



Can Teachers Run Their Own Schools?

Tales from the Islands of Teacher Cooperatives

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Table of Contents

Project-Based Learning 4

Avalon compared 7

Democratic Schooling 9

Physical Space and Psychological Hope 12

A Producers' Cooperative 13

Other Islands in the Archipelago 16

Milwaukee and the unionized version of teacher-run schools 17

The Pilot School Dimension 18

Examining Island Real Estate 19

The Policy Dimension: Islands or a Network of Practice 22

Coherence through collaboration 23

A different division of labor 23

Unitary democracy instead of central authority 24

Introspective routines 26

Project-based pedagogy 26

Successfully managing paradox 27

Finding Policy Levers 29

Policy that establishes teacher-run schools 29

A 'text' to develop and improve teacher-run schools 31

The Bottom Line 35



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Can Teachers Run Their Own Schools? Tales from the Isles of Teacher Cooperatives

Looking for a causeway to the mainland


In Arthurian legend, Avalon is “The Fortunate Isle.” For the faculty and many of the 187 students, the Avalon School in St. Paul, Minnesota is also wonderfully detached from the mainland of public education. From the old coffee factory in which it operates to the individual student work-spaces, it doesn’t look much like school at all.

To understand the island of Avalon it is necessary to hold three concepts in mind at the same time: First, the idea of project-based learning: not just doing projects as part of a class assignment but understanding schooling as a series of student-initiated projects. Second, the idea of a democratic organization in which students set a lot of the rules, resolve conflicts, and enforce many of the norms. And third, the idea of a teacher-run school in the utopian tradition of producers’ cooperatives.

At Avalon these three ideas are so bundled together that the school would lose its identity if one of them were pulled away. Clearly, the teachers at Avalon have craft knowledge about how to run project-based learning. But how much of that craft knowledge depends on the fact that teachers work in an environment where students are socialized to take responsibility for their own learning and that consciously *learning from failure* is an important part of the process?

Clearly, students at Avalon run their own Congress that makes the rules for the school. But how much of their capacity to do so is a function of a set of collegial relationships built through the process of working on projects, study groups, and daily experience in relational trust building? Clearly, faculty at Avalon have created and sustained a producers’ cooperative with no permanent administration. But how much of that is sustainable because the adults are driven by the democratic organization imperative as an essential pedagogical tool?

The combination of the three concepts creates plenty of policy paradox: entrepreneurship mixed with utopian socialism, teacher control mixed with lack of



union protections, attention to student outcomes mixed with diffidence about conventional assessment.¹

Extracting public policy possibilities from Avalon's island of education requires examining some other islands of innovation that share a common heritage but have evolved in somewhat different ways. Fortunately, there are a growing number of schools that emphasize the three elements to varying degrees. Some are more teacher-run than others, some more project-based without the teacher cooperative idea. Some are charter schools; others are part of conventional school districts.

The contemporary bundling of these ideas began in rural Minnesota in 1994 at the Minnesota New Country School, where the local school district contracted with a teacher cooperative to operate a school. That cooperative continues to run schools, and it has spawned a non-profit school service organization, EdVisions, that provides assistance to nearly 50 schools around the country that vary widely in the degree of teacher autonomy and authority.²

In this analysis, we first visit Avalon and then examine some of the other islands in the archipelago before turning to an examination of the public policy dimensions of teacher-run schools.

Project-Based Learning

Carter Olsen has a lot of hair. I think it was envy that attracted me to him. We chatted for a while, and then he said, "you want to see my senior project proposal?" Carter is proposing to study Norse mythology, or using mythology to study Norse culture, or something like that. His ideas are still a little unfocused, not unlike that of many college students as they approach their advisors about a thesis. But Carter is willing to share his work with an outsider, because that is how things are at Avalon.³

The senior thesis is one of the essential educational structures of Avalon School, which was founded in 2001 by a group of teachers and parents. It shares a philosophy with EdVisions, although it is a freestanding organization chartered under the sponsorship of Hamline University.

Carter has prepared himself to research and write his thesis by taking an introduction to anthropology course at Hamline, and there he learned how artifacts can be studied to understand ancient cultures. As is the case for other students in

¹ Stone, Deborah. *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.

² <http://www.edvisions.com/custom/SplashPage.asp> (Accessed, July 30, 2010).

³ Olsen has successfully completed his senior project and is happily taking college courses.

Minnesota, Carter's foray into university courses is made possible by a legislated Postsecondary Enrollment Options Program designed to allow high school students to broaden their educational background. "Ancient cultures interest me more than modern cultures, possibly because of the relative mystery surrounding them," he writes in his proposal.

Just like a graduate student, Carter has found a committee of advisors, which in his case includes his parents, teachers at the school, a fellow student, and a community member.

The requirement for a community member on project committees compels students to interact with and gain the cooperation of adults other than the school faculty. In some projects, the interaction is life changing. One student undertook a photography project with the cooperation of a professional documentary photographer. She gained his trust, and then went into ethnic neighborhoods taking pictures and interviewing people whose social and life experience were markedly different than her own.

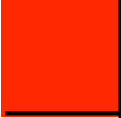
Carter reads a lot. My eyes halted when I noticed the Seamus Heaney translation of *Beowulf* on his list, a book that remains only partly completed on my lifetime reading list. Generally, Avalon students are readers, although there is no required syllabus or common Great Books.

Carter's reading, and that of his fellow students, is built around projects. There are some classes, and math is largely class taught, but for most of each school day students work on their projects.⁴ The process would be familiar to any doctoral student, and it is difficult for teenagers for exactly the same reasons that graduate students struggle. Creation of learning experiences means dealing with ambiguity and creating structure for one's self. As one student told me, "That's the college prep piece that gets overlooked in traditional schools." But the paradox of creating structure for one's self is that it is best done in community. At Avalon, independence creates collaboration.

The pedagogy at Avalon advances learning about learning. Teachers at Avalon are called "advisors," and addressed by their first names. Advisor Kevin Ward, writes that students who come from a traditional school think, "that an open environment is the equivalent of an unsupervised study hall and act accordingly. They wait for bells and whistles and detentions and plenty of assignments."⁵ "Parents may expect to see immediate success," but "learning to become an independent learner takes not

⁴ In some instances, students complete math requirements through projects or independent study.

⁵ Ward, Kevin. "Avalon Book Chapter." *unpublished manuscript* (2007): p. 11.



only time but a good measure of failure.”⁶ These students become successful over time, Ward asserts, because students create their own rules. That struggle can take a long time, sometimes two years before a student understands that success is primarily a function of what they put into it as opposed to how well they play by someone’s rules. Contrast this with scripted teaching, frequent teacher-led drills, and frequent testing that characterizes some charter schools recognized as successful.⁷

The transformation from student as object of instruction to student as the primary worker in the educational system marks the critical difference in Avalon’s pedagogy. “Advisors are not police officers,” Ward said. “The important rule is that students must be in charge of their own learning, even if it means that they fail.”⁸ Some do, but to paraphrase a student, once students know what their education is for they seek it with more energy and enthusiasm than they had before when they were just fulfilling requirements on the way toward graduation. Only when a student sees graduation as a means and not an end does education truly become theirs.

