

Teacher Professional Partnerships

A Different Way to Help
Teachers and Teaching

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

January 2004

 **education | evolving**

*A joint venture of the Center for
Policy Studies and Hamline University*

ABOUT EDUCATION|EVOLVING

Millions of America's students head off to school each morning sporting brightly colored backpacks and determined to make this their "best school year yet." At the same time, federal and state policymakers are making tough new demands that our schools change and improve – so that "All students learn at high levels." New standards, tests, timelines and consequences are all being put in place to make sure that "No child is left behind."

Yet, all across the country, many policymakers, journalists, teachers, parents and students themselves are troubled by a haunting feeling that all this effort may not really produce the degree of change and improvement that we need. At a minimum, we are now taking a series of risks that are neither wise nor necessary to be making with other people's children. These are, after all, demands and results well-beyond what we've ever expected of American public education – all at a time of severe budgetary pressures on states, districts and individual public schools.

That, at least is the serious concern of a small group of Minnesota-based public policy veterans who have come together as Education|Evolving... a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University. The individuals behind this initiative believe...

... it's an unwise and unnecessary risk for the state and nation to be trying to get the results we need solely by changing the schools we now have...

... the issues about teachers and teaching should not be debated only in the old employer/worker framework...

... the solution to maintaining financially viable public education in rural areas may not lie in the three old 'solutions' of excess levies, consolidation and state aid...

... today's schools should not go on largely failing to take advantage of new electronic technologies and other substantially different ways of teaching and learning...

... and the critical discussion about the future of K-12 education in Minnesota and nationally must not proceed solely as a discussion among adults, with students largely left on the outside looking in.

Education|Evolving is undertaking a number of initiatives over the coming year. They include a national initiative to convince policy makers, education reform leaders, journalists and others that *creating new schools* should be an essential element in achieving needed changes and improvements in teaching and learning – at least equal in importance to *changing the schools we now have*.

One focus of this initiative is to introduce the concept of an "Open Sector" – to help create the kind of legal and political environments in which new schools can be created and succeed. Another – described in this report – is designed to challenge the fundamental premise that teachers in schools must always be "employees." Another initiative is looking at the premises used in asking the critical question, "How are chartered schools doing?" Other ongoing Education|Evolving projects focus on strengthening and enhancing the role of the agencies and organizations that sponsor chartered schools – and on how policymakers, journalists and others can more routinely and substantively tap into the experiences and perspectives of students and of young people not now attending school.

Education|Evolving's leadership is provided by two Minnesota public policy veterans: Ted Kolderie, senior associate at the Center for Policy Studies, and Joe Graba, a senior policy fellow at Hamline University. Its coordinator is Jon Schroeder, former director of Charter Friends National Network.

Education|Evolving's activities are regularly updated on the initiative's new and unique web site – www.educationevolving.org. To receive print and electronic updates of Education|Evolving initiatives, contact info@educationevolving.org.

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A DIFFERENT WAY TO HELP TEACHERS AND TEACHING

All our discussion about improving teaching occurs within the traditional assumption that teachers are employees managed by administrators, rather than professionals in control of their work. Current efforts to train teachers, to improve teacher-practice, to recruit teachers, to retain teachers and to change the way in which teachers are compensated all take place within this boss/worker, master/servant framework. Minds are locked into the notion that if you want to be a teacher you have to be an employee.

The assumption of employment makes the effort at improvement a program of professional development organized by management. This is assumed to be the most effective way to secure the changes in teaching that researchers and policymakers are convinced are now required. Improving teaching is – clearly if implicitly – ‘something the boss does’.

In all this the teachers may or may not be consulted. The assumption of employment does not encourage the notion of teachers as leaders. The administrators are the leaders. Nor does the assumption really allow the notion of teachers as professionals. Teachers may want to think of teaching as a profession. But teachers do not control their work, which is the test of being ‘a professional’. Education is not organized on a professional model. Whatever the

school, the rule is almost absolute: If you want to be a teacher you have to be an employee.

Within the school building it is ‘the principal’ who is considered the instructional leader. ‘Principal’ was once an adjective: principal teacher. Today ‘principal’ has become a noun; is an administrator. Arguably the principal today has no time to be an instructional leader. The old theory hangs on partly because boards guard the area of professional issues jealously as a management right. Boards do not want teachers to be the instructional leaders.

This may not be the best framework within which to improve teachers and teaching. And we probably are not doing well in our effort to change and improve teaching within the conventional employer/employee framework. We might do better if the assumption of employment were pulled out, and the questions of training, recruitment, retention, practices, professional development and compensation were re-thought on the assumption that teachers could be professionals working in partnerships.



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It clearly is possible to organize K-12 education on a professional model. Teachers could have and should have the option to work if they wish – as many architects and engineers and consultants and accountants and lawyers and doctors do – with colleagues, in a professional group which they collectively own, with the administrators working for them.

This might be a better framework in which to change teaching. In an effort to improve teaching it is probably not smart to leave out the teachers. It would obviously help to be working in an arrangement that mobilizes the teachers' energies and abilities fully toward change and improvement . . . that gives teachers a real opportunity to improve what they do and reasons to make these changes in their own interest.

It does appear many teachers would like a professional arrangement. In a survey by Public Agenda early in 2003 two-thirds of the new teachers (fewer than five years' experience) and half the veteran teachers (over 20 years) said they would be somewhat or very interested in working in an arrangement where they could run the school (see table on page 15).

The essentials of the partnership arrangement

Having known nothing but the employer/employee arrangement, it's hard for all of us to think of teaching arranged in any fundamentally different way. It is always hard to understand what we cannot see. Naturally we ask: What exactly would this be? How would it work?

