Minnesota's K-12 Schools: How Chartered and Other New Ideas are Opening Up the Public School System

Doug Thomas

"The definition of power is changing, too. Real power is the ability to change."

— Adam Urbanski
American Federation of Teachers

James is a pretty typical kid. He does better than average in school, is active in several extra-curriculars (he's a very good baseball player), hunts with his buddies on Saturdays, and spends his free time socializing like most rural kids, both in small groups and sometimes online. His medium-sized high school looks like most, offering a wide range of classes, both for the college-bound and those expecting to head for technical schools, the military or work. He starts his day at school at 8:20 in the morning and ends it at 3:15. He likes some of his classes and dislikes others. It often depends on the teacher, the expectations and the importance of the grades. He detests classes and assignments that require memorization over activity, which shows in his not-so-successful test taking. Although he will attend a two- or four-year college, he doesn't know what his true career interests are yet. He hasn't talked much with his folks about his plans. A few of his teachers have suggested what they think he might want to pursue.

Andrea starts her day with a reading report to her dad at breakfast. She does so out of her intense interest in reading and her enjoyment in spending "intellectual" time with her dad. She's been taught at home (mostly by her mom) her entire life, except for the fourth-grade week she spent at the local school (that didn't go so well). She's now 13 and her daily lessons from Mom are much the same as they were five years ago. After Dad heads for work, she spends the morning working on a self-paced curriculum designed for home-schooled students. She's two years ahead of her curriculum guide. Her mother has a real estate job but spends most of her morning working with Andrea and her sister, who is two years younger. They are active in 4-H and church activities and often combine those efforts with school work. She's also planning to play volleyball next year at the local district school,

which may be difficult given that her dad doesn't get home until 5:30 and her mom is often at appointments in the afternoon and early evening. They're still working that out. Up to this point, her afternoons have usually been spent doing extra work on things of interest, reading, using her computer for research, or outdoors with her sister, exploring their farmstead and woods and completing assignments. Next month, she will start an online Algebra II class. If that goes well, she will complete most of her high school work online.

Evan is a 15-year-old student at an innovative chartered school. He's been attending since seventh grade. His parents liked the idea of a smaller, more personalized school. It was started by some of the teachers from the local high school and some parents with whom Evan's family was familiar. He works very independently at this school. Part of his day is entirely project-based, so he can follow his interests and prepare for the post-secondary options program, which he intends to use next year. His goal (part of his personal learning plan) is to graduate with thirty college credits before leaving high school. He is very interested in the sciences (as in fiction), not sure what career that will lead to, but wants to explore some science courses, as well as complete a few of his general education credits. He also likes his school because the students have a lot of input into some of the standard policies of how the school is run, how students are expected to behave and what interesting choices of activities the students have. He has a small group of close friends at the school but considers himself to be somewhat non-social. His true hobby is the online world of games, chatting and research. He knows he needs to be out of doors more often, but his dad travels a lot and his mom likes him to be home rather than out with friends. His advisor at school is sort of a "tech-head," and they get along quite well, which motivates Evan to do well in school.

Lisa can't seem to be able to decide which world she wants to live in: the world of the rambunctious, short-sighted rebel, or that of the steady, long-range goals of school and work. Impatience is her most obvious characteristic. Her school is the local district Alternative Learning Center. She likes the school and is less distracted there. Some of her friends, some who she isn't so proud to know, also attend the school. Lisa is very bright, but was inattentive at the regular high school. At 16, she is ready for the real world in many ways. She wants to continue her education after high school, but her teacher/counselor says she needs to learn to focus first. Her way to solve that dilemma is by threatening to get her GED rather than her diploma. She is far too social, has an obsession with hair color and loves her siblings, a younger brother and sister (even though she doesn't want to stay home with them when necessary to help out her single mom). Her special interests are music (she used to play three instruments) and math, which she is particularly adept at. Her reading skills are her biggest deficit. She is

quite close to her paternal grandparents but seldom sees her dad, who lives nearly a hundred miles away.