Parents frequently seek out Avalon because their son or daughter is unhappy with the rule-based structure of the school they attend, but getting used to the lack of structure is tough for them. “My child does better with structure,” they say. “And yet they are in Avalon, a rather open and unstructured place that requires students to take charge of their own learning.”⁹ Managing parent expectations is a big part of what Avalon teachers must do.

The project process begins with brainstorming, either individually or in a group, followed by setting goals and objectives for the project. These are initiated by parents before the process continues. Tasks and milestones are then added, requiring the students to reduce their big ideas to workable steps with time estimates involved. Finally, students add a list of resources that, depending on the project, may include a working bibliography. Students then enter their completed project into a web-based program, Project Foundry, which keeps track of their progress.¹⁰ Advisors consult, tweak, and approve. As befits the school, the process is explained

⁶ Ward, “Avalon Book Chapter,” p. 11.

⁷ Gabriel, Trip. 2010. *Despite Push, Success At Charter Schools is Mixed*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/02/education/02charters.html?adxnnl=1&ref=education&adxnnlx=1276362348-sQbtc92c9irQ5CI9RpcASQ> (accessed May 1, 2010).

⁸ Ward, “Avalon Book Chapter”, p. 12-13.

⁹ Ward, “Avalon Book Chapter,” p. 11.

¹⁰ <http://www.projectfoundry.org/index.html> (Accessed March 11, 2010).

on the school web site by a campy student-made video complete with an imitation of Tina Fey channeling Sara Palin.¹¹

Students create projects linked to the Minnesota state standards, and they graduate by completing them. The credit system—perhaps the most enduring structure of American high schools—is relegated to a bookkeeping function. Students log the hours that they put into projects. One hundred hours yield one credit; 40 credits are needed for graduation. But regardless of the hours put in, students must design projects that meet all the state standards.

Projects are graded using a rubric. Across the top of the rows in the rubric matrix are grades for a project. *Attempted* means that the student turned something in but that it was low quality work—below a C grade. *Met* means B or C high school work. *Achieved* is A or B work. But beyond acceptable achievement is the *Exceeds* category, which outlines the expectations for professional quality work. In terms of grading the research methodology, for example, meeting basic standards or *Met* might involve a paper that used only Internet sources, while professional standards or *Exceeds* requires a solid bibliography, the most recent and valuable sources, and primary source material collected by the student.

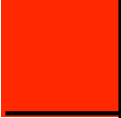
Each time a student completes a project, he or she is required to grade it themselves. The school's "Reflection and Evaluation of Academic Work" is discussed with advisors and links the project to Minnesota graduation standards. All senior projects, and some others depending on design, require a public presentation.

Avalon compared

Demographically, Avalon resembles Minnesota as a whole more than the St. Paul Public School District. Some 71 percent of Avalon's students are white, compared with 76 percent statewide and 25 percent of the 37,875 students in the city school system. Avalon students are also substantially less poor (22 percent) than those in the surrounding St. Paul District where 70 percent of students qualify for the free-or-reduced-price lunch program. Compared with the city, however, Avalon has a substantially higher percentage of special education students: 25% compared to 16%, and these students do relatively well in reading proficiency.¹²

¹¹ <http://www.avalonschool.org/project-based-learning-pbl/pbl-walkthrough-video/> (Accessed March 11, 2010). In addition, EdVisions has created a longer illustration of the project learning method: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7693959170730516557&hl=en#> (Accessed September 12, 2010).

¹² Demographic and achievement data from <http://education.state.mn.us>. (Accessed March 11, 2010).



Under Minnesota law, students are free to transfer between districts, and more than 7,000 St. Paul students have chosen this option. Avalon benefits from this option. In 2008, about one third of its students came from municipalities other than St. Paul, the largest number coming from Minneapolis.

Avalon met federal Adequate Yearly Progress requirements in 2009 as did the state as a whole and white students in St. Paul, although the entire district did not. Avalon students did substantially less well (40%) than students statewide (60%) in standardized testing for math. Its results were similar to those of St. Paul and Minneapolis citywide. Avalon students scored slightly better (77%) than the state in reading proficiency and substantially better than either of the twin cities.

The Great Schools ranking system gives the school a 6 out of 10, much higher than surrounding schools, which are mostly ranked 1 or 2. And the school gets a 5-Star ranking from parents, mostly with glowing commentary.¹³

The school keeps an eye on external tests, and in some ways responds to them. Math, for example, is now class-taught rather than embedded in projects because the school could not figure out a way to hit all the specific proficiencies tested by the state using the project mode exclusively. Still, students use the same checklist system for math as they do with other state standards, and they keep track of their own progress. Some advisors give students practice tests for the state exams. These serve as a means of formative assessment, cueing teachers when students may need assistance. They also serve as a very subtle form of test prep. But there is no intensive preparation or drill that typifies many district schools.

Although Avalon students take state tests, it is clear that the school's goal is not test score maximization. Teachers don't tout scores, and when they talk about their students, it is in terms of the "amazing," or "remarkable," project they have done. "I think that our only concern is that (the test scores) are not substantially below the state average," said Carrie Bakken, Avalon's lead teacher.

This past year, an Avalon student won an expenses-paid trip to Washington to receive an award from the National Park Service in recognition of a project the student designed and completed. Another chose to move away from a gang he'd been involved in and committed to attending school regularly. "That's not going to

¹³ http://www.greatschools.org/cgi-bin/cs_compare/mn?compare_type=city&city=St.%20Paul&school_selected=3165&level=m&from=form (Accessed March 11, 2010).

show up on a test,” said Bakken. “Achievement does look different for student X and student Y.”¹⁴

Democratic Schooling


There was a “Lord of the Flies” moment during the first year of Avalon’s existence. The students gathered to decide whether to allow the students to override a decision of the adults (the executive branch of the school’s government). Bakken recalls watching with more than a little fear of what the well-intentioned adults had unleashed. There was a lot of yelling, but also good arguments on both sides. Ultimately the students decided not to allow an override of an executive veto. The constitution itself looks very American, with three familiar branches. It grew from class study of the U.S. Constitution, but the teachers did not write a word of it.¹⁵

The Congressional system contains some refreshing elements of direct democracy:

- Anyone can be a member of Congress, but they actually have to show up and participate. Reading newspapers or fiddling with your Blackberry while other people are talking is considered bad form.
- There are no hierarchical positions in Congress.
- The person who records the minutes in one weekly meeting chairs the next one.
- Members can (and do) remove other members for bad behavior.
- Congress can “make or modify any law applying to students or to the student/advisor relationship so long as it is not unconstitutional or against any higher level (state or national) laws.”
- Congress can form committees to organize social events (which sounds like a good use of Congressional time).

¹⁴ Hawkins, Beth. 2010. Teacher Gets to Tout St. Paul's Avalon Co-Op School to Nation's Top Education Officials. http://www.minnpost.com/stories/2010/07/01/19375/teacher_gets_to_tout_st_pauls_avalon_co-op_school_to_nations_top_education_officials (accessed July 21, 2010).