The way to 'see it' best is to focus on the essentials rather than on the details. There are real cases of teacher partnerships appearing (which we will explain in a moment). But each has worked its own variations on the core idea. So at this point it is best to focus on that core 'partnership' idea. Here are its basic elements:

- The teachers form a professional organization, using any of the various forms of organization available under state law. It could be a general partnership. It could be – as in the case of the emerging organizations in Minnesota and in Milwaukee – a workers' cooperative. It could be a non-profit corporation. Perhaps in time there will be a partnership law specifically for teachers, as there is in some states for physicians.
- There is an agreement between the partnership and the board of education to organize and run a school, or a department of a school, or a learning program operating district-wide.
- The relationship between board and teachers changes. The current arrangement can fairly be described as one in which we (the board) don't give you autonomy, and in return you (the teachers) don't give us accountability. In the agreement with the partnership this reverses: The board grants real autonomy to the partnership; the continuation of the autonomy contingent on the teacher-group meeting the objectives it has agreed it will meet.
- Within their partnership the teachers make the key professional decisions: who is admitted to practice with the partnership, who does what work, how the work is done, what methods and materials are used. They evaluate performance and they may – as in one of the emerging cases – set their own compensation.
- The teachers are partners. This is not the independent-contractor arrangement. The idea is for teachers to work as a team to educate the students, as they too seldom are able to do today.
- The board does not 'run the school'. The board thinks about policy: Who should we have run the school? What objectives do we want accomplished? How much are we going to pay? How is the job coming? What do we do if it is coming well, or not-coming-well?
- A teacher partnership could form in order to run a new school or department or program. Or it could form to run an existing school, department or program – the teachers

simply converting their status from ‘employee’ to partner-owner.

- The partnership arrangement can conceivably be used with any kind of school. It could handle an elementary school or a secondary. The partnership could decide to have a traditional learning program – courses and classes – or a project-based program of learning, as at Minnesota New Country School (see page 8), with no courses and no classes. It is, again, the teachers’ decision how to meet the objectives set by the district board of education or the board of an individual charter school.

Here are two emerging ‘teacher partnerships’

Two important cases are emerging and developing of teachers forming professional partnerships to run schools. One is in Minnesota; the other in Milwaukee. Both involve whole schools in the charter sector. It is fascinating to watch this evolution and to watch the way an idea spreads.

o The EdVisions model

An hour southwest of the Twin Cities area on U.S. 169 as you turn west, you drop down the bank of the Minnesota River valley and cross the bridge on State Highway 19. You are in Henderson, population 910. Just to the right on Main Street is a tan metal building that blends with the lovely warm brick in which most of the old river town is built. The building houses the Minnesota New Country School.

You may have seen this school in USA Today or on network television. It was students from New Country who found the deformed frogs. Their discovery of the frogs with extra legs and legs-missing quickly became a matter of serious interest within the adult scientific community. And of course it became an exceptional learning opportunity for the school.

The school was formed in 1993 largely by high school teachers in nearby LeSueur, dissatisfied with the old model of – as one of them said – “kids coming to school to watch teachers work”. They wanted students to feel responsible for their own learning. There was no way they could persuade the board to change the existing district high school. It was Minnesota’s chartering law that gave them the opportunity to put their idea into practice by creating a different school new. The school opened in September 1994 in some old storefronts on Main Street in LeSueur.

The school is, like all chartered schools in Minnesota, a nonprofit corporation. The school has no employees. Its board has only contracts: with the district for some extra-curriculars, with a landlord for space, with a restaurant for lunch – and, for the learning program, with EdVisions, which is the teachers. Legally, EdVisions is a Minnesota Chapter 308 organization, a cooperative.

Through their partnership, the EdVisions teachers have created a remarkably innovative school. This is a secondary school. It has about 120 students. In regular school they would be in grades 7-12. New Country, though, is basically ungraded. Kids of different ages work together. Each has an ‘adviser’. Students choose their advisers and remain with the adviser they choose through their years in the school.

Each EdVisions adviser has about 17 students. It does not look like a school. There are no corridors; no oak doors with little slit windows through which you see a teacher standing in a classroom, talking. Most students are at work-stations; singly or in pairs. Teachers are at their desks, or with a student at a work-station. It looks much like a newspaper city room or, as a consultant once said, like “a messy Kinko’s”. The place is orderly, but not still and not quiet. Most people are seated but some are moving around. There is a hum of conversations.

EdVisions has not hired administrators, either. The teachers prefer, instead, to share the administrative duties.

One is 'lead' teacher. One handles accounting. Another is clerical people are also members of the cooperative. The teachers ask the students to help select new teachers. They make their own work-assignments. In EdVisions they set their own compensation.

The decisions in other words about what the adults get and what the students get is internalized within the teacher professional group. The teachers know: If they scant the students they will not have students, so will lose their school. If they scant the teachers they will not have teachers, so will lose their school. As a result the trade-off is made with integrity . . . as it is not, always, in the adversary proceeding in the employer/employee arrangement.

EdVisions itself has been almost continually evolving. At the start it was one cooperative for one school. Later other sponsors authorized other schools that contracted with EdVisions for its program. At one point EdVisions had planned to become a service cooperative and to create individual new cooperatives at each school. Today EdVisions remains a single entity with about 140 teachers in ten schools, with authority in practice delegated to the teachers at each school site; each local group making the kinds of decisions Minnesota New Country made when it was EdVisions' only school.

o The Milwaukee model

About 1998, Cris Parr and some other teachers from Milwaukee drove to Minnesota to see the New Country School and EdVisions. They liked what they saw. But the Wisconsin chartering law presented a problem. There, for a teacher in a chartered school to be in the state retirement program, s/he must be a district employee.

