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Rural Minnesota Journal

January 2006

*Challenge Helps Promote  
Creativity*

Dr. Joe Nathan

Center for School Change



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# Challenge Helps Promote Creativity

Joe Nathan

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Challenge helps promote creativity. Declining enrollment, including but not limited to rural Minnesota public schools, is one well-known trend in Minnesota K-12 education. But the fascinating, instructive and often highly effective response to population decline is not nearly so well known. This paper will explore several important trends in Minnesota's rural public schools. They include:

- Doing an outstanding job of preparing students for higher education
- Fewer traditional school districts and more public school options
- Rethinking school facilities to increase collaboration and improve services
- Declining enrollment, accompanied by growing racial diversity
- The increasing use of emerging technology

A Minnesota Planning Agency report illustrates a common view of rural schools. The report noted, "Enrollment is declining in many rural districts " (Minnesota Planning). Declining enrollment in many rural districts is a fact. But the true face of rural education is far more complex than this one statistic.

This article cites a number of positive, encouraging and often ignored developments in Greater Minnesota. While not denying rural population declines, this report will focus on several things that have received relatively little or no attention.

## **Preparation for higher education**

Let's begin with preparation for some form of post-secondary education. Research is accumulating steadily that education beyond

high school leads to better paying jobs, along with other benefits. U.S. Census figures show that over an adult's working life high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 million, associate degree holders earn about \$1.6 million, and bachelor's degree holders earn about \$2.1 million" (Porter, quoting Day and Newburger).

There are many other benefits of higher education. College graduates have increased personal/professional mobility, improved quality of life for their children, higher levels of savings, and more hobbies and leisure activities. Research also shows a positive correlation between completion of higher education and good health, not only for oneself, but also for one's children (Porter, p. 2).

People in rural areas receive clear benefits from greater education. As the U.S. Department of Agriculture noted in 2002, average weekly earnings for non-metro college graduates were \$782 in 2002, compared with \$438 for high school graduates and \$502 with some college experience without a college degree (US Department of Agriculture).

Every year, millions of students graduate from high school in the United States. But as Dr. James Rosenbaum of Northwestern University points out, students often have the mistaken belief that they graduate from high school fully prepared for college (Rosenbaum). Very large numbers of students are taking remedial courses, especially in two-year colleges. For example, nationally, of the class of 1992, 25 percent of those who entered a four-year college and 61 percent who entered two-year colleges took at least one remedial course (Rosenbaum, p. 3). Forty-six percent of students who graduated from Minnesota public high schools in 2002 and entered two-year Minnesota colleges or universities took at least one remedial course (Minnesota State College and University System, 2005, p. 5).

Every year, Minnesota examines how well its public high schools are doing at preparing students for some form of public higher education. The University of Minnesota and the Minnesota State College and University System (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2002, 2005) cooperate on research. The study looks at what percentage of students who graduate from all, and each, public Minnesota high school enter a public college or university within a year or two of graduating. The study also examines what percentages of graduates take at least one remedial course in a public college or university. The results are fascinating.

The *Getting Prepared* Study released in 2003 showed that about 39 percent of students who graduated in 2000 enrolled at public colleges or universities during the 2000-2001 academic year. Thirty-

three percent of public school graduates from the class of 1999 who enrolled in Minnesota public universities took at least one remedial course within two years of graduating (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2002). A study released in fall 2005 found that the percentage of students who graduated in the classes of 2001 and 2002 and then took one or more remedial courses had increased to 36 percent, and that 49 percent of public high school graduates entered a Minnesota public college or university (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, 2005, p. IV).

Researchers noted: "At Minnesota state colleges and universities, more thorough placement testing and enforcement of required developmental education account for at least some of this increase" (Minnesota State Colleges, 2005, p. v).

Nevertheless, whether the figure is 33 or 36 percent, it is, for many people, including this author, disturbingly high.

Having to take remedial courses is a big problem, decreasing the likelihood that a student will graduate. "Since the remedial courses often carry no credit, students who plan for two-year or four-year degrees discover that they cannot complete their degrees in the time they have scheduled or within the budget they have planned" (Rosenbaum, p. 4).

Moreover, one MnSCU researcher estimated that the cost of remedial courses at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities is about \$10 million a year, with about half coming from tuition, and the other half from the MnSCU system itself (Schoenecker). Minnesota has a huge stake, at both an individual and societal level, in getting as many high school graduates ready to enter colleges and universities *without* needing to take remedial courses.

Another important part of the *Getting Prepared* studies in both 2002 and 2005 showed the percentage of students from *each individual high school* that took at least one remedial course. The results surprise many people.