¹⁵ Bakken, Carrie. 2010, August 10. Personal correspondence. “It [the Constitution] was part of a civics class I created with students about six weeks after we opened. We needed to figure out how students were going to have a voice in our school. There was an incident in the café in the beginning of the year where the students were demanding that this was their school and they were in charge....Shortly after, we decided that we would create a framework for student input. Walter Enloe [one of the school’s founders] had suggested we look into the Paideia Institute and their constitution. I created a class, U.S. Government: Writing the Avalon Constitution. The students did in fact write the Constitution. It was teacher facilitated, but I did not write a word of it. I just taught them about the U.S. Constitution, and we worked from there on the Avalon Constitution. A 9th grader took the students’ ideas and wrote the document. About 25 students participated.” For more on the constitution see: Enloe, Walter. “Living Democracy Daily: Service Learning and Active Citizenship.” In *The Future of Service Learning*, edited by Jean Strait, and Marybeth Lima, 206-18. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2009.



The Avalon statute books are not cluttered with a lot of laws, but Congress has passed statutes mandating sex education, requiring a mandatory cleaning of advisory rooms in which students and advisors “will clean their respective learning areas.” Subsequently, Congress passed a law limiting required cleaning to no more than once a week. It also gave students the right to read in the common room (café) if they were ahead in their work.

All high schools have issues with cell phones, and many ban them, some going so far as to collect the phones from students when they enter school in the morning and return them when they leave. Then they spend adult time trying to ferret out those clever students who have a second, undisclosed phone. At Avalon, cell phones are a learning tool. “I have had students use their phones for presentations or to retrieve information from the Internet as a part of a class discussion,” said Bakken.¹⁶

It’s not that cell phones were not an issue. Congress discussed them at length, and at the end it decided that the problem was not the phones themselves but the disruption they sometimes caused to learning. So rather than ban phones, Congress banned disruption, and in 2009 passed a law saying:

If a student is disruptive or disrespectful to the point that an advisor asks them to leave the seminar, advisory, etc., and their request is denied/ignored, the student will be given one warning and if further action is necessary, the student will be permanently removed from the advisory, seminar (including Math) for the rest of the block [6 week session] with the exception of students with an IEP or other programs that require their presence.¹⁷

Avalon’s judiciary is built around peer mediation and restorative justice. Its manual adopts, and nicely condenses standard mediation techniques. (“Ask disputants what will happen if they don’t solve the problem.”) Mediators are trained every year, and students can gain language arts credit under the interpersonal communications standard for the course. Mediators are taught to rein in the overly aggressive and help the timid. (“Offer the timid person a chance to speak first so they do not get overshadowed by the other disputant.”) They learn where to seat people, what to do if the conversation gets stuck, and how to get the parties to communicate their underlying feelings in both verbal and non-verbal ways.

The concept of restorative justice varies from the zero-tolerance rules found in most schools: those rules that are enforced and applied rigidly without exception. Avalon has rules about drugs and weapons, and those offenses are handled by the faculty through intervention, suspension and continued monitoring. But for other offenses

¹⁶ Bakken, Carrie, personal communication, July 29, 2010.

¹⁷ The Constitution of the School of Avalon, Law 13, October 2009.

the restorative justice system asks how the student has damaged the school as a society and what they need to do to put things right. “[T]he student gives something back to the community and learns how their actions affected the community as a whole.”¹⁸

Last year, for example, a handful of students made a habit of skipping out of school to sneak a smoke behind a building in the neighborhood. Certainly, this was not a red-letter offense, and similar behavior is in evidence in neighborhoods surrounding many high schools. Still, there were complaints, and the students had caused Avalon to be negatively perceived. Called to question by other students, the errant smokers brainstormed ideas to boost the school’s image. They cleaned up around the school, passed out school brochures in the area, and created an anti-smoking presentation for the Middle School students. The smoking also stopped, at least around school.

The Avalon constitution contains a Bill of Rights:

- Every person has the right to bring someone to mediation. For students, this includes the right to take an adult in the school to mediation.
- Every person has the right to ask “why?” (This is not a trivial matter in a high school.)
- Every person has the responsibility to treat others with respect and dignity and the right to be so treated.
- Every person has the responsibility to question themselves and their actions in times of duress.
- Every person has the responsibility to listen at all times to whoever is speaking.
- Every person has the right and responsibility to be involved and participate.

The constitution creates a much different school than most. A student, Anna, recalls, “At [my former school] the number one rule is there’s to be no insubordination...whereas at Avalon, we wrote into the constitution the right to ask questions. And that was really cool—to just be able to go to a teacher and say, ‘I don’t understand why we have to do this’ and have a straightforward conversation.” At the same time there is an imperative to solve one’s own problems. As Anna says, “A lot of whining goes on...democracy is very messy—so there [will] be people whining, ‘I hate this. I don’t like this, fa-la-la-la-la....’ The line in the sand is basically, ‘okay, you don’t like it; what are you going to do about it?’”¹⁹

¹⁸ Avalon School, “Peer Mediation and Restorative Justice Manual.” p 11.

¹⁹ Pat Wollmering, “Anna Interview Report,” Hamline University, 2008, pp. 3, 11.



Physical Space and Psychological Hope

Avalon exists in an old, red brick three-story industrial space. Another charter, a German immersion school, occupies the first floor, and Avalon has the upper two. It's a scruffy space, and Avalon is looking for new quarters.

Avalon's industrial workspace is decorated like a teenager's bedroom from the moderate grunge period. There are a few conventional classrooms, and a science lab, but the heart of the space is the advisory space surrounding the common area or café. Each advisory contains about 20 office-type desks, which are the student work-spaces, and a similar desk for the advisor. The relatively small "class size" of advisories is a function of the school's concentration of its faculty in the core subjects and the relatively few extra or ancillary teachers and support personnel. Computers—some school-owned desktops, some student-owned laptops—sit on most of the desks where students are at work on various stages of project development.

Most of the students are, actually, at work quietly, either independently or with others. When they have questions, or they want approval of a project, they approach their advisor, and occasionally an advisor, who has been watching the room with the well-practiced teacher peripheral vision, will quietly ask whether a student is making progress or just playing with pictures on their computer. ("What are you trying to do there? Is that moustache you are drawing on Obama important to your project?") But all of this is quiet and in a low key.

The advisories are all open space, surrounded by windowed walls. Between them, in the center of the building, is the café with round tables and chairs. Students can snack there, go talk with other students, and hang out. Hanging out is at least a student semi-prerogative so long as project work is making good progress, and it would be a stretch to claim that all "project planning" conversations in the café were highly task oriented.

The school has a small library, which is student run. The library rules, posted on the door, announce that it is a "silent workshop" that students can use unless they have overdue work or failed courses. There is to be "no inappropriate behavior anywhere, but especially on the couch—you know what I mean." Violation of the rules will result in "permanent banishment."

Avalon's less-than-ideal factory space seems to work for the students. They navigate the stairs from second to third floor, gather in work groups around tables set in an alcove, move in and out of advisories with permission notes from advisors jotted in the schedule notebooks they all carry. Student work is in evidence everywhere: some stunning photographs, a study of Hiroshima after the bomb, poetry, announcements about upcoming events.