Cris Parr discussed this with her father; a longtime official with AFSCME. He asked a labor-lawyer friend how they might get both the professional autonomy to run the chartered school and the opportunity to remain in the state teachers retirement program. Quickly they worked out a variation on the Minnesota model. It involved the

responsible for the computer technology. The (few) teachers keeping their economic life with district employment, the master contract and union membership; forming the cooperative as a vehicle through which to handle their professional life . . . through which to run the school.

With this advice and model, a group of parents, teachers and community members then created I.D.E.A.L., a grades 4-8 school at the end of the second floor in a wing of a district middle school building in Milwaukee. It opened in 2001, with about 200 students crowded into four rooms. In 2003, a similar group of parents, teachers and community members founded the Professional Learning Institute (P.L.I.), a secondary school. Phoenix, on the north side, uses this model and others using the workers' co-op model are being formed now in Milwaukee.

In this arrangement the teachers remain employees of the district. The cooperative can decide how many personnel of what sort to have in the school and – like all Milwaukee schools now – can decide who comes to teach there. The person holding a given position is paid at the rate set in the district master contract. Cris Parr – who has been the union representative at almost every school in which she's worked in her 20-year career with MPS – was initially the lead teacher for I.D.E.A.L. and now works at P.L.I. These schools – again, like all MPS schools - also have a site council, with which the teachers counsel.

What are the implications for key stakeholders?

For **teachers** there are larger roles in the partnership arrangement. If they are handling a whole, discrete school, they have to think about how to handle the duties that are in a conventional school left to the administration or to the district central office. (A partnership handling just, say, the science department of a suburban high school, would not.) This does not mean the teachers have to do the administrative duties themselves: The partnership could, like a law

office, employ an administrator and staff. But the teachers will have to decide; one model or the other.

Students are likely to find a different climate in the school, resulting from the changes in the behavior of the adults; perhaps a more cohesive and integrated sense of purpose; perhaps more innovative and varied learning opportunities, or more individual attention. The old “I get paid whether you learn or not” will have gone. **Parents**, too, are likely to find themselves more involved. The teachers will quickly realize it is in their interest to have every possible resource helping them with student learning.

The **board**, even of the chartered school using the partnership model, will see its role change. It will not be an employer; not, at least in ‘the Minnesota model’, a negotiator-of-compensation. This will put it more in the role of the district or other sponsor of a chartered school; responsible for a school that it does not itself run and operate.

There are fascinating implications for the **teacher unions**; still unexplored. Clearly they need to think about their members’ interest in being able at last to be professionals; to be able to run the school in which they work. Those figures from Public Agenda (on page 15) are impressive; and reinforce the findings of an earlier survey by the National Education Association.

The unions have said they wanted to get their members into ‘professional issues’: “If you want to hold teachers accountable, teachers have to be able to run the school,” Albert Shanker used to say when president of the American Federation of Teachers. Before, that was not possible: Boards of education protected ‘professional issues’ as a management right so long as teachers were not accountable; and were backed up in this by legislatures and governors.

In Milwaukee where the teachers remain employees and dues-paying members, the union has helped Cris Parr with waivers from the master contract needed to permit her

school to exercise the discretion it has and that the partnership requires. Where the teachers do not remain employees, the unions might provide professional development and retirement or other benefits to members of the partnerships.

Finally, **teacher-education programs** will need to adapt. Professor John Goodlad said in the 1980s, when first encountering the idea: “If this should take hold, almost all of teacher education would have to be rethought.” Perhaps it should be. To operate successfully as partners, teachers will need new skills. Perhaps these can be provided better by other professions, which have used the partnership model longer and have long experience with how to manage professional service organizations.

What are implications for the general public?

We can only speculate about the benefits to the public: We cannot really know until the idea is more widely tried. But it is reasonable to suggest that within the partnership/ownership framework it will be easier to make the improvements that need to be made in the profession and with teaching . . . since the teachers themselves will now have a new incentive – new reasons, and new opportunities – to be a part of the change.

- More young teachers may stay in the profession, stemming the outflow that often occurs after three to five years. This will reduce the costs of recruitment and of training for districts and for the public. With this model, too, there will be new opportunities for growth. A veteran Minnesota elementary school principal used to say his challenge was “to motivate, as much as possible and for as long as possible, people who are in essentially dead-end jobs”. That would change. Quite likely a dual structure of leadership will appear, as in other professional groups where there is both a top professional – a managing general partner, in a law firm, or a chief of the medical staff,

in a hospital – and a top administrator. Education has – curiously – operated on the notion that a single individual will be both the top educator and the top manager.

- New compensation arrangements may be more possible. They are hard to introduce today, in the employer/employee framework. Teachers fear leaving the decisions about pay in the hands of administrators who may play favorites. They created unions and worked for collective bargaining to prevent this. Where the decisions are made within the partnership it may be possible to do things that cannot be done in the old framework: Teachers may be willing to reward their colleagues for superior performance, or may be willing to pay what is necessary to attract quality teachers for areas of the curriculum like math or science, where teachers are in short supply.
- The partnership arrangement may improve the ability of public education to adapt in times of fiscal constraint. The teachers will make the decisions and to some degree will probably be able to keep for use in the program what they do not need to spend. (Even in the Milwaukee arrangement they can decide how many positions of what type they wish to have in the school.) This will give them an incentive to introduce methods that make better use of resources: internet technology, for example.
- The project-based learning the EdVisions teachers put into Minnesota New Country School reduces the staffing (compared to the course-and-class model) while individualizing learning for the students. At the same time it may be possible for the teachers to earn more. Where the workers are the owners, powerful incentives exist to introduce technology that will make the work at the same time less difficult and more rewarding. It will be possible for the productivity gains to be captured by the teachers. Think about farming.

