numbers on the scale directly to the difficulty of items on the tests and it is equal interval. Equal interval means that the difference between scores is the same regardless of whether a student is at the top, bottom or middle of the RIT Scale, and it has the same meaning regardless of grade level.

**Social Skills Rating System (SSRS):** This rating scale is designed to assess the social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence of students from ages 3 through 18 years and takes approximately 25 minutes to complete. Students are rated on a three-point, Likert-type scale in two areas: how often behaviors occur and how important each behavior is to the respondent. Separate forms are available to be completed by the teacher, student, or parent.

**Stanford 9 and SAT-10:** The Stanford Achievement Test Series, Ninth and Tenth Edition, is a norm-referenced test that provides information about what students know in reading, language, and math. A combination of multiple-choice and open-ended subtests helps educators obtain a picture of both the breadth and depth of students' educational achievement. Test questions tap various comprehension skills from the below basic literal level (signifying less than partial mastery) up to the advanced level (signifying superior performance). Individual student scores can help parents understand how their child performed in core academic subject areas. Scores are reported in percentile ranks. Percentile ranks provide a comparison of a child's performance to a national norming group composed of students in the same grade. More information is available at: <http://www.hemweb.com/trophy/achvtest/sat9view.htm>

**Weschler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT):** WIAT is a comprehensive yet flexible measurement tool useful for achievement skills assessment, learning disability diagnosis, special education placement, curriculum planning, and

clinical appraisal for preschool children through adults. New norms also allow for the evaluation of and academic planning for college students with learning disabilities. It assesses problem-solving abilities by evaluating the process as well as the product. Through linkages with the Wechsler intelligence scales, one can make comparisons between achievement and ability that enable one to make

curriculum and intervention decisions. This and other information is available at the following Web site:  
<http://www.psychcorp.com.au/wiat2.html>

FURTHER INFORMATION NOT AVAILABLE FOR:  
Science Research Associates, Inc.; Standard of Behavior  
and Parental Satisfaction

## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Education/Evolving is a Minnesota-based project committed to helping K–12 education evolve and meet the challenges, demands, and opportunities of the 21st Century. We are individuals who have been working for some years on questions about the future of public education in Minnesota and elsewhere in the country. We work together as a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University in Saint Paul.

### **Education/Evolving...**

**FOLLOWS** the evolving elements of K–12 education—the thinking and the policy actions—in Minnesota, in other states, and at the national level.

**ASSISTS** the evolving where we can, by analyzing situations and looking for opportunities for change. We try to explain to policymakers why things work the way they do and how incentives can make a difference. We design new arrangements and we suggest new ways of coming at problems and opportunities as they present themselves.

**REPORTS** to others about what we observe, sharing both our own work and related work we see being done by others. This is done through traditional printed reports like this one, through conferences and informal meetings and, increasingly through electronic means, including a new web site at [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The school site visits and original student and staff interviews for “Positive School Culture” were done by Education/Evolving associates: Kim Farris-Berg, a Minneapolis education and public policy consultant, and Susan Heegaard, then a Saint Paul-based public policy consultant who has since become a senior policy advisor to Governor Tim Pawlenty. Kim Farris-Berg also did most of the final integration, writing, and editing of the school profiles. The introduction and overview on major findings of the report and their policy implications was written by Jon Schroeder, coordinator for Education/Evolving. These findings also draw on the thinking and writing—over the past several years—of the E/E leaders, Ted Kolderie, Senior Associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and Joe Graba, Senior Policy Fellow at Hamline University.

## SOURCES & METHODS

The report is intended to provide background and subjective profiles of a limited number of Minnesota chartered schools, as well as stimulate discussion and highlight important policy questions raised by its findings. It is not meant to be formal, academic research or an exhaustive description of the huge diversity of learning programs and other characteristics of Minnesota’s 75-plus chartered schools.

A number of individuals and organizations helped greatly in the preparation of this report. We appreciate their willingness to speak openly and to make available the documents and insights that further explain their organizations and their operations. We ask their indulgence for the simplified description, here, of what they know are sometimes immensely complex new and different concepts. Our hope is that we have caught the essentials accurately and explained them clearly.

More details on the sources and methods are described more thoroughly in the *Introduction and Overview of Major Findings*, specifically in the following sections: “So, how do we measure success?” and “Profiles include ten schools and a consistent set of questions.”

Any thoughts readers may have on the content of this report or its findings are welcome and will be greatly appreciated. E-mail the project at [info@educationevolving.org](mailto:info@educationevolving.org).



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