Part of why the somewhat cramped, second-hand space at Avalon and the EdVisions schools works is that they are built on the realization that the students are the real workers in the education system, that "schools need to pay attention to

adolescent development as a means to academic achievement” and whether “our educational environment is developmentally healthier for adolescents.”²⁰ In simple terms, it’s about whether these students have a greater sense of hope about themselves and about their lives. Hope counts at Avalon, and as we shall see hope is one of the outcomes the school measures.

A Producers’ Cooperative

There are no administrators at Avalon, no executives, no CEOs. There’s a good Russian restaurant across the street, but there are no education czars in Avalon. Carrie Bakken shares the program-coordinator job with Gretchen Sage-Martinson, who works part time, but no one thinks that arrangement is permanent. Sage-Martinson talks of stepping down and of other faculty stepping up. The school has already undergone a change in leadership, when its founding teacher leader, Andrea Martin retired.

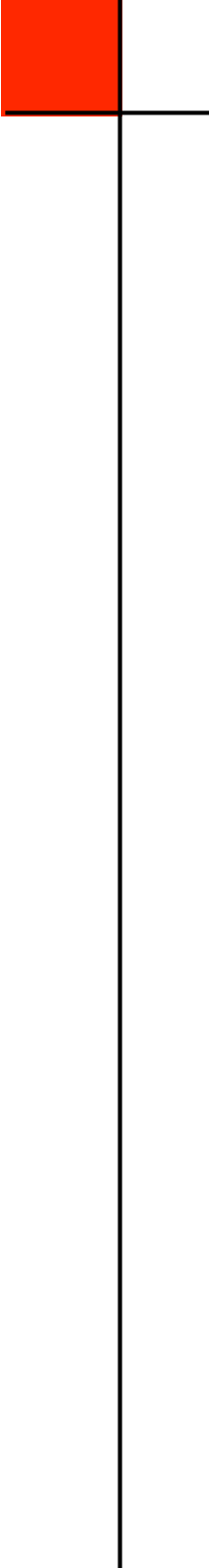
Producers’ cooperatives are not a novel idea in Minnesota, where agricultural cooperatives—the best known of which was the Green Giant brand—have been a way of organizing businesses for generations. Thus, it is not surprising that the practice of teacher-run schools would flourish in the Upper Midwest. But formal and informal cooperatives reach far back into American history. “Formally organized cooperatives, such as mutual fire insurance societies, date back to colonial times. Informal cooperative action pervades our early history in the form of barn raising, threshing bees and mutually supportive activities of neighborhood, town and village life.” The use of cooperatives is much more widespread than commonly realized, involving as many as 100 million Americans.²¹

When applied to public education, the cooperative form of governance challenges both the notion of ownership and that of bureaucratic management. It is “perhaps the most radical departure from other American schools, whether public, private, or charter.”²² In the original Minnesota notion, it combines financial ownership with teachers’ ownership of their work: the opportunity to function as self-governing professionals. In practice, it has been this latter dimension that has spread to new locations.

²⁰ Newell, Ronald J., and Van Ryzin, Mark J. “Growing Hope as a Determinant of School Effectiveness.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 88 (2007): 465-71: 466.

²¹ Nelson, William, and Judy Ziewcz. “Forward.” In *Cooperation Works!: How People Are Using Cooperative Action to Rebuild Communities and Revitalize the Economy*, 1-6. Rochester, MN: Lone Oak Press, 1996, p. 5.

²² Rofes, Eric. ND. Teachers and Communitarians: A Charter School Cooperative in Rural Minnesota, p. 10.
http://www.ericofes.com/research/Teachers_Communitarians_wc.doc.pdf (accessed May 17, 2010).



In some ways, the idea of teacher ownership and control parallels changes in health care, where the old sole practice model has virtually disappeared, and the industry is moving from autonomy to accountability, just as education is. In the original version of the idea, EdVisions, a corporation founded to operate teacher cooperatives, has contracts with several charter school boards throughout Minnesota. In each contract the board delegates authority to manage and operate the school to EdVisions and pays them a lump-sum. The cooperative then grants authority to a site team, a group of teachers who are members of the cooperative. They make decisions about the budget, curriculum, and personnel. Each site team pays EdVisions an administrative fee for payroll and benefit services. The original model was to create an opportunity for equity ownership by teachers in the cooperative, including the distribution of surpluses, but in practice there have been few surpluses to distribute. Most teachers have chosen to be associate members rather than owner-partners, and not all of them are heavily involved in operational decisions.

Avalon is a variant on this model. It shares the EdVision philosophy, but is organized as a traditional charter school. Teachers are technically employees, but several of them are on the board; in effect they work for themselves. Faculty meetings are chaired by different members, and substantive decisions are by faculty vote.

Teachers at Avalon have the authority to select colleagues, evaluate and terminate them, set staffing patterns, select their leaders, determine the budget for the entire school, determine the salaries of colleagues and their leaders, pick the curriculum and pedagogy, set the schedule, and within the school's student-written constitution, they set disciplinary policy and carry it out. They are at the pointy end of teacher empowerment.²³

In order to function, Avalon teachers have learned to make decisions efficiently. In their third year, they adopted a consensus voting mechanism called "A Fist of Five," where teachers display an open hand to fully support an idea, fewer fingers to show ambivalence, and a closed fist to block action. Although it sounds simple, the voting mechanism proved powerful. It kept the verbally aggressive among the staff from talking an idea to death, because another member could call for a vote.

The school also learned to keep careful minutes of decisions reached so that once an issue was decided it would not have to be recycled. A third corny but highly effective structural element is the "talking piece." A piece of wood is passed among faculty members at meetings. Possession of the wood carries with it speaking rights. No jumping in, no hijacking the conversation; go get the stick. Finally, each person in the school was trained in how to run a meeting, and the chair rotates with

²³ Ingersoll, Richard M. "Short on Power, Long on Responsibility." *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 1 (2007): 20-25.

each meeting. These structural elements helped drastically shorten faculty meetings and create a culture where decisions could be made.

Sometime these decisions are painful. Faculty cut their fringe benefits and went without cost of living increases during the 2008-2011 recession. They took on extra duties without additional compensation. Bakken notes that the economic discipline shown by her colleagues is one of the factors that has kept the school going. A nearby charter is closing, and in a faculty meeting some Avalon staff expressed sorrow over the loss of the school, but Bakken reminded her colleagues that “those folks weren’t willing to do the things we’ve done to keep their school open.”

The faculty has also had to deal with an external threat in the form of a lawsuit brought by an unhappy parent, who thought that the school was not responding to his concerns. The ordeal began as a special education due process hearing before an administrative law judge and was appealed to federal district court. The process lasted for three years and is talked about as one of the elemental challenges to the school’s operations. Conventional school districts, of course, face multiple legal challenges each year, and have created routines and personnel to deal with them, but in a small organization, such as Avalon, they are highly disruptive and potentially life threatening. These organizations do not have a great deal of what organizational scholars call “slack,” the reserve capacity that can be thrown into a crisis or emergency.