An analysis of this data, reported here for the first time, shows that *all* fifty of the high schools that had the lowest percentage of students taking a remedial course were in rural Minnesota. Forty-five of the schools were small. Only five of the high schools graduated more than 1,000 students over the four-year period 2000 to 2003. Three, Winona, St. Cloud and Mankato were in communities with state colleges (Nathan and Accomando).

It is fascinating to compare these rural high schools with a number of well-known metro suburban high schools. At least on this measure, dozens of rural high schools did better.

Less than one quarter (25%) of graduates from these 50 rural high schools who entered a Minnesota public college or university took a remedial course. Compare that to the state average of 36 percent, and to the percentages of well-know suburban high schools:

Anoka (40%); Blaine (41%); Bloomington Kennedy (44%); Coon Rapids Sr. High (45%); Eagan (40%); Edina (29%); Lakeville (34%); Minnetonka, (32%); North St. Paul High School (48%); Rosemount (43%); Simley-Inver Grove Heights (41%); Tartan (41%); White Bear Lake South (49%); Wayzata, (31%).

When this information was shared with a number of rural newspaper editors in October 2005, the responses were quite strong. "I'm stunned." "I'm shocked!" "Are you sure?" These were typical responses, followed by an invitation to write about this for a variety of rural publications.

Minnesotans generally assume that the best public schools are in affluent suburbs. Unquestionably, many good things are happening at these high schools. And it is not appropriate to judge a school only on one statistic.

But whether it is percentage of students fully prepared for public universities or other forms of testing, evidence is growing that some of the state's best schools are located in Greater Minnesota. And as mentioned above, *all* of the 50 high schools sending the lowest percentage of students needing remediation to public universities and colleges are in Greater Minnesota.

**Table 1:** Fifty Minnesota public high schools (class of 2000-2003) with lowest percentage of students taking remedial courses at public universities (MnSCU, 2005)

School district	High school	Total number of graduates	Percentage of graduates enrolled at Minn. public higher education	Percentage of HS grads enrolled at Minn. public higher education institutions who took developmental courses
Alden	Alden-Conger Sec.	148	46%	22%
Alexandria	Jefferson Sr.	1,346	52%	23%
Becker	Becker Sr.	513	42%	23%
Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa	Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa Sec.	268	65%	22%
Blooming Prairie	Blooming Prairie Sec.	287	63%	16%
Brandon	Brandon Sec.	97	67%	20%
Caledonia	Caledonia Sr. High	388	31%	17%
Canby	Canby Sec.	272	54%	22%
Chokio-Alberta	Chokio-Alberta Sec.	105	62%	15%
Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley	Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley Sec.	174	56%	13%
Evansville	Evansville Sec.	112	58%	22%
Fillmore	Fillmore Central Sr.	290	48%	24%
Foley	Foley Sr.	546	49%	16%
Glenville-Emmons	Glenville-Emmons Sec.	185	57%	20%
Goodhue	Goodhue Sec.	201	56%	16%
Granada Huntley-East Chain	Granada Huntley Sec	106	38%	20%
Hancock	Hancock Sec.	81	62%	16%
International Falls	Falls Sec.	473	57%	23%

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Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton	Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton Sec.	242	60%	16%
Kimball	Kimball Sec.	288	58%	23%
LaCrescent-Hokah	LaCrescent Sec.	524	30%	23%
Lake of the Woods	Lake of the Woods Sec.	215	52%	21%
Lewiston-Altura	Lewiston-Altura Sec.	299	52%	20%
Little Falls	Little Falls Sr.	1,070	56%	24%
Littlefork-Big Falls	Littlefork-Big Falls Sec.	106	53%	20%
Luverne	Luverne Sr.	403	46%	24%
Lyle	Lyle Sec.	79	61%	21%
Mankato	Mankato East Sr.	863	59%	18%
Martin County West	Martin County West Sr.	275	52%	22%
Melrose	Melrose Sec.	589	64%	19%
Minnewaska	Minnewaska Sec.	546	60%	24%
New Ulm	New Ulm Sr.	837	53%	24%
Norman County West	Norman County West Sec.	137	33%	20%
Parkers Prairie	Parkers Prairie Sec.	181	62%	24%
Pierz	Healy Sec.	328	61%	16%
Pipestone Area Schools	Pipestone Sr.	407	44%	15%
Plainview	Plainview Sec.	358	46%	24%
Red Rock Central	Red Rock Central Sec.	219	61%	23%
Renville County West	Renville County West Sr.	398	49%	23%
Sartell	Sartell Sr.	755	56%	20%
Sauk Centre	Sauk Centre Sec.	493	57%	22%
Sauk Rapids	Sauk Rapids	926	64%	24%
Sibley East	Sibley East-Arlington Sr.	379	55%	24%