In rural Minnesota in 2006, which of these scenarios constitutes K-12 schooling? For Lisa, Evan, Andrea and James, school isn't what it was for their moms and dads, or their grandparents. In some cases, the setting is quite different and in others, the learning program is far from anything traditional. The common theme is learning, choices and technology. In the U.S., and particularly states like Minnesota, we are growing more choices and high-tech environments. Different schools for different students seems to be the trend. With greater technology, attention to learning styles, parent preferences, district competition and rural economic realities, schools in the 21st century will continue to look substantially different. The four scenarios above are but a few of the more consistent options available to parents and young people today. On the horizon is a staggering number of new learning opportunities: online, experiential, apprenticeships, internships, project learning, etc. But first, a look back.

There was a time here in the rural heartland when virtually every high school looked the same and offered essentially the same learning program. As Ted Sizer pointed out in his 1984 groundbreaking book, *Horace's Compromise,* "You could visit high schools from Maine to California and Florida to Oregon, and see the same thing happening from classroom to classroom" (Sizer). Students were using textbook curriculums and being assessed in similar fashion. It was comfortable and successful for a great number of students and adults. Success meant getting a job. In Minnesota specifically, the rural schools have been an engine of productivity and brain power, feeding the metropolitan Twin Cities area economy with talent and work ethic. The out-migration of skill and leadership has been both a curse and a blessing for our rural communities. We take pride in our educational accomplishments and more particularly our own family members and friends, but as the late Paul Gruchow pointed out, it has given us a "left-behind" mentality that "if you are any good, you go elsewhere." For at least the last fifty years our schools (both colleges and K-12) have been driving the train to "elsewhere" (Gruchow, 1996).

By design and purpose, our rural schools have been filling a strategic need for business, the professions, agriculture and labor. The typical selecting and sorting of our young people is both fruitful and limiting. We have always needed a certain number of people to sustain our agrarian livelihood and small-town lifestyles, but the reality is that those numbers aren't as seemingly necessary any

more. To quote Gruchow again, "people and towns are obsolete … all we need is bigger tractors and more petroleum." So more and more of our talent is being prepared for different careers in more complex urban areas. And as the economy becomes more diverse and complex, the demands on our schools have begun to change. All this is pressuring schools to re-consider their purpose and design. Add technology to the mix, and we are beginning to see that the industrial model may have outlived its purpose.

We've seen the slow, steady pressure for change. Federal special education requirements changed some of the look of schools. Other pressures have centered on solving some of our social ills, most often created by economic disparity. Most recently, we have been challenged by issues of diversity (language and cultural barriers), a new push for more engineers and scientists, and the ever-present No Child Left Behind Act, the strongest federal standards and subsequent state testing movement in history. For our schools, NCLB is the "stick without the carrot." It is a terrific attempt to raise the expectations and results of schools nationwide at a time when the complexity of the world is de-constructing standardization and curriculum. As good as our rural schools are and want to be, the task of being everything for everyone may be overwhelming. The prospects for meeting all the demands and getting more kids through college will require substantial sacrifices for our state.

We have already begun to react to these pressures in Minnesota. Part of our strategy has been to begin to "open" up the system: get more learning out of the system without spending substantially more money or dismantling our current schools. During the past 20 years we have implemented a number of interesting and challenging policies to both spur competition and to create opportunities. For urban and rural communities, school choice in the form of open enrollment, post secondary options, chartered schools, alternative schools, online schools, second-chance programs and increasingly popular home schools have become legitimate options for students and families (Minnesota Department of Education). Minnesota is leading the nation in K-12 options supported publicly. We now have more than 100,000 students in alternative, charter and home schools (MDE). We are arguably the state that most believes that we cannot only raise standards as a way of meeting new educational demands, but we can also exercise the strategy of creating new schools and programs. Many states have not embraced the latter.