The original idea behind teacher-run schools was to create better jobs. Ted Kolderie, whose organization, Education|Evolving, launched and supported the idea, views the teacher-controlled school as a way to make the occupation more attractive:

People recognize that teaching is not presently structured to be as good a job as it could be or not structured to be as good a career as it could be. So in a real sense all the effort to create better people for the job is working up hill. If you aren’t at the same time creating a better job for the people. How do you do that except trust them, and enlarge their responsibility and hold them accountable? If they get to run the school they will accept accountability.²⁴

Rather than simply recruiting better teachers for conventional jobs, his idea is to get better jobs for the teachers.

In conventional bread-and-butter terms, jobs at Avalon are not better. Technically, they are less secure than those in district-run schools. Wages are no better than at surrounding public schools. There is no tenure, no seniority, and no union. But the

²⁴ http://www.educationevolving.org/teacherpartnerships/what_is_tpp.asp (accessed March 12, 2010).



teachers get to run the show, function in their own town hall democracy, control the curriculum, and determine the composition of their work. During the time I was there, no one made reference to a memo or directive from the central office.

In exchange for the freedom to shape their work, the Avalon teachers hold themselves accountable. The school engages in annual 360-degree evaluation, where teachers evaluate one another, students evaluate teachers, teachers evaluate the current leadership. Teachers new to the school have been fired, including some with substantial experience who did not mesh with the school's participatory culture.

The school has a high teacher retention rate. In recent years, there have been only two teachers who have left for jobs in conventional school districts in the Twin Cities area. Many of the teachers came to the school from outside teaching and would take a job other than teaching if they left Avalon. Teachers reported that the job they have now is the best one they've ever had.

Other Islands in the Archipelago

Beyond Avalon lie several other islands of teacher-run schools. As noted earlier, the largest grouping of them are in Minnesota and run by EdVisions, the organization that gave rise to the first of the teacher cooperatives, New Country School in Henderson, founded in 1994. New Country students would later gain fame through a group science project that studied deformed frogs in a local pond, and which spawned a line of "big science" research. By 2002, it had been dubbed "the coolest school in America."²⁵

EdVisions began as an organization to spread the school design principles of project-based learning, small learning communities, authentic assessment and teacher ownership.²⁶ Besides schools in the footprints of New Country, EdVisions has developed an on-line 7-12 grade school offering customized learning to students in rural areas where local schools have closed. Now, it largely functions as a support services organization providing professional development, personnel, and payroll services to affiliated schools. There are 12 EdVisions schools in Minnesota, and 35 others throughout the country. EdVisions services schools in Wisconsin, California, Washington, Maine, South Carolina, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Kansas, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Not all of these schools are teacher-run to the same degree as those at Avalon or New Country.

²⁵ Thomas, Doug, Walter Enloe, and Ron Newell, (eds.) *The Coolest School in America: How Small Learning Communities Are Changing Everything*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education, 2005.

²⁶ <http://www.edvisions.com/> (Accessed, May 10, 2010).

Additional teacher-run schools can be found throughout the country. A roster of teacher-run schools includes 16 stand-alone teacher-run schools and some district-embedded examples, such as the Boston Pilot Schools and the growing number of Pilot schools in Los Angeles.²⁷

Milwaukee and the unionized version of teacher-run schools

Outside of Minnesota, the next largest aggregation of teacher-led schools is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where 13 teacher-run schools exist as what are called “instrumentality” charters within the Milwaukee Public Schools. Teachers gain authority to make day-to-day decisions in schools, which have no principal, through memoranda of agreement with the district and with the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association. Teachers remain employees of the district and members of the bargaining unit. They are paid according to the standard salary schedule and participate in the conventional pension system.


Milwaukee teacher-run schools control their own curriculum, and they determine some of their own work rules and internal decision processes. Unlike the case at Avalon and the EdVisions schools, they do not control personnel and budget decisions to the same extent. The Milwaukee schools can select teachers, but from the district pool of candidates, and on some occasions they receive a “must place” teacher, who has lost a position at another school.

Much of the relationship between the teacher-run schools and the district has existed as informal permission, where formal authority rests with the district but operating discretion rests with the school. Over the last decade, that relationship has been reasonably stable, but both the union presidency and superintendency have turned over, and it remains to be seen whether the new administrations will be as tolerant as the old ones. Meanwhile, the state of Wisconsin has given the state superintendent enhanced powers to intervene in Milwaukee and other districts deemed to be failing, including the ability to impose a standard curriculum in all schools. It is unclear whether this mandate applies to charters, such as the teacher-run schools, that are instrumentalities of the districts. Some of the teachers and teacher leaders are considering leaving the district altogether and applying for charter status directly from the state.²⁸

The existence of the Milwaukee teacher-run schools owes much to Cris Parr, who is the lead teacher at SUPAR (The School for Urban Planning and Architecture) that is built on the notion that there is a powerful and engaging pedagogy in the act of design. Parr was an experienced teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools when

²⁷ For a description and history of EdVisions teacher-run schools see: Dirkswager, Edward J., (ed.) *Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalization of Public Education*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

²⁸ Associated Press. “New Wis. Law Targets Failing Public Schools.” April 30 2010.



she and her father, John, visited the Minnesota EdVisions schools and began to ask themselves “why should teachers have to sacrifice their income to start a great school?” John Parr, a former union organizer, devised and negotiated the memoranda of agreement with the district and union that made the teacher-run schools possible. He has since become an advocate for teacher-run schools with teacher unions nationwide.

Since the start of the I.D.E.A.L. Charter School (Individualized Developmental Educational Approaches to Learning) in 2001, teacher-run schools have become sources of innovation for the Milwaukee Public Schools. The Academia de Lenguaje y Bellas Artes (ALBA) integrates the fine arts and Latino culture with bilingual literacy beginning with three-year-old Head Start students and continuing through 5th grade. Advanced Language and Academic Studies (ALAS) is a bilingual high school with a focus on social justice and community involvement. Marshall Montessori International Baccalaureate High School, was the first school in the world to connect the Montessori method and the IB program. The apparent success of the Milwaukee teacher-led schools varies widely, as does their fidelity to the idea of teachers running the school. In some, principal-like roles have reasserted themselves in the form of permanent leadership.

The Pilot School Dimension

The Boston Pilot Schools and those in Los Angeles are only distant relations of Avalon, but they were created in response to the same instinct that gave rise to charters, of starting new schools outside the regulations of districts and union contracts. Three of the Boston Pilot Schools are teacher-run, in the sense that Avalon is, but they are all teacher-influenced and present the same set of organizing hurdles about how vision and operating control and coordination are created without a singular hierarchy. In terms of autonomy, these schools are the logical descendants of the School Based Management/School Based Decision Making entities that were a popular reform in the 1980s and 1990s, and they face the same challenges.

Pilots, like the schools in Milwaukee, remain part of the district, and arguably have stronger leverage over in-district reforms. As Bob Pearlman, who helped the Boston Teachers Union invent the Pilot School idea, notes: “most charter schools, while interesting, are marginal to local school districts and local reform efforts, are seen as ‘hostiles,’ and in nearly all cases receive no material or moral support from the local districts where they reside.”²⁹ The hope for Pilots is that they will do as their name implies.

²⁹ Pearlman, Bob. “Smarter Charters? Creating Boston’s Pilot Schools.” In *Creating New Schools: How Small Schools Are Changing American Education*, edited by Evin Cinchy, 38-45. Teachers College Press, p. 39.