We cannot know at this point how the partnership model will evolve. What we can see is that the incentives – the structure opportunity and reward - will be reset into a

form that should benefit both teachers and the public, and should encourage both innovation and quality.

Why would a country serious about improving learning and teaching not want to try this?

What role can policy leadership play?

At a minimum, federal, state and local leadership that sees value in these ideas can use the “bully pulpit” to bring the idea – and the emerging experience – to the attention of teachers and others.

It will have to be the teachers who actually do it. Partnerships will appear only as groups of teachers decide they would, in fact, like to practice in this way. If groups of teachers – new teachers or veterans – do come forward, others are unlikely to stand in their way.

The union may be more supportive than is the board – at least for partnerships formed on ‘the Milwaukee model’. It may be a harder sell, actually, to the boards of education, unused to the idea of teacher professional autonomy, or to administrators who might see their role threatened. Where there is resistance, policymakers will need to help clear the way for the teachers.

Not much may be required in the way of changes in law. It has been easy for the partnership arrangement to appear in the chartered-school sector. The school is normally a nonprofit corporation, which has broad power to enter into agreements. Teachers need no new authority to organize partnerships or cooperatives.

Introducing the idea into the district sector of public education may be somewhat more difficult. At the moment, the law and the master contracts neither explicitly permit nor explicitly prohibit an agreement between a partnership and a board: They simply do not contemplate it. Teachers have always been employees. The idea of ‘contracting’ has always been the notion of contracting out the present employees’ work, to others. A different

situation exists when it is the present employees proposing simply to convert their relationship with the board from an employee to a partnership arrangement. Some adjustment of law may be required, especially to be sure teachers can remain in the retirement program.

Some adjustment may also be required in states where the law provides for teachers to sit as members of the board of a chartered school. (Initial Minnesota law required teachers to form a majority of the chartered school board.) Teachers on the board of a chartered school should probably be required to abstain from decisions affecting a partnership in which they are members. It may be, of course, that as the idea of the partnership develops, the teachers will feel better represented there; and there will no longer be a need for teachers to serve as members of the board.

Clearly, partnerships need autonomy; broad authority to decide how the job is to be done. State policy leadership will need to be sure its chartering law grants sufficient authority to schools, so the board of the school can pass through this autonomy to the partnership. Similarly, the board of a district will need to give real autonomy to a teacher partnership running a department, or program.

Finally, Minnesota has been giving some thought recently to a new kind of sponsor in the charter sector, which would specialize in schools created on the partnership model, and which would have the creation of new public schools as its only job.

Conclusion

The partnership arrangement for teachers is not a substitute for the particular changes and improvements that need to be made in teaching: not a substitute for training nor a substitute for compensation-reform nor a substitute for efforts at recruitment and retention. It is, as we have tried to make clear here, a new and different framework in

which these efforts to change and improve teaching can be carried out.

It may, simply, prove possible to improve both teaching and our national force of teachers more rapidly in the partnership framework than in the employer/employee, boss/worker, framework.

It does appear that quite significant numbers of teachers would themselves like to give this a try. We should, public policy should, give the teachers – and ourselves – this opportunity.

CONTRIBUTORS

This paper was edited by Education|Evolving associate Ted Kolderie, with contributions from E/E associates Ed Dirks-wager, Kim Farris-Berg and Jon Schroeder.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SOURCES

Web site: www.educationevolving.org. From the home page, click on "new organizational arrangements..." and then on "Teacher ownership...".

Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalizing Public Education. Edited by Edward J. Dirks-wager. Forward by Ted Kolderie. Scarecrow Press. 2002. Available at Amazon.com and [Barnes and Noble.com](http://BarnesandNoble.com). Ed Dirks-wager can be reached at ejd2@uslink.net

EdVisions Cooperative: A cooperative of teacher-owners that contract with ten chartered schools to provide the complete educational program. www.edvisions.coop

About Education|Evolving

Education|Evolving brings together a group of veteran affairs professionals who have been working for a number of years on questions relating to the future of public education in Minnesota and elsewhere. The initiative – led by Ted Kolderie and Joe Graba – is a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University, both in St. Paul. Its coordinator is Jon Schroeder, former director of Charter Friends National Network (CFNN).



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A Pioneer in Teacher Professional Practice

Minnesota New Country School

Teachers in professional partnerships – and many observers – make the claim that the new types of organizational arrangements and schools lead to higher performing teachers, students and educational institutions. The experience at Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) in (population 910) Henderson, Minnesota, offers good evidence to back up those claims. MNCS was one of Minnesota’s early charter schools, authorized by the LeSeuer-Henderson School District. Opened in the fall of 1994, MNCS now serves approximate 120 students in grades 7-12.

The non-profit MNCS contracts with EdVisions Cooperative, a Teacher Professional Practice that has members who work in nine other schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The teachers – who prefer to be called “advisors” – each work with 15-20 students across grade levels under a curriculum that is project-based. The advisors also share administrative and support functions needed to keep the school and its facility up and running.

MNCS advisors are, among other things, convinced that the incentive structure is better, leading to their increased willingness to keep up-to-date with research-based learning, theories, and discussions. A teacher partnership really does free-up time, they say, to work together and to individually do hands-on staff and program development.

This type of governance arrangement also allows teachers to block off more time to develop and improve their professional development plans. The MNCS advisors review themselves in the fall, at mid-year, and at the end of the year, so professional development plans are never idle. In addition, each advisor’s plan includes professional, school and personal goals. Each advisor is also able to create joint goals with other staff members.