Southland	Southland Sr.	242	60%	22%
St. Clair	St. Clair Sec.	180	61%	13%
St. Cloud	Technical Sr .	1,508	63%	20%
Swanville	Swanville Sec.	112	62%	23%
Upsala	Upsala Sec.	130	43%	18%
Walker-Hac kensack-Akeley	Walker-Hac kensack-Akeley Sec.	239	47%	23%
Winona Area Public Sc hools	Winona Sr.	1,233	49%	19%
	Minnesota New Country Sc hool			10% *

\* Minnesota New Country in Henderson had 22 graduates in the 2000-2003 school years who entered Minnesota Public Colleges or Universities. Only two of those students took remedial courses. Due to the very low number of students, the report did not list MNCS individually in its chart.

**Table 2: Sample Urban and Suburban Schools, class of 2000-2003**

School district	High sc hool	Total number of graduates	Percent of graduates enrolled at Minnesota public higher education	Percentage of HS grads enrolled at Minn. public higher education institutions who took developmental courses
Anoka-Hennepin	Anoka Sr.	2,418	58%	40%
Anoka-Hennepin	Blaine Sr .	2,222	55%	41%
Anoka-Hennepin	Coon Rapids Sr.	2,025	56%	45%
Bloomington	Kennedy Sr.	1,222	57%	44%
Burnsville	Burnsville Sr .	2,473	55%	38%
Edina	Edina Sr.	1,870	30%	29%
Inver Gro ve Heights Sc hools	Simley Sr .	972	60%	41%
Minneapolis	Abraham Lincoln High School	122	34%	86%
Minneapolis	Broadway Education Place	92	23%	57%
Minneapolis	Edison Sr.	840	47%	57%

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Minneapolis	Henry Sr.	601	46%	48%
Minneapolis	Loring-Nicollet	55	42%	43%
Minneapolis	North Sr.	660	39%	59%
Minneapolis	P.M. High School	138	16%	55%
Minneapolis	Roosevelt Sr.	656	55%	70%
Minneapolis	South Sr.	1,326	43%	37%
Minneapolis	Southwest Sr.	1,063	40%	41%
Minneapolis	Washburn	818	53%	53%
Minnetonka	Minnetonka Sr.	1,823	44%	32%
Mounds View	Irondale Sr.	1,425	48%	39%
Mounds View	Mounds View ALC	309	14%	72%
Mounds View	Mounds View Sr.	1,796	43%	33%
North St. Paul-Maplewood	North Sr.	1,523	52%	48%
North St. Paul-Maplewood	Tartan Sr.	1,293	56%	41%
Richfield	Richfield Sr.	940	58%	41%
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan	Eagan Sr.	1,630	47%	40%
Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan	Rosemount Sr.	1,227	51%	43%
Roseville	Roseville Area Sr.	1,865	47%	37%
St. Paul	ALC Unidale	336	12%	54%
St. Paul	Arlington Sr.	919	46%	60%
St. Paul	Central Sr.	1,638	39%	42%
St. Paul	Como Park Sr.	1,019	51%	47%
St. Paul	Harding Sr.	1,367	47%	48%
St. Paul	Highland Park Sr.	918	43%	47%
St. Paul	Humboldt Sr.	456	36%	45%
St. Paul	Johnson Sr.	937	55%	48%

St. Paul	St. Paul Open School	95	38%	44%
Wayzata	Wayzata High	2,546	41%	31%
White Bear Lake	White Bear Lake South Sr.	2,593	55%	49%

What are some of these small rural high schools doing?

Sixteen percent of Blooming Prairie’s 2000-2003 graduates who entered Minnesota public colleges or universities took a “developmental” or “remedial” course. That’s less than *half* of the statewide average of 36 percent. And 63 percent of 2000-2003 Blooming Prairie graduates entered a Minnesota public college or university shortly after graduating, well over the statewide average of 49 percent.

Blooming Prairie superintendent Barry Olson offered several reasons. First, “being small allows us to know students well, and see who needs help.” Next, Blooming Prairie requires four years of math and has a strong math department. Finally, their required senior English class spends a semester on composition and research and a semester on literature (Olson).

Only 15 percent of Pipestone’s graduates who entered Minnesota public colleges and universities took a remedial course, while 44 percent overall entered Minnesota state public colleges and universities. Pipestone High School principal Joan Ratzloff offers several reasons for the school’s success: “First, no-nonsense but very caring teachers. They put rigor in the work. They have convinced many students taking challenging classes has a big payoff.” Ratzloff agreed with Olson that the relatively small size of the high school allows faculty to know students well. She also praised many parents for recognizing the value of advanced courses, and encouraging students to take languages, which helps strengthen many skills (Ratzloff).