Examining Island Real Estate

No one has yet reached a definitive answer to how well teacher-run schools perform, or by what metric they should be judged. There is general agreement that success should equate to more than test scores, but in a policy environment of test score accountability—in part driven by charter school advocates and public school critics—ducking the spotlight glare of test scores or adequate yearly progress is impossible.

The tables below present a summary of the test score and demographic data for the Minnesota schools associated with EdVisions and the Milwaukee teacher-run schools. Generally, the Minnesota teacher-run schools lag the state as a whole in results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Tests. Only the Nerstrand Charter School had a higher percentage of its students meeting expectations in math, and only Nerstrand and Avalon had a higher percentage of students meeting expectations in reading. Nerstrand and New Country Day beat the state average in science. The state as a whole did not make its Annual Yearly Target benchmark; 7 of the 13 teacher-run schools did.

The demographics of the teacher-run schools vary substantially. Throughout Minnesota, 36 percent of students come from families with incomes low enough to qualify for a free-or-reduced-price lunch. The teacher-run schools range between 9 and 89 percent. But the teacher-run schools generally enroll much larger percentages of special education students. Avalon, for example, has 45 percent more special education students than the state average, and Minnesota New Country enrolls special education students at 2.5 times the state average. Anecdotal evidence from observers of these schools, suggest that parents of special education students choose the teacher-run schools because their children seem to thrive there, like school more, and stay engaged.

The Milwaukee teacher-run schools test scores approximated those of the city and were substantially lower than the state as a whole. The demographics of the teacher-run schools were also closer to those of the city, where 15 percent of the students are white, compared to the state, where 76 percent are. The teacher-run schools also mirror the city's overall measure of students in poverty, over 75 percent.

Minnesota Teacher-Run Schools: 2009-2010 Results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Test

School, Grades & Enrollment	Grade	Percent Meets or Exceeds Expectations			Made AYP	FRL [SE] *
		Math	Reading	Science		
State	All	64.69	72.41	48.83	No	36 [13]
Avalon 7 thru 12: 172	All	45.76	76.19	37.25	Yes	22 [19]
Edvisions Off Campus School: 7 thru 12: 73	All	10.71	53.12	25	No	38 [14]
El Colegio Charter School: 9 thru 12: 90	All	0	9.09	**	No	89 [16]
Green Isle Community School: K thru 6: 90	All	51.16	62.79	**	Yes	32 [14]
Lafayette Public Charter School: K thru 8: 67	All	50	66.66	15.38	Yes	63 [18]
Minnesota New Country School: 6 thru 12: 108	All	37.25	67.21	57.69	Yes	30 [33]
Naytahwaush Community School: K thru 6: 101	All	34.69	40	0	Yes	95 [31]
Nerstrand Charter School: K thru 5: 153	All	69.23	80.76	53.84	Yes	18 [12]
New Century Charter School: 7 thru 12: 144	All	28.12	47.12	25	No	42 [19]
Northern Lights Community School: 6 thru 12: 97	All	9.3	16.07	5.88	No	71 [30]
River Heights Charter School: 9 thru 12: 69	All	**	46.66	10	No	9 [13]
Riverbend Academy: 6 thru 12: 69	All	19.23	65.21	30	No	57 [51]
Sage Charter Academy: 9 thru 12: 86	All	4.76	28.57	11.11	Yes	66 [22]

** too few students to calculate. [FRL]= Free or reduced price lunch; [SE]= Special Education
Source: <http://education.state.mn.us> (Accessed, Aug. 31, 2010).

The range of test score results among the teacher-run schools is very large, and so is the student population served. The percentage of free or reduced price lunch eligible students ranges from 31 to 92 percent; the percentage of second language learners from zero to 58 percent. The percentage of African-American students

ranges from 1 to 96 percent; that of Latino students from 2 to 99 percent. (Detailed Milwaukee data can be found in Appendix A.) These data underscore the difficulty of using single measure test scores as a means of evaluating the schools, but it also underscores the need for the schools to develop their own measures, built on the school's own objectives and their distinctive characteristics, an issue discussed in a later section. In addition to test scores, there are other indicators of academic progress. The schools appear to have better than average college test results and college-going rates. The EdVisions schools averaged 23.6 on the ACT compared to a national average of 21.2. The SAT for students from these schools was 1749 compared to a national average of 1518. Over 82 percent of EdVisions graduates went on to two- or four-year colleges, compared to a national average of 68 percent.³⁰


Milwaukee Teacher Run School Test Score Results, 2009

	Reading: Proficient or Above	Math: Proficient or above	Free/Reduced Price Lunch: Students Qualifying	Special Education Students
Wisconsin	81.5%	77.3%	37%	14%
Milwaukee	58.9%	50.8%	79%	19%
Mean of Teacher-Run Schools	55.6%	38.9%	76%	20%

Mark Van Ryzin at Education|Evolving linked psychometric measurement to the notion of hope, and over the last six years the Hope Study has tracked a measurement of hope (Richard Snyder's Dispositional Hope Scale).³¹ Students with high Hope Scale scores believe that they have the ability to find workable routes to their goals and that they can meet them. The longer students are at Avalon or the EdVisions schools, the better they feel about their futures. Measurements of *autonomy, belonging, and competency* plus *academic press* (questions such as "My teachers press me to do thoughtful work") are related to increased student engagement, and that drives both increased academic performance and an increase in the Hope Scale measurement. Interestingly, the idea of mastery—trying hard and understanding—that is encouraged at Avalon is positively linked to student engagement and results. But the idea of performance for its own sake and sparse rewards is negatively linked. The average student in an EdVisions school will grow

³⁰ Personal correspondence, Kim Farris-Berg, May 2010.

³¹ Van Ryzin, Mark J. "Measuring School Capacity for Positive Youth Development." *Unpublished manuscript* (2009).



on the Hope Scale from about 48, which is the national average, to over 55 in six years.

The Hope Study is not likely to replace state standardized tests. But it speaks to a willingness of these schools to put their values into measurable terms and to track them over time.

The Policy Dimension: Islands or a Network of Practice

The question of whether cooperatives can work in public education requires a complex answer.

The Minnesota experiment appears to have settled the teacher financial ownership question in the negative. The notion of a for-profit cooperative selling services to a school district, appears not to be growing. Most of the teachers associated with the rural Minnesota schools, where the EdVisions cooperative started, are associate members, essentially employees, instead of partners in the cooperative itself. And most pointedly, there are not a lot of profits to share. EdVisions reported passing out \$100-\$300 bonuses some years back, but that level of incentive is not going to attract would-be venture capitalists to teaching.

However, the idea of teachers as owners of their work and self-managers appears poised for growth, and it is coincident with older labor traditions associated with craft and artistry.³² Interest in teacher-run schools is growing among teacher unions, and a union-backed teacher-run school is due to open in Detroit in fall 2010.³³

If one were to ask whether teacher cooperatives are about to replace school district hierarchies, the answer would be “of course not.” But if one were to ask whether it is possible for groups of teachers to run successful schools on their own and in the process increase the degrees of autonomy and flexibility in their own jobs, then one would get a different answer. Yes, it is possible, and it would be easier if public policy would better enable teacher-run schools. And if one were to ask whether there are lessons to be learned from these cooperatives about how we might redesign teaching as work and schools as learning organizations, then many possibilities flow.