At MNCS, the teacher partnership allows the advisors to consistently strengthen their knowledge about how to make sound management decisions and increase accountability. Dee Thomas, one of the MNCS founders, notes that she has been the only staff member who has gone to the state’s annual conference on statutory and rules changes. But, since other colleagues want to benefit from what she learns, she puts on a mini-seminar for them when she returns. As a former district high school principal, Dee says, “Most high school principals wouldn’t do that.”

Teacher professional practices have also improved the advisors’ time-management, they say, mainly because decisions are made at the source. If something in the curriculum or culture isn’t working,

the MNCS advisors can address the problem within 24 hours, eliminating the bureaucratic red tape of working through superiors who aren’t familiar with day-to-day happenings at the school.

MNCS’s teacher-owners are involved in all key management issues. Dee Thomas says she always knows exactly how much money is in the budget. But, when she was principal at a district high school, her superiors would call and tell her to cut programs or freeze salaries, but she was never given the reasons for the decisions. The same is true, she and others at MNCS say, for policies involving the school. The MNCS teachers note that, when they were district employees, they only learned governing policies when they were in trouble and needed the policy to bail them out. As teachers in a professional practice, they’re the key decision-makers.

The teachers at MNCS believe their governance arrangement has led to higher performing students, as well. On a daily basis, students observe teachers working together to learn something and to make the school a better place. Students see teachers modeling how to be lifelong learners and then work to do the same.

Also relevant to student performance, MNCS advisors say that, because ownership allows them more time to stay up-to-date with the latest research and development, they are able to more consistently improve the learning program – with resulting improvements in student achievement levels. MNCS’s teachers say that their ability to make changes to the learning program at a rapid pace has also helped improve student performance.

Profiles of other teacher-owned schools reveal similar findings. In a recent paper published by Education|Evolving, students and teachers from Avalon Charter School, an EdVisions-affiliated high school in Saint Paul, claimed the positive learning environment teacher-owners can create is almost a “prerequisite for learning.” The Avalon students described how school size, personal relationships with teachers, the ability to influence the learning program and access to technology were all barriers to learning in their former (traditional district school) settings. At Avalon, these factors were all positive assets and the students “get right to learning.”

“Teacher Partnerships and their effect on schools”

A presentation and discussion at
the Progressive Policy Institute
Washington D.C. -- November 14, 2003

Following is an edited transcript of a presentation and discussion on Teacher Professional Partnerships hosted by the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) on November 14, 2003. Presenting were Joe Graba, Senior Policy Fellow at Hamline University, Dee Thomas, one of the founding teachers at Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, Minnesota, and Cris Parr, one of the founders of the I.D.E.A.L charter school in Milwaukee.

Will Marshall (PPI President): PPI has always spotlighted innovation. We’ve been fascinated with Minnesota and Wisconsin; progressive states. Almost 15 years ago we were alerted to the public school choice appearing there. PPI did a report on this in 1990, which led to our support for chartering as a strategy. We continue to listen. Now we’re hearing about teacher partnerships, along with their associated instructional innovations.

So we appreciate your coming today. This is a terribly intriguing concept. Raising the quality of teaching is essential to the national effort. And people have talked for years about improving the professional status of teachers. And about compensation: If the country is going to demand more it should pay more. But this discussion so far has been entirely about inputs, like ‘training’. Your ideas go a different direction; toward partnerships, on the model of other professions.

At the moment it is a small beginning; too early for evaluation, probably. But it is promising. We hope you can tell us about the ‘early returns’, about teacher satisfaction, about student performance, about the implications for reform strategies and for the teacher unions. About whether it will be possible to bring this to scale.

Joe Graba: We’re interested in creating a policy climate that will stimulate fundamental change in schools.

Lots of existing schools work fine. But this country will have to create a great many new schools with fundamentally different arrangements. We are asking education to do what has never been done before: to get every child to be a successful learner. This is a laudable goal. But we cannot do it only with the schools we currently have. Some schools will have to be created new. It is an exciting prospect.

Teacher partnership is one of those fundamental changes in existing arrangements. It appeared first in Minnesota, in 1994, in LeSueur, a county-seat town about an hour southwest of the Twin Cities area, in the New Country School. Now another model is emerging in Milwaukee. The central idea in both is to break the traditional assumption that teachers must be employees directed by administrators. It is an idea that began to germinate here in the early 1980s, actually.

All the efforts at improving teaching and the status and performance of teachers – about recruitment and retention and compensation and development - take place within the notion of teachers as employees. Every other profession offers at least the option for its members to own and control their work. It is possible to offer this also to teachers, under the laws of most states. In Minnesota and Wisconsin the teachers are using the cooperative statute; both the models today involve workers’ cooperatives. But we will talk of them essentially as partnerships.

Be conscious that these are just examples. Focus on the central concept, of teachers banding together and selling their professional services collectively . . . to a board of education or to the board of a chartered school. Both of those you’ll hear about today are whole schools, but understand that the teacher partnership might also be handling a department of a high school or a program district-wide.

New Country is a chartered school, which means in Minnesota that it is a nonprofit corporation. It has a board. Most boards in America see themselves as running the

schools. This board is different. It manages contracts rather than people. It has no employees. It has agreements with the district, with a restaurant for lunch, with a landlord for space – and with EdVisions for the learning program. EdVisions is the teachers. The partnership receives a lump sum, to run the school. In this new arrangement the board's role is very different: Just think about what's on the agenda of a district board today. And the teachers' agenda is different.