This idea of improving learning by creating schools anew rather than dramatically reshaping or converting traditional schools has been dubbed the "open sector" by "Education Evolving," an

initiative created by the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University in St. Paul (Education Evolving). Working from the notion that we need more high quality options, Education Evolving is supporting the policy environment that would give us a new combination of chartered schools, online learning environments, contract arrangements with districts, and schools authorized by organizations other than school districts. Essentially, this would open the system to teachers, parents and other public institutions that can create the space to allow for a new kind of public to emerge. This idea rests heavily on the belief that districts are by nature too slow to respond to changing demands, do not have the capacity to always see the need, and are set in a bureaucracy that is rule-bound and fiscally constrained. The greater the supply of open sector options, the more robust the public sector, both within and without the district system.

Like many states, Minnesota allows for its school boards to contract for services beyond its typical unionized master agreements. Many districts have already done so, especially in the at-risk student area, often through the Area Learning Centers or contract for-profit providers. They also have several contracts for low-incidence needs with entities like service cooperatives, special education cooperatives and education districts, created by the state legislature for collaborative efficiency and service delivery. These are often used by rural districts to fill real needs and offer new programs. We also saw several technical cooperatives over the years, but some of these have faded due to budget cuts and priority changes. Contracting and collaborating is just one way rural districts have attempted to answer the call for more and better programs delivered efficiently. For the most part, they have been successful.

The new "Open Sector" is asking for more, in part, because the current system can not re-create itself. Clayton Christenson of the Harvard School of Business and others have written much about innovation and how old institutions, like old businesses, cannot innovate. Their structures and culture prohibit their ability to adapt (2000). They must create a sector designed for innovation, just like Dayton's did with Target and 3M had in creating its "Skunkworks." For this reason, the "disruptive innovators" will continue to gain a foothold in the public market, whether rural or urban. For their foresight in opening up the system, Minnesota legislators of the past three decades should be applauded. No other state has come this far and continued to achieve this much in meeting the needs of so many students.

The sector that has attracted the most attention for a variety of reasons has been the chartering sector. My own experiences with

school reform are tightly tied to chartering, as a former district board member and a member of a chartered school planning committee, and now as a developer of new schools nationwide. The charter law came about in Minnesota in 1991 as a result of passionate discourse and practical realities. It was a novel idea with straightforward and attractive policy implications: allow groups of parents and teachers to start new schools, following public admission requirements, and trade flexibility for accountability. Over 20,000 students now attend chartered schools in our state (MDE). With a few Minnesota nuances, like teachers being a majority of the boards, and with a few tweaks over the years, the law still stands as one of the strongest in the country. It offers a solid combination of district options, true independence, optional sponsors (colleges, non-profits, etc.) and enough accountability support to be effective. In some cases, the law has resulted in the kind of showcase schools it was meant to create.

From the beginning I saw the chartering law as a means to rural re-independence. Just as many of our ancestors did when they came to this part of the world over 100 years ago, if you could gather enough families together and had a dream for a school, you could petition the state government to "charter" your school as public. That can be done again today. After four terms as a school board member, I no longer had the illusion there was anything left to the description of the "independent" school district, but I felt strongly that the possibility for at least some schools to be able to formally act "independently" was good for the system as a whole. The idea that innovation, however defined, could occur without meddling, was most intriguing. There is no better population than our educated, independent, entrepreneurial rural citizenry to carry out the best intentions of this opportunity.

Part of that optimism came from my ten years of working with Minnesota's most innovative teachers and communities as a part of a team from the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota. At the Center For School Change (www.centerforschoolchange.org), funded primarily by the Blandin Foundation of Grand Rapids, we identified and worked with projects all across the state. We learned much and we attempted to energize nearly a hundred communities around greater involvement in their schools. In some, we introduced the chartering idea, but mostly we helped districts consider various interesting options. Near the completion of that work in 2000, I was asked to assess what it would take to get the kinds of changes necessary to take rural Minnesota schools into the future. What was my answer?

