

# An Explosion of Pedagogical Agents

Charters and other schooling alternatives give educators a much-needed chance to innovate.

BY TED KOLDERIE AND TIM MCDONALD

THE CHARGE TO AMERICA'S PUBLIC-EDUCATION SYSTEM HAS UNDERGONE A DRAMATIC SHIFT. FOR MANY years, access was the maxim. Expansion into rural America, integration, busing, Title IX, and other landmarks paved the road of compulsory schooling. Districts were responsible for making sure all students had a desk, and it was the duty of the parent to make sure their young person showed up. Whether a student learned in that desk depended largely on the effort he or she chose to put forth. Many succeeded, yet many were left behind.

Attendance is no longer the measure of a district's success. Schools are now told that all students *must* learn. Curricula are being standardized across school districts in an effort to ensure educational equity; federally mandated testing is holding the nation's public schools accountable for basic achievement benchmarks in core subjects; greater emphasis is being placed on individualized and project-based learning plans in an attempt to reach each and every student at his or her best level; and a vast array of technology is being deployed to engage and monitor today's kids with the latest tools.

Into this mix, in recent years, the concept of an open sector within public education has been taking shape, based on the fundamental argument that it may be easier to create completely new schools than to try to fix existing schools. This new thinking, which is the chief mission of our organization, Education|Evolving, is founded on several core ideas. Public education should be:

- Open to new entrants—new schools should be created by teachers, parents, community-based organizations, and networks of schools;
- Open to new authorizers or sponsors—schools can be overseen by entities other than school districts;
- Open to new learning programs—there are new ways to manage schools; and
- Open to all—as part of public education, these new schools should be available to any student who wants to attend.

Inherent in the open-sector concept is our belief that these schools should be allowed to operate under a different set of rules than conventional public schools. Open-sector schools should have the authority to shape their learning programs, select their own staffs, and manage their own finances without the restrictions that typically govern the operations of other public schools. They should operate under a performance-based contract with the authorizer, and they should receive funding on par with other schools in their district.

In part as a result of this new thinking, chartered schools and other in-district alternatives have been opening across the country as educators and parents look for teaching and learning alternatives to traditional schools and schooling. Increasing focus on innovation—in the use of technology, the styles of teaching, class sizes, educational focus, right through to the management and administration of the schools themselves—not only is providing new models of schooling, but also more options for students, their families, and a certain kind of teacher.

## An Expanding Role for Educators

The job of teaching is in the early stages of an evolution that is affecting change at the most fundamental level. Educators in many open-sector schools are being afforded greater degrees of self-determination over their work, increased specialization opportunities, and improved professional development compared to their counterparts in conventional schools.

Now that charter schools and in-district alternatives are strong and growing—chartering laws have spread rapidly to 40 states since first appearing in Minnesota in 1991—the professional options available to educators are growing exponentially. At schools such as Boston’s Pilot Schools, management decisions are made locally by a board of teachers, administrators, and community members. The Pilot sector, designed in part as a competitive response to chartering, acts as a second, more responsive arm of the Boston Public Schools. Each school has control over its staffing, budgets, curriculum, assessment, governance, policies, and even yearly calendar.

Treating educators in this manner positively influences motivation, a principle factor of teacher performance. In teacher-run schools, it is commonplace for educators to willingly work significant overtime, put creativity into their teaching, and innovate in curriculum and

have had great initial success in launching an organizational model called Teachers in Professional Practice (TPP). Under this arrangement, teachers not only run their schools—they are virtual owners in a partnership comparable to partners in a law firm, private medical practice, or architectural cooperative. When there are administrators, they work for the teachers. Budget and managerial duties are distributed among the partners. (For more information and a comprehensive list of teacher-led schools, read our publication, *Teachers in Professional Practice: An Inventory of New Opportunities for Teachers.*)

The model shows great promise. In addition to national expansion from California to Boston, Mass., teacher interest in self-run schools is high. A 2003 survey of educators by Public Agenda found 58 percent of educators to be “very” or “somewhat” interested in working in a chartered school run and managed by teachers. The response likely would have been higher if the question had left out the “chartered” qualifier.



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are responsible for policy, budgets, and management. There is an element of control to each position, unlike conventional models, where teachers are essentially employees of building and/or district administration. Through power sharing, educators act more as partners in a mutual operation, enlisting the full range of their personal and professional potential and in turn making the occupation more attractive to new and current prospective entrants.

## Changing Models Attract Educators

Two of the original intentions in creating chartered schools were to expand choice and encourage innovation. While traditional districts continue to improve, they are limited by structure and convention. The opposite is true for charters and other alternatives: They have the autonomy and authority to undergo radical and unorthodox innovations in models of school and pedagogy. At the same time, all sectors are seeing more opportunities available to educators in the form of specialties such as curriculum experts, learning coaches, cognitive specialists, and community liaisons.