Minnesota New Country School, a charter public school in Henderson, has one of the five best records in the state. This school enrolls about 125 students, grades 7-12. Each student has an advisor. The student, advisor and family develop an individual plan for each student. Much of the program at MNCS is “project based,” with students carrying out various interdisciplinary projects, individually or in small groups. Moreover, students are strongly encouraged to take at least one Post-Secondary Option course prior to graduation, and the vast majority do. Doug Thomas, who helped found MNCS, sees the combination of small size, individual attention, project approach, high expectations, multiple forms of measurement —

including periodic public presentations, and strong encouragement to participate in PSEO — as coming together to produce the very strong outcomes (Thomas).

### **Fewer traditional districts and more options**

During the 1990s, Minnesota's legislature adopted two initiatives that resulted in somewhat contradictory results. First, the legislature provided financial incentives to encourage consolidation of districts. Secondly, it adopted the nation's first charter public school legislation, allowing educators and families to create new, potentially more innovative and effective public schools. People in Greater Minnesota have used *both* pieces of legislation.

The number of Greater Minnesota, traditional school districts dropped dramatically. Over the period 1990-2001, 164 rural districts consolidated into 75 districts. In several cases, school districts dissolved, with students attending nearby districts (Bolger).

At the same time, there was a dramatic increase of charter public schools throughout the state, including parts of Greater Minnesota. Thirty-six rural Minnesota communities now have charter public schools, enrolling thousands of students. (See )

These include many innovative approaches not otherwise available in the area. For example:

- Bluffview Montessori, in Winona, is one of the nation's first two charter public schools. The school draws students from a number of districts because of its Montessori program.
- Lakes International Academy in Forest Lake offers a Spanish-language immersion program for elementary students.
- Minnesota New Country in Henderson represents the nation's first use of the cooperative model to operate a public school. Teachers have formed EdVisions Cooperative to help them manage and operate their schools ([www.edvisions.coop](http://www.edvisions.coop)). With assistance from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, MNCS is helping create such schools in other parts of the country. (For much more information see, Thomas, Enloe and Newell.)
- Rochester Off-Campus, which offers a strong small high school option for area students with whom large comprehensive high schools have not succeeded.
- Schoolcraft Learning Community for K-8 grade students near Bemidji, which offers French language for all students, plus a nationally validated curriculum based in part on the

Outward Bound Model.

- Harbor City in Duluth, housed on the third and fourth floors of a downtown warehouse. The school's location makes it far easier for its high school students to participate in internships and service projects in cooperation with local businesses and cultural groups.

Minnesota's Department of Administration noted that school districts are responding in a variety of ways to new choices that families have been given. Post Secondary Enrollment Options, which was adopted in 1985, has encouraged many school districts to create new courses, or develop new partnerships for more challenging education.

As an alternative to the post-secondary option, many public school districts are offering the College in the Schools program, which allows students to take college-level classes in their own schools. The number of students participating in these courses rose from an estimated 9,500 in 2000-2001 to an estimated 14,000 in 2003-2004 (Minnesota Department of Administration, p. 6).

Jerry Ness, Superintendent of the West Central Public Schools, near Fergus Falls and president of the Minnesota Rural Education Association, is a good example of both trends described above. West Central Public Schools represents a 1995 consolidation of four smaller districts: Kensington, Barrett, Elbow Lake and Hoffman (Bolger).

Ness recently described the impact of providing more options, such as Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, open enrollment and charter public schools, "You have to be innovative to survive. Giving students more choices among schools has made us much better."

Ness explained how his district has responded to PSEO: "To combat post-secondary options, we've made partners out of them, rather than enemies" (Ness). He listed several agreements with post-secondary institutions that his district has negotiated:

- Courses available at Alexandria Technical College.
- Colleges in the Schools with Fergus Falls Community College.
- Using the same software in certain courses as is used in post-secondary institutions, so that students are more familiar with what they will encounter later in their educational career.

Ness reports that the same kind of response is happening in many rural districts (Ness).

Gregg Allen, former principal and superintendent in the southern Minnesota Nicollet district, described how his district responded to Post-Secondary Options. With two post-secondary institutions less than 15 miles away, "We had to do something" (Allen).

Nicollet cooperated with Fond du Lac Community College to offer 16 credits a semester in courses that earned both high school and college credit. Before beginning the program, Allen interviewed students to see what they were seeking. "It wasn't just more challenging courses. They wanted to be treated more like adults. So we changed the schedule for them, set up a separate lounge, and began offering the courses between 10 and 2 p.m."