• First, we actually have to change something in terms of the learning program.

Far too often schools make cosmetic changes. They improve buildings, consolidate or share programs with others, buy more technology, etc. But the real changes in how young people work with adults, their community or other students changes very little. At the bottom of the learning pyramid is lecturing (5% retention) and at the top is practice by doing or teaching (90% retention) (National Training Lab, 1996). In between is a whole range of strategies, yet the most consistent teaching style in schools, even after all we know that works, is still what some call the "sit and git" method. Many programs or schools set out to be quite different, but because of comfort, security, control, etc., they find themselves falling back to traditional methods. A related issue is that we do not reward risk, difference, or challenging the status quo, no matter how much we talk about it.

• Second, those who choose to innovate should be given the autonomy to do so.

The cruelest act of any system is to encourage others to take risks and try new things without the authority to shape that innovation into what might work for their clients or themselves. Some of the best educational ideas in the country are squelched by meddling boards, administrators or jealous colleagues. We need new ideas in order to compete in this "flattening" world (Friedman, 2005), and the ingenuity will not come from institutions where micro-managing is more prevalent than rule waivers. Remember, the last act of a dying institution is to make more rules!

• Third, those who are implementing program changes must be given control of and the responsibility for the money.

This is the area of most difficulty for many Boards of Education. It is quite often the last holdout to reform. "We'll let you do what you want, but we'll control the money," is often the battle cry. This is a matter of both trust and accountability. The public is very responsive to its institutions' and officials' handling of money, but at the same time we will get virtually no change without trusting a public research and development sector. In fact, we may never discover new efficiencies without allowing reformers to re-allocate funding. The other battle cry is, "You can do it, but you're going to have to find your own money." This, too, is neither respectful to innovators nor a sustainable reform strategy.

• **Fourth, those who reform must be willing to share and accept the results**.

Not all good ideas work well or soon enough. If we've learned anything in the last fifteen years of work, we know that only some of what gets proposed gets accomplished, that it often takes longer than anyone thinks, that the public is impatient and judgmental, and there are a variety of ways of determining success. The trust I referred to earlier should also include a respectful exchange of honest information about what works and does not work for students. That should include, but not be limited to, the assessment of required outcomes deemed to be in the public's interest. (Note that I did not say how that assessment should be done as I think NCLB gets it wrong sometimes.) Remember, too, part of the Open Sector idea is based on the tradeoff of flexibility for accountability.

• **And fifth, it must remain small**.

The evidence is in on many fronts. Small, personalized schools do better in most academic and life-skills areas. Tom Vander Ark, Education Director at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is fond of saying, "Small class size makes all the difference at the elementary level, and small schools make all the difference at the secondary levels" (2000). Minnesota's small, rural schools consistently score well in the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments tests (elementary grades) and on the Basic Skills Testing (secondary grades) (Standard and Poor's, 2006). In the Mankato area, for instance, of the 30 high schools reported on the basic skills writing tests this year, six schools had 100% passage (Mankato Free Press, 2006). They were six of the seven smallest high schools in the region. In addition, the real cost of not graduating (factoring in social costs, prison rates, etc.) is now being considered as a serious determinant to school success (Nebraska Alliance, 1999). Both small and rural schools have higher graduation rates and are especially significant in high-poverty areas (Rural School and Community Trust, 2005).

School size also makes a difference in making reform possible. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested over $1 billion in high school reform over the past six years and reports significant challenges in getting improvements in large districts with big high schools (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). This is impacting strategies at the district and state levels nationwide in their attempts to downsize schools and mimic the success of smaller and rural high schools.