In the spring of 2000 Tom Vander Ark from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation visited New Country at its new building in Henderson. It took him about a half-hour to decide he'd like to replicate this model. EdVisions got an initial \$4 million – then later another \$4.5 million – to move the idea nationally through 35 new schools.

Dee Thomas: In 1993 there began to be talk about a new learning situation for kids, and at the same time about a new work situation for teachers. Ted Kolderie suggested we consider ownership, partnership. We decided to look at it. Eleven of us had been teachers for many years. I certainly knew from my own experience as a principal how hard it is to change a high school. Ownership seemed to make sense. We could see a new opportunity – with new challenges. We saw it would make us responsible; would change the focus to students and to learning; would put decisions in the hands of the teachers.

I tried to list what's changed for me, with this experience.

* I have a new outlook. We are responsible. Never before did I know what the budget was – let alone be able to change it.

* Decisions are now made in a group. I may be the 'lead' teacher but I have one vote like everyone else.

* The blame-game is over. I can't complain about anybody else. We carry the responsibility. We get the praise, and also the criticism.

* We work till the job is done. This is offset by the flexibility we have when we work for ourselves. We now

use a 5:1 schedule for members. If my work is finished I get a week away after five weeks 'on'.

* We're more responsive now to students, parents, community. And they now look at us differently. They see we take pride in what we do. We are a choice program, so we do treat customers differently than we did when I was in the district. If we lost 50 students we could close. We have to know how well we are doing. We require EdVisions people to be active in the community.

* We are critical of our own performance. We sit down and say we're going to devote 6 percent of the budget, say, to compensation. Then we ask ourselves, individually: What is my value to the school? If I left what would it take to replace me? What are my goals, next? What are the surveys of student and parent opinion showing about me? A teacher – adviser – whose performance is not satisfactory is likely to leave.

* We need to market ourselves. In the district I just expected kids to walk in because they lived there. We have to attract them. We developed a program of project-based learning. We have to keep evaluating it. We think it works well. Certainly it is attracting interest. Our school gets about 500 visitors a year from all over the world.

* If something needs fixing we can act quickly. In my district high school we would create a committee to study a proposed change; then there'd be two subcommittees and eight months later all the drive for the change would be gone. Here if we see a need we can act immediately.

* We have to balance interests, when it comes to compensation. If we spend too much on our members the kids will pretty soon react. If we spend too little we will not hold teachers. So we have to balance.

* If we did hire administrators they would be working for the teachers.

* We are creating new relationships with local universities, for the staff development we need.

* We are talking to other schools. There are now 11 in the EdVisions group, with which we can network.

Cris Parr: I'd been teaching 17 years in Milwaukee public schools. The district's graduation rates and scores were atrocious. I was frustrated with how little I could accomplish outside my classroom. I was in an IGE school ("individually guided education"). A new principal proposed changing it; dropping IGE. Parents and teachers didn't know what to do. A member of the MPS board, John Gardner, suggested we start our own school. We heard about New Country. We drove there; spent a day. We came back so excited. On the five-hour drive we started talking about how to adapt this model to MPS.

I'd been active in the union. Under Wisconsin's charter law we would not have been able to stay in the retirement program using the New Country model. We started up the I.D.E.A.L. school K-4/8 on a slightly different model. We were the first new MPS instrumentality charter. After this, Bill Andrekopoulos went from Fritsche middle school to be superintendent.

I.D.E.A.L. is now in its third year. As the 8th-graders began leaving they went into high schools that were very traditional. The kids started asking for a different kind of high school. So after two years of planning we now have the Professional Learning Institute, PLI a high school in its first year.

In our arrangement all the teachers remain district employees, under the master contract and members of the union. We select our teachers: They are hired by the district. MPS is a very dynamic situation right now. With the grant from the Gates Foundation it's pushing to create 40 new schools. North Division high school, for example, where about 20% of the kids graduate, now has four small schools in it (for incoming ninth-graders). These gradually will replace the old North Division.

Graba: Milwaukee schools, not just these chartered schools, select their teachers from the district pool. EdVisions draws teachers from the market pool. Cris' school can de-select a teacher, but that teacher then returns

to the district pool. The two are different, and have a different appeal to the union.

Parr: We've had awesome support from our union. We generate no grievances against administrators; create no work. I keep the union posted on developments. I was the union rep in my building all the past 17 years.

Graba: Her father, John Parr, headed the AFSCME local in the Milwaukee for many years, and has been a big help in getting memorandums of understanding from the union to let Cris' school do the things the teachers decide to do.

Parr: I have almost the same list as Dee of the things that have changed for me.

* I got the keys to my building. It feels like my building now. I can see the same feeling in the kids. They scrounged up a lot of the furniture over the summer; cleaned it. They like the school. We often have to throw them out. "It's 7 p.m.; time to go home."

* We have extra responsibility. I spent years not caring about the budget or where the toilet paper came from. Here I have to think about these things. And the kids are involved, too. We involve them in interviews: One student was the decisive vote on our secretary, who has turned out to be just great.

* In Milwaukee the 30-year administrators are now seeing something like 10 teacher groups coming in with proposals for schools like this. The momentum is growing. I see no way to stop this. It is exciting now, after so many years of having to take direction I often disagreed-with. If it weren't for Gates all this might not be happening. But they invest only in this small-school arrangement.

* We have a lot more flexibility along with the responsibility. This can be hard for people who'd gotten used to being able to blame others. Our biggest challenge is to adjust to this new situation. University training programs will have to change.

(The meeting then opened for Q&A and discussion.)

Q: How do your schools meet state standards and other accountability requirements?

Thomas: Minnesota is now introducing more conventional standards. But we have the opportunity to decide how to meet these.