As the open sector expands and districts open smaller, semi-autonomous schools (usually as a response to charters), new types of schools are emerging. These include teacher-led schools, project- or theme-based curriculum schools (e.g., arts, sciences, bilingual), online schools, and technology-oriented schools.

The state of Minnesota and the city of Milwaukee, Wisc.,

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Both the Minnesota and Milwaukee variations of the TPP model finished—in 2005 and 2006, respectively—as part of the final 50 of the annual Innovations in American Government Competition at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. As the education leadership in major cities look increasingly toward new-school creation, the Professional Practice model is in prime standing to see further growth in popularity among city leaders, business, and educators.

Each of these new models of schooling attracts different kinds of teachers. Some educators may want to teach in a school that

## Teacher-Led Schools

A sampling of teacher-led schools includes:

### California

**Maybeck High School**, [www.maybeckhs.org](http://www.maybeckhs.org)

**Synergy School**, [www.synergyschool.org](http://www.synergyschool.org)

**Walden Center & School**, [www.walden-school.net](http://www.walden-school.net)

### Minnesota

**Avalon School**, [www.avalonschool.org](http://www.avalonschool.org)

**El Colegio Charter School**, [www.el-colegio.org](http://www.el-colegio.org)

**Minnesota New Country School**, [www.newcountryschool.com](http://www.newcountryschool.com)

### Wisconsin

**The Alliance School**, [www.allianceschool.org](http://www.allianceschool.org)

**I.D.E.A.L Charter School**, [www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/ideal](http://www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/ideal)

**Professional Learning Institute**, [www.plidragons.org](http://www.plidragons.org)

## A Profile of Teachers in Professional Practice: Minnesota New Country School

The Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) is a teacher-led, project-based school located in Henderson, a small town of 910 people in southern Minnesota. MNCS was one of Minnesota's earliest chartered schools, authorized by the LeSeur-Henderson School District, and opened in the fall of 1994. The school now serves approximately 120 students from grades 6–12.

MNCS contracts with EdVisions Cooperative, a Teacher Professional Practice that helps provide structure and support to individual schools by assuming responsibility for administrative duties and assisting startups. In 2000, the cooperative received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to spread its democratic model by creating 40 new schools nationwide. EdVisions is sustained as an operation through support from the schools that receive its services.

The teachers at MNCS, who prefer to be called advisors, each work with 15 or 20 students across all grade levels. Since the curriculum is project-based, every student has his or her own workstation, complete with a computer and desk space. The advisors guide students through personalized plans that ensure each young person covers all state and federal standards. In essence, the students are responsible for their own pace of learning.

Management is transparent. Each advisor knows how much money is in the budget, so when there are funding changes, a curriculum review, or discussions about strategic direction, everyone is in the know.

Advisors share the administrative tasks necessary to run the school, including staffing and budgets. They contend that this type of management structure is more efficient and has a positive impact on student achievement. Not only do young people see the adults working cooperatively together, but the atmosphere is responsive to student needs as they arise.

Decisions at MNCS are made at the source. If advisors sense a problem in curriculum or a student issue, they can address it and rectify the situation immediately. The advisors are all held accountable for the school's performance, as each one is a teacher-owner. As evidenced by its quick replication in the past decade to its current 10 schools—and soon to be more than 40 at the completion of EdVisions' grant—New Country School's model of teacher-led governance is assured to be a force in public-education reform.

is less bureaucratic, but with traditional management structures. Many chartered schools look like this. Some may want to start their own schools in a cooperative, professional partnership. They can do that now in Milwaukee or Minnesota (see box above), and Massachusetts, California, Georgia, and New Jersey are looking seriously at this model. Either way, entrepreneurs and creative minds now have an outlet in the structures of public schooling.

It used to be that each school would have a handful of nontraditional educators: a mid-career accountant making a vocational move; a mother who decided to enter teaching after caring for her children at home; a businessman who sold his company to retire early and give back. By increasing the professional teaching options available, we believe that new entrants will continue to be more entrepreneurial, more innovative, and possibly of a higher academic caliber. Bright young college graduates will give teaching a more serious look, and professionals from mathematics, engineering, information technology, and the sciences will find greater incentive to enter the profession. Technology-based schools already have borne witness to this, as have teacher-led cooperatives that draw educators from outside the traditional mold.

The new entrants have had a discernable effect on pedagogy. Support staff and specialists are redefining special education; teaching is becoming a more specialized profession; and educators are taking on an expanded range of responsibilities. And with increased autonomy comes increased accountability. Since the teachers run the school, they all have a stake in its success.

With teacher-led schools, as with all chartered schools, there must be routine review for quality, support, and—when necessary—closure. The chartered sector is, fundamentally, one of new school creation and research and development. Too often this point appears forgotten by those both inside and out.