If all of these factors were present, does it still make sense to have a new schools sector? I believe so, but there are certainly implications in deciding to create a parallel system of schools while at the same time attempting to improve. Like many others, I was drawn to this effort because of my strong belief in good small schools and a passion for different models of learning. Even then, I had to make a substantial trade-off: to recognize that some things would have to be discarded in order to take up new ideas. This is the crux of the implications. There is no free ride on the train to redesign and reallocation. There is a definite cost to prepare people, facilities and programs for a new look. My own calculation puts this figure at around $1,500 per secondary pupil during the first year, and $500 per pupil for years 2 and 3 of the re-design (not including facility costs).

But the larger issue for rural schools is the downsizing of current programs as a result of students moving to new programs or schools. There is no answer for this dilemma yet. The public is not accustomed to this level of adjustment. Some states have attempted to provide declining enrollment indexes or count phantom enrollments for a few years, but the reality is that in system transformation, true reallocation is highly controversial, painful and publicly visible. The good news is that it seems we are much more flexible than we think, and we adjust faster than one would expect.

Another implication has to do with power and control. What does a system of non-geographic boundary schools do to an institution based on definite lines of control and jurisdiction? The new schools 'open sector' has no geographic boundaries: not chartered schools, not online learning, and not even open-enrolled students. In fact, it's beginning to make our traditional school districts look both constrained and somewhat old-fashioned. It appears that districts have boundaries only for purposes of taxing authority, yet other schools are proving to operate effectively and efficiently without taxing authority. Education Evolving's 2002 study of school efficiency shows the top ten schools in Minnesota are all chartered schools. Incidentally, the top ten district schools were all rural and mostly small. Without opening the entire education financing can of worms, I would contend that eventually we must take a serious look at how schools are funded, what that means for local taxpayers, and what the role of the state is in funding schools. This is not only an equity issue, but a larger question of whether the state should take full or partial responsibility. The current trend for rural schools does not look good. The smaller communities are caught in a cycle of modest and unpredictable state funding increases and fickle local taxpayer/voters being asked to approve

additional local funds. This can't be a good way to guarantee anything close to enough money, especially as our population ages.

An open sector also changes who gets to have a say in educational programming and the operation of schools. Today's typical boards of education have been around for well over a century. Their role is reasonably clear with the public: deliver quality education at a fair and reasonable cost. Some would argue that it is more a matter of "protecting the public's money," but we'll leave that discussion to others. Many of the new schools being created today do not have publicly elected boards and often look like small non-profit corporations. In the case of many chartered schools in Minnesota, teachers make up a majority of the boards of directors. This was hard to imagine just a couple of decades ago. So in many districts around the state there is someone other than the locally elected board of education offering the service of public education and fulfilling the state mandate to "provide a fair and equitable education." That is a very new idea to most people.

This also leads to a question of leadership. Do we have enough educational leadership to carry us forward into a different kind of educational environment? Can we move toward a system of small, flexible and flat organizations prepared to adapt to changing needs and demands? I believe it will take a transformation of both instructional and organizational leadership. Frances Moore Lappé, in her new book, *Democracy's Edge*, is hopeful that we are evolving from a large group/organization mentality to a much more democratic, small group nation (2005). She is adamant about the need to practice democracy — that it is not just something we have, but something we do — and that the small schools movement in America is positive, because it will serve as learning labs for young people and foster greater, active leadership and democracy. She cites hundreds of examples of inspiring organizations and schools that are making a difference for their communities by being small, focused and changeable.

A further consideration here is the possibility this movement possesses to allow for small communities to have a measure of self-determination and economic development. Many towns have struggled with the loss of local schools, particularly high schools. With new and different kinds of schools, especially those with enhanced technology capabilities, there is the possibility that schools may redevelop in communities that no longer have schools. They may require full-time enrollment, part-time enrollment or entirely online enrollment. In any case, it means real dollars, employment for community members and students again bringing their active

involvement back to town. This has happened in a number of places that I will reference later.