Response was very positive, both from the students and their parents. Every Nicollet junior and senior took at least one of these courses, and a number of juniors and seniors spent most of their time in concurrent courses. Allen notes, "Parents and students really rose to the occasion. The students asked to be treated more like adults — and when we did it, they showed us that they were ready." Allen hopes to create a similar program in Osakis, where he was recently hired to be superintendent (Allen).

Benefits from competition can run several ways, promoting new partnerships in ways not previously expected. "There's something important that you're missing. There's another benefit from the Post-Secondary Option program that you have not described. The benefits of competition can go two ways." That's what a western Minnesota school administrator explained, as we discussed Minnesota's Post-Secondary Options law.

The administrator agreed that Post-Secondary Options, now 20 years old, has encouraged many high schools to increase the number of advanced, challenging classes. As he put it, "That's true. Schools do this in order to retain students, who might otherwise attend a nearby or local college."

He continued, "But the program also has encouraged some colleges to become more responsive and cooperative with high schools." This was something I had not heard before.

Apparently, as the high school in his district began losing students to nearby colleges, the district administration asked if these post-secondary institutions would be willing to work with them to create what are often called "College in the Schools" courses. These courses, taught in the high school, offer both high school and college credit. The number of these courses has increased around the state

since PSEO, along with Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses.

Initially, this administrator reported, neither nearby local higher education institution was interested in cooperating. So the district contacted another Minnesota state university that he had heard was open to this idea.

They were. Together the university and school district planned and began offering new College in the Schools courses, right in the high school. They were quite popular.

Hearing about this, a nearby community college changed its mind. Now its administrators were willing to help the high school offer more challenging, college-level courses in the high school.

These new courses are valuable new options for students. And the collaboration has helped high school teachers, who are working with college faculty to offer the courses.

Sometimes competition creates winners and losers — as in a basketball or football game. But in this case, it seems everyone has won.

## **Declining Enrollment, Greater Racial Diversity**

Families are moving to the Twin Cities metropolitan area and to regional centers such as Duluth, Rochester, St. Cloud and Alexandria. Between the 1984-85 and 1998-99 school years, school enrollment dropped in 30 counties, primarily southern, western and northern areas of Minnesota. During this same time period, school enrollment rose overall 22 percent (Minnesota Planning).

Five years later, the picture is somewhat different. As a report from the Minnesota Department of Administration noted in its title, “Enrollment Declines are Widespread Since 2000.” This report noted that the pattern reported in 2000 of overall growth in school districts enrollments had ended.

In fact, statewide, public school enrollment declined between the 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 school years. While the number of limited English speaking and minority student enrollments increased, they did not grow enough to offset the decline in white enrollment. Public school enrollment fell from 845,040 in fall 2000 to 827,331 in fall 2004 (Minnesota Department of Administration, p. 1).

At the same time, the report noted, “immigration has greatly increased the proportion of limited English proficiency students in many small southern Minnesota districts such as Madelia, St. James, Tracy and Sleepy Eye. This transformed the percentage of limited English speaking students in Sleepy Eye, for example, from 13 percent in 2000 to 27 percent in 2004” (MN Department of

Administration, p. 8). Depending on how schools and communities react to new immigrants, immigration may increase, helping strengthen many rural communities.

The same report noted that while overall K-12 district public school enrollment has declined by about 2 percent from 2000-2004, "charter school enrollments surge[d]." Over the same period of enrollment decline in district public schools, charter enrollment gained 87 percent, from 9,384 in 2000 to 17,544 in 2004 (Minn. Department of Administration, p. 5). A record 23 new charters opened in fall 2005, and charter enrollment has grown to around 20,000 students. In fall 2005, new charter public schools opened in or near rural communities such as Grand Rapids, Green Isle, Naytawash, Rochester, Tofte and Worthington (Center for School Change Profiles of Minnesota Charter Public Schools).

## **Rethinking School Facilities to Improve Services**

Some of the state's most intriguing interagency collaborations are being developed in Greater Minnesota. Here are a few examples:

### ***Perham***

The Perham Area Community Center (PACC) was, in part, a result of a failed referendum for new school district buildings in the late 1980s. Physical fitness facilities in the town's secondary school were more than 45 years old and almost certainly not worth the expense of expanding and improving. Several community leaders analyzed the vote and concluded that the public did not want to pay for a new gym and swimming pool. At the same time, several local businesses felt that the town, and their businesses, would be more attractive if there were an up-to-date exercise and physical fitness center (Anderson, Nathan).