³² Kerchner, Charles Taylor. “The Modern Guild: The Prospects for Organizing Around Quality in Public Education.” In *Transforming Unions*: edited by Jon Brock, and David Lipsky, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

³³ Walsh-Sarnecki, Peggy. 2010. Detroit Public Schools Tries Something New: A School Run By Teachers. <http://www.freep.com/article/20100708/NEWS01/7080367/Detroit-Public-Schools-tries-something-new-A-school-run-by-teachers> (accessed July 30, 2010).

Coherence through collaboration

The value of a single point of authority has been raised to the status of civil religion in business-oriented school reform quarters. Stand-up mayors and big talking, brash superintendents are in fashion. But experts need wide latitude in their work, or as Peter Drucker noted, “knowledge workers can’t be managed” at least not in the command and control manner.³⁴ Expert workers, in whatever form of organization, challenge the notion that one gains coherence through compliance with a set of rules or procedures designed outside of the immediate workplace. From work rules about the length of faculty meetings or the school day to a curriculum pacing plan that mandates the number of minutes spent on a lesson, the notion of expert teacher judgment clashes with the view that coherence in the system can only be provided by a hierarchy topped with someone with unquestioned authority.

Teacher-run schools try to create coherence through other means, and are therefore good case examples of the practices that would have to be imported into district schools if types of autonomous schools, such as the Pilot Schools, were to thrive. As such, they create a few imperatives.

A different division of labor

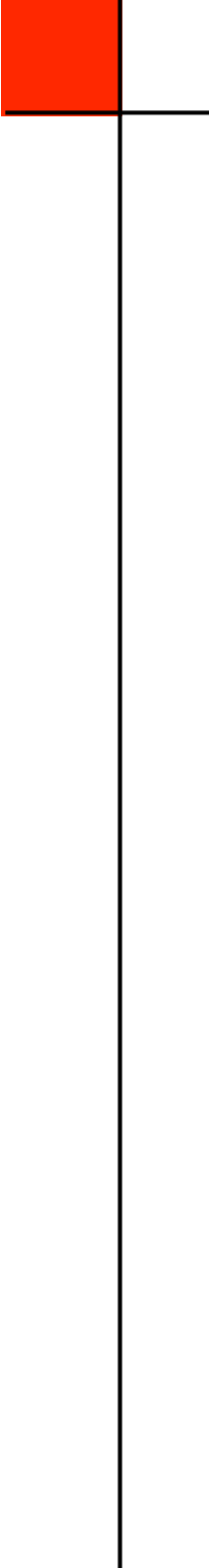
First, and most obviously, teacher-run schools have a much different division of labor than conventional schools. Adult roles are more diffuse and much less specialized. There are relatively more teachers engaged in the core academic subjects and fewer ancillary personnel. There are more shared responsibilities, and less demarcation of duties with specific work positions. There is more fluidity in moving responsibility from one person to another.

Yet, the most common belief is that teacher-run schools are neither possible on any but a trivial scale, nor are they desirable. Newspaper stories about the founding of a teacher-run school in New Jersey drew disbelieving comments. James Lytle, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania questioned whether teachers have the patience to do the ‘adminis-trivia.’ And Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute offered the opinion that only a handful of teachers could pull off such an audacious organizational feat³⁵

These comments—pulled from context as are most newspaper quotes—miss the essential point about the division of labor inherent in teacher-led schools. A lot of what teachers do at Avalon, which would be called administrative work at a conventional school, is rather seamlessly wrapped into daily activities. A teacher and other students, rather than an assistant principal, deals with discipline. A

³⁴ Drucker, Peter F. *Post-Capitalist Society*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993: 65.

³⁵ Hu, Winnie. 2010. In a New Role, Teachers Move to Run Schools. www.nytimes.com/2010/09/07/education/07teachers.html? (accessed Sept. 13, 2010).



teacher, rather than a classified worker, observes the lunch line. A teacher, rather than a chain of office workers and administrators, talks with parents when they call. Teacher-run schools are not regular schools in which the tasks have been shuffled; they are schools where tasks are done differently. Some of the things that teachers do in regular high schools—master scheduling, for example—virtually disappear because the project-based nature of the schools means that time is used differently.

If one were to examine doing tasks differently in a careful and deliberate manner, in much more depth than this study was able, one would find implications for productivity in public education. For example, the economic production function of a lesson is different when students inquire into needed facts than when a teacher dishes them out in a lecture. The cost of individualized instruction is different in a project mode than when a teacher is charged with the responsibility of individualizing lessons. The cost of discipline differs when a student mediation team handles the problem than it is when an assistant principal does the same job. For decades, it has been claimed that school reforms don't change the core function of teaching and learning. These teacher-run schools appear to be an exception to that rule.

The critique of teacher-run schools also notes that their faculty need a broader skill set than most teachers, and that is very much the case. They do need to understand budgets, not the arcaneness of fund accounting, but the fundamentals of what a school's income and outflows are and what causes them. Understanding economic reality in a teacher-run school creates competence in putting together a learning system that works, is attractive to students and their parents, and is kind to teachers and their time. Teachers also need more skills in dealing with parents. Parents come to schools like Avalon because they are watchful of their children's education, and sometimes managing these expectations is difficult, as is the case in a private school or other charter school that is dependent on a continued flow of students seeking the school. Angry or questioning parents can't just be referred to an administrative flack catcher. However, these same parents are also central to the learning system. They sign off on student projects and often serve as resources in their completion. And they become the school's most loyal advocates.

Unitary democracy instead of central authority

The second distinguishing feature of teacher-run schools that would have to be carried into district schools in a Pilot or similar model is the substitution of unitary democracy for central authority.³⁶ They rely on strong cultures, a common mission, and relational trust. The idea of unitary democracy, as opposed to interest group democracy or political parties, makes the goals of the cooperative enterprise more

³⁶ Mansbridge, Jane. "The Rise and Fall of Self-Interest in the Explanation of Political Life." In *Beyond Self-Interest*, edited by Jane Mansbridge, 3-24. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. Bryk, Anthony S. and Barbara Schneider. "Relational Trust." In *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.

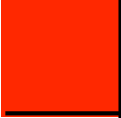
important than those of individual positions. These schools are not the refuge of iconoclasts. For schools like Avalon, New Country, or SUPAR to work, the adults who work in them need to create decisional norms that come to conclusions quickly and avoid the “process paralysis” associated with past attempts at school-site decision-making. At Avalon, faculty use a “Fist of Five” voting system indicating how supportive of a proposal they are. A closed fist blocks action, but a person who does this is required to articulate an acceptable alternative. In practice, there are not a lot of closed fists.