Perhaps the biggest implication is what the reality of different schools has done and will do to our understanding of learning and human development and how it can be assessed well. In a world currently dominated by standardization, the new sector may be compliant but is by no means buying into the notion that students can be standardized, nor can schools for that matter. It has been 30-40 years since we tried to create new schools around the latest research on learning, and we have learned so much since then it is staggering to consider: learning styles, brain-based research, learning disabilities, autism, new teaching strategies, technology, alternative assessments, etc. We may be finally getting to a knowledge base that will allow us to create the schools that John Dewey, Ted Sizer, John Goodlad, Don Glines (Wilson Campus School in Mankato), and others imagined.

I recently found a copy of *LOOK* magazine from January 1970, the year I graduated from high school. The series title was "Mankind's Last Best Chance" (rather ominous), and the education piece by reformer John Holt was called, "Why We Need New Schooling." It called for many of the same changes we are making or want to make today, along with several very radical ideas. For example, he says, "People should be free to find or make for themselves the kinds of educational experiences they want their children to have." Also, "In most of history, children have been educated by the whole community. Nothing else makes any sense." And, "Any school charging no tuition and open to all should be considered an independent public school and receive tax support." And my favorite, "Many schools are too big to be human. Instead, we could have, in any of our giant school buildings, a number of small schools, each independently run and using its own ideas and methods." Radical ideas? He also advocated the elimination of all required curriculum, testing and grading and believed that students should vote in school board elections.

So how are schools to look and act in this new era? Should we tighten up or lighten up in order to meet the demands of an ever-changing world? Here are a few suggestions:

1) **Fight standardized testing as the dominant measurement of student success.** We need multiple strategies to determine individual and school results. No Child Left Behind is a negative, punitive and discriminating solution to school improvement. If poor minority students began to do really

well on standardized testing, how long do you think this movement would last? Our efforts toward value-added measurements are much more useful in this area. Rural Minnesota could be a beacon for multiple, authentic assessments. The Hope Study, measuring dispositional growth and motivation, developed by Mark Van Ryzin at the University of Minnesota, is just one of many such assessments (2004).

2) **Do everything we can to encourage real-world, active learning.** The previously mentioned learning pyramid puts "memorization" as having a 15% retention rate (National Training Laboratories). That just does not justify continuing the current learning model in most schools. The use of internships, field study, project learning, apprenticeships and service learning are all good ways to encourage active learning. Ask most adults what they remember from their school days and they will invariably mention these experiences, not sitting in a particular class. If we're worried about the Asian students surpassing us in engineering knowledge, we need to focus on both learning and interest (Star Tribune, 2006).

3) **Require all graduating high school seniors to make a major public presentation showcasing their academic and presentation abilities.** We've heard the word "relevance" more than occasionally the past few years. We have to have more than grades to determine a student's readiness to move on to college and work in this "flat-world" economy. Redefine relevance and rigor by expecting a whole new level of success before graduating. Some Minnesota high schools are experimenting with this idea, but it is not nearly far enough along yet and not yet articulated with state graduation requirements.

4) **Enhance the use of technology beyond computer labs.** Technology has advanced to the point where every classroom should be a computer-infused setting. Some of every high school's offerings should be online. It's embarrassing in Minnesota that we have schools that are often more technically under-equipped and under-used than many student's bedrooms. Checking your email once a week during computer time is not techno-literacy.

5) **Create individual customized learning plans for every student.** We can no longer afford to think of students, no matter how large the school, as groups or grades. If we ever expect to meet higher standards we have to start with each child. Every student should carry an electronic portfolio as a personal documentary (including videos and other authentic means) of their learning. At the EdVisions network of schools, all students now have an electronic means, accessible on the Web by their parents, to track how and when they reach required standards.

6) **Continue to encourage use of the post-secondary options program.** It not only serves as an incentive to start college, but it helps young people know if they are capable of doing college work. Some would like to backpedal away from this popular program that has now been around for 20 years, but as someone recently told me, "You can't put the toothpaste back in the tube." Every advantage we can give students to attend and complete college should be explored (Center For School Change, 2005).