The city, local businesses and the school district joined to create PACC. The building is located immediately next to the town's secondary school. PACC is a 66,000-square-foot building with several multi-purpose spaces. These include:

- Two racquet ball/walley-ball courts (similar, but not identical to volleyball)
- A roller-skating rink
- A swimming pool used by families, students and the broader community
- State-of-the-art physical fitness facility with a variety of weights and aerobic exercise equipment
- Whirl pool, kids' pool, wading pool, large swimming pool



- and sauna
- Dance studio
- Walking / running track
- Several large gyms

Perham High School’s Physical Education classes use the facility, which can simultaneously meet the school’s needs and provide an opportunity for community members to come in, for example, over a lunch hour to play basketball, volleyball or some other sport.

The building is open from early in the morning until late at night — on weekdays, for example, from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., and many hours on Saturday and Sunday. Many community members use the facility along with the students. (See [www.perham.com/pacc](http://www.perham.com/pacc).)

***Birch Grove***

Birch Grove Elementary is located in Tofte, along Highway 61 north of Duluth. As veteran Minnesota educator Vicki Nelson wrote, “Birch Grove is a small school that has benefited from the resourceful, caring spirit of citizens in the North Shore communities of Lutsen, Schroeder and Tofte” (Nelson).

The Cook County District closed Birch Grove as an elementary school in 1984. As a result, local elementary students were forced to take long bus rides of 25 to 30 miles to attend an elementary school in Grand Marais. Many parents and community members disliked this idea — they wanted a nearby elementary school, and they did *not* want to have their children taking long bus rides each day.

After reviewing various options, people in the Birch Grove attendance area created Birch Grove Foundation, a private non-profit organization that worked with area townships, businesses and other groups to keep the school open. The Foundation leased the building from the school district. It rents space not used by students to other users, such as a medical clinic, commercial food preparation business, financial services office and youth hostel. On a recent morning, the directory inside Birch Grove Center read as follows:

*Birch Grove Center*

	Suite
Center Office	2
Gitchi Gam Hostel	4A
Computer Lab	1
Superior Financial	2
Classroom Grades 3,4 & 5	3
Library	4

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Classroom Aides	5
Multi Use & Pre School	6
Community Room	7
Kitchen	8
Classroom K, 1 & 2	9
Clinic	Foyer
Banquet Space & Equipment	
Call 663-7977	

Birch Grove has been cited in a recent national publication about creative uses of rural school facilities (Lawrence).

### ***Schoolcraft Learning Center***

Greater Minnesota houses a number of camps that are busy and active in the summer. In many cases, these camps are not used during the fall, winter and spring. Not so for Concordia College's beautiful Lac Du Bois French Language Village, near Bemidji. This site doubles as a language camp in the summer and a K-8 charter public school in fall, winter and spring.

Schoolcraft opened in September 2000 after a group of parents and Bemidji State professors developed a proposal and convinced the Minnesota Dept of Education to sponsor the school. It uses the nationally validated Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound model as the schools' core curriculum. Student learning revolves around thematic instruction units lasting three to four months called expeditions. These are designed to help students build strong academic skills, challenge them to expand what they think they can do, and promote teamwork among students of various ages. Each student learns French, and the language is used in many classrooms (Anderson, see [www.schoolcraft.org](http://www.schoolcraft.org)).

Ten of the language camp buildings are used for student classrooms and project areas. The main building is used as a lunchroom, with French food featured.

At the end of the school year, staff members pack up their materials and equipment and store everything until the school reopens in the fall.

### ***Harbor City International School***

Schools usually are not found on the third and fourth floors of a former warehouse. But that's where Duluth's Harbor City International School is housed. The school provides an option for about 200 high school students from Duluth and surrounding communities.

The school's founders deliberately selected a site in the downtown area, within walking distance of an art museum, the YMCA, a large public library and many other business and cultural resources. Student internship and service projects are made much easier because of the school's location.

The school fills a previously vacant warehouse space, which has been transformed into a colorful and inviting location. Meals are purchased at a nearby restaurant and served daily in the school's kitchen and dining area. A separate student-run school store offers snacks and other items. Harbor City has been honored by DesignShare, an International Architectural Forum of Innovative Schools (see [www.designshare.com/Awards](http://www.designshare.com/Awards)) (adapted from Nelson, 2004).

***Northfield Community Resource Center (adapted from Nathan, 2000)***

"It's a dream come true." That's how Alene Fink, Northfield Senior Citizens Center director, described the magnificent new Northfield Community Resource Center when it opened in fall 2000 (Fink). Five major groups cooperated to create a \$5.5 million building that provides services and opportunities for everyone from infants to senior citizens. By working together, the groups created far more than any of them could have done by themselves.

The building has four wings and covers more than 58,000 square feet. It has 84 rooms, including a swimming pool, exercise room, cafeteria and eight conference/meeting rooms.

Discussions about a new home for Northfield Senior Citizens started about 1986. Over the last several years, a variety of groups joined the seniors to plan the center. Several years ago, 82 percent of Northfield voters approved a bond issue that helped make the dream real.