So the question is: What do these schools, based on power sharing, bring to the students, their parents, and families?

Foremost, as a result of their structure and smaller size, these schools have a strong sense of community

and connectedness. The environment is stable. As one retired music teacher put it at a dinner in Minnesota, having traveled between four schools in a week, "I could tell within 10 minutes of entering a building what sort of principal they had." This is, of course, a qualitative and selective statement. Other qualities that may positively affect student achievement include a more responsive environment, flexibility of curriculum, and the inherently innovative nature of a free faculty. Parents, especially in urban settings, appreciate the law and order of teacher-led schools where all educators are responsible for discipline. Students are likewise engaged in learning and even operations. In some schools, students are allowed to sit in on administrative and budget meetings, and sometimes also have a vote.

In a visit with Minnesota educators and policy leaders, a partner from a TPP school in Milwaukee, Wisc., remarked that, "In my old school there was little responsiveness... here if a student has a problem, or if there is a problem among staff, it can be solved on the spot. If student needs aren't being met, we—the adults—can do what it takes to meet them. We have control over the budget, the management, and regulate ourselves as the staff... [T]his makes a difference."

## More Avenues Arise Through Innovation

Two conditions have changed in recent decades, altering public education in ways yet to be fully understood.

The first is the accessibility of information in an age of information technology. No longer is the teacher the only source of information for students. Technological competence is vital for today's educators. The level of personalization and engagement today's students have with technology and interactive media is unprecedented, and no aspect of education is immune from the inroads made by technology. To better prepare teachers, administrators and education schools need to provide the training and ongoing professional development—as well as the tools—to effectively use technology in their classrooms. At the same time, practical 21st-century skills such as technological proficiency, media literacy, the ability to speak two or more languages, and the ability to problem solve in teams are increasingly important. Administrators will need to provide new opportunities for educators to learn and practice comprehensive education that crosses defined subject areas.

The second major change is the erosion of the monopoly traditional districts have held over the public education of America's children. Now that the assignment has changed from access to achievement, no longer is it enough simply to put students in desks. Schools must ensure that they learn and are able to compete at a global level.

Innovation, coupled with long-term and scientific research and development, is the way forward. We need to understand that nobody has the answer to chronic underachievement. No Child Left Behind has put forth a noble goal: for all students to become proficient in math and reading. Yet the United States is incredibly diverse socially, economically, and in the opportunities available to each segment of the populace. While we need federal standards to ensure a cohesive curriculum, we believe there must be room to tailor it locally according to the needs of each population. By encouraging educators to innovate—to act as professionals with meaningful control over their professional practice—they can have the opportunity to improve schooling. Some new models will work well overall, or just for some groups of students; others will fail or may work for only one group of students. Over time, with proper methods for assessment, we believe we will be able to recognize and replicate the most successful models.

Staffing too is changing. There is an opening now for adjuncts, especially in chartered schools where union contracts are more likely to allow it. Minneapolis Public Schools have been considering it as part of a district redesign. This is a way for schools to target specific needs—sciences, advanced and specialty courses—without hiring more full-time faculty. It makes both economic and curricular sense, since it diversifies the background of teaching staff. Teachers can work across schools, districts, and even states. For example, a Japanese or upper-level

German course might be conducted via videoconferencing from one building to three or more classrooms simultaneously. The concept of site-based hiring, known commonly as interview-and-select, also is gathering steam as schools seek to control their own destiny. While democratic management is foreign to most educators, there is a gathering tide in support of providing staffing authority to those who actually work in the school. Experiences in the open sector have shown us that when professionally minded teachers encounter a degree of self-determination (e.g., teacher-led peer hiring), they quickly become motivated by a sense of liberty and responsibility. This model also allows educators to help shape the culture and dynamics of their schools.

As these changes occur and the open sector continues to increase its market share, administrators in the traditional sector can learn from their nontraditional counterparts. Administrators should understand that, once acculturated, teachers can run a school quite well. The more points of independent decision making there are in a building—provided it has a functional governance model—the higher the likelihood of innovation in pedagogy. Students experience the benefits of both the subsequent advances in teaching and the environment of teamwork.

Forward-thinking school leaders will recognize that good management means maximizing efficiency by motivating workers. No longer do teachers want to be kept in the dark about budgets, curriculum, and staffing. Educators are capable of much more and will respond to greater opportunity. ●●●

*Ted Kolderie is a senior associate with the Center for Policy Studies and co-founder of Education|Evolving, a policy group with a national focus based in Saint Paul, Minn. A principal architect of chartered-school laws in Minnesota and many other states, he is a former journalist and has served as executive director of the Twin Cities Citizens League and as a senior fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.*

*Tim McDonald is an associate with Education|Evolving. He is a junior fellow at the American Academy of Political and Social Science, where he won the annual Undergraduate Research Award in 2007.*

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