7) **Create a pilot K-14 or K-16 system model.** We need one real, seamless example of a community willing to merge the K-12 and post-secondary systems. If we're serious about having students attend and graduate from college, we need a model partnership to make that happen by allowing all high school graduates to move directly from high school to college without discrimination or arbitrary admissions.

8) **And lastly, continue to support the creation of both district- and non-district-sponsored schools of choice, particularly schools of specific focus and interest.** Parents are very aware in rural Minnesota that choices are a part of the educational system, both private and public. They want schools of distinction, smaller school settings and school programs that fit their child's learning styles and needs. The bubbling up of new schools, schools-within-schools, magnet programs and charters are helping make Minnesota one of the leading states both educationally and economically.

Check out these Minnesota K-12 schools to find out more about the great Minnesota options being offered in rural areas:

- Nerstrand Elementary School, Nerstrand, www.faribault.k12.mn.us/ne
- North Shore Community School, Two Harbors, www.northshorecommunityschool.org
- Studio Academy, Rochester, www.studioacademyhs.org
- Lafayette Charter School, Lafayette, www.lafayettecharter.k12.mn.us
- Northern Lights Charter School, Grand Rapids, www.nlcschool.org
- Bluffview Montessori, Winona, www.bluffviewmontessori.org
- Crosslake Community School, Crosslake, www.crosslakekids.org
- New Century High School, Hutchinson, www.newcenturycharter.com
- E.C.H.O. Charter School, Echo, www.echocharter.com
- Prairie Creek Community School, Northfield, www.prairiecreek.org
- Schoolcraft Learning Community, Bemidji, www.schoolcraft.org
- TRIO Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School, www.wolfcreek/trio-wcwebsite.htm
- ARTech, Northfield, www.artech.k12.mn.us
- Minnesota New Country School, Henderson, www.mncs.k12.mn.us
- EdVisions Off Campus High School, Henderson, www.edvisionshighschool.com
- Great River Education Center, Waite Park, www.greatriver educationcenter.com
- Southwest Star Concept School, Okabena, www.hlo.k12.mn.us
- Harbor City International School, Duluth, www.harborcityschool.org
- Ridgeway Community School, Houston, www.ridgewayschool.org
- RiverBend Academy, Mankato, www.riverbendacademy.com
- Great Expectations School, Grand Marais, www.greatexpectationsschool.com
- TrekNorth High School, Bemidji, www.treknorth.org
- Voyageurs Expeditionary High School, Bemidji, www.vehs.org
- Green Isle Community School, Green Isle, www.greenislecommunityschool.org
- Minnesota Virtual Academy, Houston, www.mnva.k12.mn.us
- Minnesota Center of Online Learning, Houston, www.mcol.org
- Summit Learning Center, Houston, www.houston.k12.mn.us
- TEAM Academy, Waseca, www.waseca.k12.mn.us
- Bridges Elementary School, Mankato, www.isd77.mn.us/bridges

Looking at this partial list, one can see how the four scenarios at the beginning of this writing are just a sampling of the dozens of new and exciting programs being developed to serve the students of rural Minnesota. Minnesota is an extraordinary place to live, work and learn. We are a hotbed of innovation and at the same time a place of strong tradition. Many would argue that Minnesota has little reason to change its current educational system, from pre-kindergarten to its many colleges and technical centers. But with a quietly growing drop-out rate and nearly 15% of secondary students already attending schools that don't look or act like traditional schools, we must think about how we will be both different and better for more of our young people in the future. Our rural schools and communities are on the cusp of great changes and face a growing demand for options with all their need for better technology, personalization, flexibility and accountability. These are challenging and exciting times in the heartland. Will it be a grand "opening" for more learning and better schools? Let's hope so.

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