David Towle, 16, calls the building "awesome." Towle is a student at the Area Learning Center, a Northfield School that originally was one of the building's major tenants. ALC students have been able to interview senior citizens who come into the building as part of a local history project. Some students also assist in the Head Start program, another building tenant.

Mike Thorsteinson, Executive Director of Three Rivers Community Action, says, "Of all the public-private partnerships I've been involved in, this has been the most fun." He pointed out that the planning group overcame many obstacles, including some residents who wondered if folks of different ages could get along in the same building. Now that the building is open, the answer appears to be clearly, "Yes!"

His agency helped pay for part of the building. He believes that although the partners will vary, every community ought to consider how services can be improved when agencies work together to create something like this.

Scott Neal, City Administrator, believes the building shows it's possible to "bring together people with their own separate visions. Many times we could have tripped up, but we didn't lose sight of the end goal: helping people." Originally the city owned and managed the building on behalf of the partners.

Charlie Kyte, former Northfield Superintendent who is now Executive Director of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators, beamed as he walked through the building. "This process of working together, deciding our organizations could help each other, is almost as important as the final product. Everyone gains when people work together like this."

Carla Johnson, who later moved to Rochester, helped pull together representatives of various Northfield groups to plan the building. She told me, "I am moved to tears to see this actually happen."

For a free descriptive brochure, write to Northfield Community Resource Center, 1651 Jefferson Parkway, Northfield, Minnesota 55057. The five founding partners were: City of Northfield; Northfield Public Schools; Northfield Senior Citizens, Inc.; Northfield Community Action Center; Three Rivers Community Action Center.

Since opening in 2000, most of the original founding leaders have moved to other jobs. That, combined with economic downturn, has made operating the community center more of a challenge than originally envisioned. The district moved all its early childhood programs into the Center and moved the ALC to another location. However, all the original collaborating organizations remain involved. The Center continues to provide programs and services to its intergenerational clientele (Kyte).

A famous sign just outside of town reads "Welcome to Northfield: Home of Cows, Colleges and Contentment." It's time to add another "c" to that sign: cooperation. Northfield shows how it can be done (Nathan, 2000).

### ***Rothsay Hardware Store***

Since 1988, the Rothsay, Minnesota, hardware store has been owned by the school district. Just before being purchased, it was going to close. The owners wanted to sell it, but could not find anyone to buy it. That's when Tom Fosse, a local school board

member and visionary stepped forward.

Fosse convinced the school board and the broader community that running the hardware store would be a great work experience for local secondary students. It also would retain a business, and the funds it generated, in the community.

The program has evolved over the last several years. The hardware store now includes a lumberyard. In recent years, students have built and sold houses. Students also take on small construction projects. One example was lining and insulating a shed.

A few years ago, the district decided to add several grocery items such as eggs, milk and cheese to the items that are sold at the storefront, since the town no longer has a grocery store. Total revenue is about \$100,000 (Balken).

The Rothsay Hardware store has helped inspire many things. It's been written up in *the Wall Street Journal*. It's been described in a variety of national publications and helped inspire Minnesota State legislators to provide hundreds of thousands of dollars to help start school-based enterprises throughout Greater Minnesota.

### **Expanded use of emerging technology**

Distance learning can be another form of collaboration. The Minnesota Planning Agency calls this "a strategy with great potential" (Minnesota Planning, p. 6). The report points out that this can involve videoconferences or the Internet, "so students and teachers do not have to be in the same classroom." Jerry Ness, president of the MREA and superintendent of Minnesota's West Central School District, calls this "another big wave," especially as "more and more of the online courses become interactive." His experience is that the most frequent use of distance learning via technology is for language instruction, i.e., Spanish, French, German, etc. A national study of distance learning found that the proportion of foreign language students enrolled in distance learning courses was considerably higher in rural areas (22%) than for suburban (10%) or urban students (5%) (Setzer and Lewis).

As Ness points out, "Many small districts find it difficult to afford, much less attract, a strong foreign language teacher, who may well just be needed for a couple hours a day. Distance learning allows rural schools to use expertise from another district or from a college or university. North Dakota State University has moved a number of correspondence courses on line. We're seeing more and more of this" (Ness).

Interviewed in spring 2005, several Greater Minnesota superintendents confirmed and expanded what Ness reports.

Superintendents in communities like Hibbing, Forest Lake and Rushford-Peterson reported their districts do not currently offer online courses, but as Hibbing Superintendent Bob Belluzzo explained, “we’re definitely thinking about it” (Belluzzo, Miller, Steenblock).