Parr: Our situation is similar. We are also project-based and individualized. We meet standards in the way it's best for the student. Not all the new MPS schools are like us. Some are more traditional.

Q: This makes great sense. What has been the reaction of your local media?

Parr: We've had very positive contacts with the media. I did have a sense when the reporters first came that they were looking for what they might find not working well; for something negative. Yet the stories came out positive. They come back, to see if it's lasted. Reporters did go to North Division on its first day with the new small schools. That was unfair. But at North Division the principal is still the boss; the teachers are assigned to the small schools. Some of them are struggling.

Thomas: So far the coverage on our schools has been positive. It is sometimes hard for the reporters to see the distinction between what's 'charter' and what's 'teacher ownership'.

Graba: There's a continuing need to stress that chartered schools are public schools. There are really three separate dimensions of innovation in this: the chartering, with its greater autonomy; the teacher partnership as a new form of governance, and the project-based learning.

Q: What would you need from universities?

Parr: Something about management. My father wrote our budget, since none of us had this experience. Something about policy issues, public-relations.

Thomas: We now have relationships with Minnesota State University/Mankato and with Hamline University for a 'leaders center' on partnership and ownership. This will be an 18-month development program. We're also considering an online version.

Graba: In a teacher training institution, few of the faculty have this knowledge or experience. Many are actually offended at the idea of teachers playing these roles.

Q: What has been the reaction of traditional administrators and how are administrative functions handled?

Thomas: Principals are concerned about administrators being needed still. But they will be needed, by the teachers.

Parr: Some of our MPS schools are becoming multiplexes. We now have four schools in our building. These may join together to hire, say, a business manager to serve them all.

Q: I'm a lawyer, activist, in Prince Georges County. A new attorney may make \$100,000 a year. What is your compensation.

Thomas: We set our own compensation. We pay well; higher than what's paid in most nearby districts. We also pay extra for the administrative work. I personally make less than I'd make as a principal in a district. But the job I have is the most rewarding thing I've done in my life. Before, 95 percent of the work was keeping order; now that's maybe one per cent.

Graba: That school does have a problem getting kids to leave at the end of the day. They come in on vacation time. There is a total change in the 'climate'.

Q: I teach at a university near here. I agree we need new models of school. I'm concerned the pressures now for accountability will block new models. Don't we need to find new measures of performance? Can we do both kinds of 'accountability'?

Thomas: I agree some things in the new standards are unnecessary; are things I didn't really need and you didn't really need. We like to show our kids are becoming successful learners who will be lifelong learners, even if not all go to college. Will there be a fight about over (these different concepts of performance)? Absolutely.

Parr: Charters in MPS are evaluated every five years. I'm more accountable than the traditional school. And I'm

OK with this. MPS is now moving to value-added as a measure. This longitudinal performance is important. Our school has 98 percent attendance, every day. If a kid is absent I'm on the phone: We've gone to pick up kids. Accountability has got to be more than test scores.

Q: Is this arrangement unique to small schools?

Parr: Our budget is based on pupil count, attendance, and we have a 1:17 ratio. So we are tight at our size. But I would never go back to larger size.

Thomas: We cap enrollment in our school. But we could do a small school like this within a larger school. That would take a paradigm-change in districts.

Graba: Chartering allows greater flexibility, so there are some efficiencies that help. Also, project-based learning is a huge economy. You cannot run a small high school on the course-and-class basis, with all the specialty teachers that would require. In the model they use the teacher becomes more a generalist, a guide to the subjects.

Thomas: Since EdVisions now has 11 schools there are economies through sharing: payroll, for example, benefits packages.

Q: How can you meet the requirements about 'highly qualified teachers' if you're not teaching courses in subjects?

Thomas: I'm on the Minnesota Board of Teaching, and this is an issue currently; we're asking for a ruling about this. In our school we do have a subject-matter specialist 'in charge' of each area. We are also starting toward developing a license for a generalist teacher. Discussions continue. Meantime, the kids are fine. We have almost 10 years experience with this, now. The subject-matter instruction was not essential.

Parr: It's an issue for us too. We have a teacher specializing in biology, but not necessary 'teaching' biology to my advisory.

Q: You both have 'a collective'. Why did you elect the workers cooperative rather than the for-profit partnership? How do you get your benefits, or the things a

union provides? What are the implications of this for unions?

Thomas: The cooperative is so common in our area, so well accepted. We wanted a shared vision for the school. Minnesota law qualifies teachers in chartered schools for retirement. We buy a health plan, and liability insurance both for the co-op and for the teacher. We work with Minneapolis attorney Dan Mott, who knows both education and co-op law. We are still wondering whether to keep one large co-op or to develop separate co-ops for each school. We recognize that we are pioneering here, and may evolve still further.

Q: What is the unions' reaction? Do they feel threatened?

Thomas: Somewhat.

Graba: They are frightened by the charter sector generally. Chris Parr and her father and I made a presentation last February to the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN). I attend TURN meetings, and have a pretty good relationship with some of their leadership. The Milwaukee arrangement, especially, generated quite a bit of interest. The dilemma for them is their own boards.

One of the Minnesota union people said to me: We're been trying to get control of professional issues. But our boards are full of 20- and 30-year people. There is no way I can lead this from the top. It will have to be something individual teachers want to do. They see the implications; the new roles for unions. They might not do bargaining. The bar associations do not bargain for lawyers, but are strong and important. Some union leaders have also seen the possibility of representing, serving, members for whom they do not bargain collectively. They have said bargaining is not an essential function of a union.

Thomas: We've always said EdVisions teachers could be (union) members.