Other rural districts have moved ahead. For example:

- Milaca Superintendent Barbra Zakrajsek says her district offers two high school courses via television: Medical Technology and American Sign Language. She believes the courses have been received “very well” and that their district is considering doing more of this. She also reported that she and other district educators have participated in meetings via educational television and found them “a very good use of time” (Zakrajsek).
- Princeton interim superintendent Mark Sleeper says the district’s high school began offering half a dozen “online” courses during the 2004-2005 school year for high school students. Courses covered subjects like English, Social Studies and Family Living. Teachers were trained before offering the courses, which have been very popular (Sleeper).
- Mike Moriarty, Caledonia superintendent, reported that high school students in his district are taking a number of honors courses on line offered by Southeast Technical College in Winona. Moriarty praised the courses as “very challenging ... and a good deal for students.” Moriarty is very conscious, as are many superintendents, of the two online learning programs offered by one of his neighbors — the Houston, Minnesota, public schools.

Houston, Minnesota, school district offers the Minnesota Virtual Academy for K-8 students and the Minnesota Center of On-Line Learning for students in grades 9-12 throughout the state. Houston Superintendent Kim Ross explained that the district decided to offer this option because:

... One model cannot work for every student. We’ve created a wider variety of options for students. Every student is a unique learner. Using a wider range of services better equips us to serve students. Increased options have proven to attract students to public education. Online programs are consistent with our mission to maximize student achievement (Ross).

Steve Kerska, who has been in education for 29 years, directs Houston's Minnesota Center of On-line Learning. He sees online learning as a strong option for some students. He's found that the most successful students in their program are self-motivated and self-disciplined. Online learning seems to work well for some students with special needs who reported that they did not feel comfortable asking questions in class. Another group attracted to online learning is gifted and talented young people, who want to move more quickly than some classes allow. Kerska reports that both the K-8 and 9-12 online programs doubled in size over the last two years. He expects another doubling with the next year or so. "If we do it right, this is here to stay" (Kerska).

A major national study of distance learning conducted by the U.S. Department of Education found that in 2002-2003:

- Nationally, 36 percent of public school districts reported having some students enrolled in distance learning courses. About 8,200 public schools, approximately 9 percent of all public schools nation wide, were participating.
- A higher percentage of rural districts (46%), compared to suburban (28%) and urban districts (23%) were using distance learning.
- Reasons cited as "very important" were "having courses not available at the school (cited by 80% of participating schools), meeting needs of specific students (59%) and offering Advanced Placement courses (50%)."
- 55 percent of districts offering distance learning reported using two-way interactive video; 47 percent used Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction; 21 percent reported using Internet courses using synchronous computer-based instruction; and 16 percent reported using one-way prerecorded video.
- 72 percent of districts with students enrolled in distance education courses planned to expand their distance education courses in the future.
- Nationally, the most frequent distance education courses were social studies/ social sciences (23%), English (19%), mathematics (15%), natural/physical sciences, (12%) and foreign language courses (12%).
- The vast majority of participating students, nationally, are in high schools: 76 percent in high schools, 15 percent in combined or ungraded schools, 7 percent in middle or junior high schools and 2 percent in elementary schools (Setzer and Lewis).

Interviews with eight random rural Minnesota superintendents, cited above, do not represent a scientific sample. But their experiences are remarkably similar to findings of the federal study. About half of their districts are using some form of distance learning; world language is the most frequent distance learning course offered, most of the students participating are of high school age, and many of the districts are planning to expand their distance learning efforts.

## **Conclusion**

This article has summarized five trends in rural Minnesota public education:

- The fifty public high schools that lead the state in preparing the vast majority of students for post-secondary education are in rural Minnesota
- Fewer traditional school districts, accompanied by many more choices in public education.
- Declining enrollment, along with increasing racial diversity.
- Rethinking school facilities to improve services.
- Expanded use of emerging technology to help students learn.

The picture that emerges as this author talks with, and visits, various rural Minnesota communities is two-fold. First, there is a recognition that the world and rural communities are changing rapidly, in ways documented elsewhere in this journal. Second, we are finding very creative responses to a changing world. The author hopes that by noting a few of these changes, others are encouraged to focus not on what has been lost, but what can — and is being done. As one poem affirms:

“Here’s to the crazy ones  
The misfits  
The rebels  
The troublemakers.

The Round pegs in the square holes  
The ones who see things differently.  
They’re not fond of rules.  
And they have no respect for the status quo...

They invent. They imagine. They heal.  
They explore. They create. They inspire



They push the human race forward.  
Maybe they have to be crazy....

While some see them as the crazy ones,  
We see genius.

Because the people who are crazy enough to think  
They can change the world, are the ones who do."  
(Apple Computer)

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