Graba: One thing is crucial. We all know how important parents are. But we have so many huge schools that nobody can change. So parent 'involvement' really

offers parents no meaningful role. With (Dee's and Cris') schools parents are almost automatically included. When you know you carry the responsibility for the school you (the teachers) do everything that will help. Involving parents is one thing. Dee's school also uses computers better than any school I've seen. Kids use 'em like pencils; teach the teachers. So the 'arrangement' has a major effect in changing the attitude of adults.

Parr: It was parents who got the I.D.E.A.L. school started. In our school the kids do some teaching. We do peer teaching in Spanish. This means you treat the kids more as equals.

Thomas: The kids are constantly teaching me, and doing things for the school. We paid an outside firm to set up a system to keep track of student work. It's didn't operate well. Finally one of our special-ed students taught us how to get it done right.

Parr: It's interesting to watch the attitude of others in the district toward this. We're the only school that has a student's voice answering our phone, and we catch some flak for doing that. Yesterday we sent six kids to the meeting of the MPS high-school task force, to get into the discussion with 150 adults. The kids are our best salesmen.

Thomas: If I were still a high school principal I would not be having any of the opportunities I'm having now to travel and to talk about both our cooperative and about project-based learning. I would not be sitting here today. Soon I'm going to Japan, for the fourth time, for two weeks, with three of our kids, to talk with 300 or 400 Japanese middle-school students about project-based learning. If I hadn't gotten into this I'd still be in St. Clair, Minnesota, working as a home-ec teacher.

Editor's notes:

On the nature of the discussion:

One veteran Washington education-policy person remembers the discussion as "not producing the normal defensive statements common in these Washington policy sessions". The discussion had run well beyond the scheduled ending-time, and a number of those attending stayed to talk with the visitors afterward.

On who participated:

Among the organizations represented at the PPI-hosted forum were: The US Conference of Mayors, George Mason University School of Education, the US Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, the Educational Testing Service, the National Governors Association, DC Voice, the Public Education Network, the National Cooperative Bank Development Corporation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Council for Basic Education, Learning Disabilities Association, the National Institute for Literacy, Education Leaders Council, the Institute for Educational Leadership, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, the Education Writers Association and the National Commission on Teaching in America's Future.

On the potential for Teacher Professional Partnerships

WITHIN district schools:

An informal discussion including Joe Graba, Dee Thomas and Cris Parr was also held the same afternoon at the Washington office of Teach for America and the next day at the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards at its annual meeting of board-certified teachers in Washington.

In one of these conversations someone asked if the Teachers in Professional Practice concept could be applied within a district school, for example to a department.

Joe Graba said: *There is no current example of this, but in principle, yes it could be. The teachers in a department of a big high school, for example, could form a partnership through which to take responsibility for the science or math program. There would be some issues that would have to be worked through, since most everybody's notion of a contract today is of an arrangement that displaces existing employees. In the case of a partnership this would be the existing employees, simply converting to professional status; changing their relationship with the administration, changing their role, taking on a new responsibility.*

On the question of 'Would teachers actually want to do this?':

The discussion about teacher partnerships always raises the question how many teachers would in fact be interested in the partnership arrangement: Just these few? Some? A lot? A Public Agenda survey in early 2003 provides our best answer to date.

In its survey, Public Agenda asked a sample of American teachers: "How interested would you be in working at a charter school that was run and managed by teachers themselves?"

Almost an afterthought in the survey, the question hardly conveys the essence of professional partnership. And it asks the teachers to affirm a willingness to move into the charter sector as a condition of thinking about the idea of 'running the school'. Still, the response is stunning:

Teacher Interest in Running and Managing Schools Themselves

	All Teachers	Newcomers (-5 years)	Veterans +20 years)
Total interested	58%	65%	50%
Very interested	21	22	19
Somewhat interested	36	44	31
Total not-interested	36%	25%	44%
Not too interested	16	14	17
Not at all interested	19	11	27
Not sure	7	10	7

Source: Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters. Public Agenda, New York, June 2003

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ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF AN 'OPEN SECTOR' IN EDUCATION

Much of the work being done by Education|Evolving is to help create and sustain an “Open Sector” in public education – in Minnesota and elsewhere in the country. By “Open Sector,” we mean a “space” in public education that is open to new entrants – new schools that are started from scratch by teachers, parents, community organizations and multi-school networks. The “Open Sector” is also open to new authorizers or sponsors – entities other than school districts that oversee schools. The “Open Sector” is open to new learning programs and to new ways of governing and managing schools. And, as part of a broadening definition of public education, the “Open Sector” is open to all students who choose to attend schools in that sector.

The “Open Sector” is based on the premise that we cannot get the degree of change and improvement we need in education by relying only on fixing the schools we now have. And, to get enough new schools that are fundamentally different, we need a combination of public policies and private actions that will allow new schools to emerge and that will create an environment in which they can succeed. This kind of positive environment for creating and sustaining new schools can be established on a state-level through actions led by state policy makers. It can also be done – and is certainly needed – in major urban communities all across America.



Though chartered schools may be the most visible part of the “Open Sector” today, this concept of a positive environment for creating and sustaining successful new schools is not limited to charters. The “Open Sector” can also include schools operating within a district or state on some kind of contract other than a charter – as long as they are truly autonomous, accountable and open to all students who chose them.

There is also no prescribed or uniform learning program presumed by this vision for creating many more schools new. In fact, there’s an urgent need to better understand, respect and address the individual differences in students. It’s likely, however, that successful new schools in the “Open Sector” will be smaller and that they will make it possible for all students to take a more active role in their learning and to develop more direct and nurturing relationships with adults.

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