The lack of deep disagreement is in part a matter of socialization. There has been a lot of stability among the teaching ranks at Avalon, and at some of the other teacher-run schools, but where there hasn't been, the organizations are struggling. And the lack of deep disagreement is partly a function of an evaluation system that can remove people who “don't understand how we do things here.” Staff learn to work at Avalon by being assigned a mentor in their first year, and they are paired with an experienced teacher in the same advisory space. Thus, every new teacher gets two support personnel. (Compare this level of support with the sink-or-swim initiation found in many district run schools.) Also, Avalon uses a 360-degree evaluation system in which everyone evaluates everyone. But more than having the structure of the evaluation system in place, the school has a culture that requires it to be used clinically. At Avalon, the teachers who have not had their contracts renewed were largely those who did not want to teach within that school's culture of project-based pedagogy.

In behavioral terms, the cooperatives substitute norms of reciprocity, civility, and engagement for those of obedience and rule following. Disengagement threatens a cooperative, just as insubordination threatens hierarchy. There are clear examples within Avalon and the other cooperatives of disengaged teachers, but the system will not tolerate many of them, and the process of annual evaluations where the last question is whether this person should return to the school next year creates a situation in which even senior faculty members cannot rely on past years of attentiveness to secure themselves a continuing position. “I paid my dues when I was younger,” does not create a claim on a job.

But collaboration also has a steely edge. Anna Wesley has been associated with Avalon almost since its founding. She was a student intern at the school and later returned to teach in the middle school. She has been on the personnel committee for years. The committee has a number of routine jobs, including the annual evaluation system, and it also deals with complaints and disputes among faculty members in the same manner as the mediation system works among students. But it also has to be willing to confront instances of bad behavior or poor teaching. This happened several times, including last year when an experienced teacher was told that he would not be rehired.

As in the practice of peer review in traditional school districts, the personnel function at Avalon and the other teacher-run schools depends on the ability and willingness of teachers to “call the question” in situations where the welfare of the school



requires that another teacher be removed from his or her job.³⁷ This process requires behaviors far different than those expected in a traditional district school, where discipline and discharge decisions are encased in a bureaucracy. It is not that there is no due process at Avalon. There are disciplinary steps, interventions, and action plans, just as there are in a conventional school district. But at the end of the decisional chain, teachers will decide.

“It is not easy being a member of the personnel committee,” Wesley notes. Teachers have a very close working relationship, and frequently they socialize with one another on the weekends. So, when someone approaches her with a gripe or complaint, she has to ask, “Why are you telling me this?” Is it just venting about a tough day or an irritating situation, or do you want the school to counsel, investigate, or take action? Unitary democracy is not just a matter of discussing things until everyone is comfortable with everything; its about running an effective school.

Introspective routines

Third, teacher-run schools develop introspective routines that cause both students and adults to inquire deeply into whether and how learning is taking place. These are brilliant when they succeed and delusional when they do not. Field research provides evidence of both. At Avalon, teachers review student achievement annually and report on their data to their charter sponsor, Hamline University. Teachers set goals for the following year. In 2009, it was to pay special attention to students who scored in the bottom 25 percent in reading growth.³⁸ Avalon, like many schools, uses a rubric to score student work. But at Avalon, unlike most schools, the rubric is built into the routines, so that a student needs to use the rubric to reflect on his or her projects. Faculty use the rubric to give feedback. Students use the rubric in finding ways to improve and resubmit projects. Yet, the routines for using student work to consciously question how project teaching could be stronger—how more *expert* projects could be produced—seem underdeveloped. “We are getting better at using data to change our practices, but, again, we question how useful tests are with such a small sample size. We try to focus less on the numbers and more on the individuals. It is important to get them reading complicated materials,” said Bakken.³⁹

Project-based pedagogy

Fourth, these teacher-run schools all teach using projects as the main pedagogy, although there are some schools where the project-based identity is being

³⁷ Koppich, Julia, Carla Asher, and Charles Kerchner. *Developing Careers, Building a Profession: The Rochester Career in Teaching Plan*. New York: National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2002.

³⁸ Bakken, Carrie, 2010, August 10. Personal correspondence.

³⁹ Bakken, Carrie, 2010, August 10. Personal correspondence.

compromised by a retreat to class teaching that better fits with the conventional “grammar of schooling.” Bundling projects and a flat organizational structure fundamentally changes the role of teachers as workers and instructors. Students become the workers in this system, not the teachers. If a student isn’t getting work done, the project method doesn’t say to the faculty member, “teach harder.” The project method moves the responsibility for creating projects and keeping on pace to their completion to the student. The students I talked to at Avalon and other project-based schools were quick to tell me that the management of their time and effort was one of their key practical lessons. “I am a sophomore,” said one student, “I should be a junior. I’m behind in my work because I hung out with the wrong people last year. This year’s different, and I am catching up.”

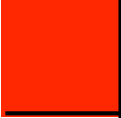
The most obvious lesson to draw from Avalon and the other teacher-run schools is that students are capable of much more self-control than most schools expect of them. While there are many reasons that urban high schools appear to be just on the ragged edge of anarchy, organizing student life around external control rather than student self-control is counterproductive. It directs resources to control that would be better spent on learning and teaching. And it fails to teach important 21st Century skills of self-control, collaboration, and solving hard-to-define problems.

There is a parallel lesson for adults: faculty and staff are much more capable of designing their own work and of understanding changing circumstances than the traditional practice of school administration through command and control would suggest. But to move from a compliance model to a cooperative model requires a great deal of craft effort on the part of the adults designing and starting up the school.

A cooperative enterprise is not simply a place where individual teachers work as they wish. In fact, historically, there was more room for individuals to hide out in conventional bureaucracies. Shielded by the classroom door, the lack of supervision, and the union contract, teachers often gained substantial operating independence so long as they did not disobey direct orders or challenge superiors. In a teacher-run cooperative, the obligation for joint action is imperative. Teachers have to understand the relationship between “my job” and how the curriculum of the school works, how resources are deployed.

Successfully managing paradox

Education reform is generally hampered by excess of ideology, and the almost immediate classification of any project as either socially progressive or market conservative. Teacher-run schools successfully manage the paradox of borrowing from, and in some ways appealing to, both camps. It is the management of paradox mentioned at the outset of this study that makes teacher-run schools worthy of further investment and policy attention.



The workers' cooperative, of course, has roots in utopian socialism, and the argument for linking workers with control of their tools is captured in critiques of the capitalist mode of production.⁴⁰ At the same time, the idea of teacher cooperatives appeals to those of American Enterprise Association entrepreneurial stripe, who would argue that the substantive problem of public education lies in the bureaucratic underbrush and the lack of ability for people who want to try novel and interesting approaches to do so.⁴¹

Teacher-run schools manage the paradox between these two camps because they recognize and organize around the fact that schools are inherently both formal organizations and small communities. The formal organization aspect of teacher-run schools recognizes that there are specific goals, that the organization has to be maintained, and that discipline and authority are part of the process. But control is based on shared understanding and responsibility rather than hierarchy. The small community aspect of these schools recognizes the aspect of schooling that public policy often misses: that schools are at their best when they are transformative for students and teachers, and that "the daily life of the community shapes, sometimes in very subtle ways, the kinds of persons students become."⁴²

The argument for teacher-run schools derives in part from a desire to create better jobs for teachers, jobs that would broaden the talent pool of people eager to take up teaching and willing to take on more responsibility than civil servants are required or allowed to. These teachers take on more economic risk than a conventional public school teacher. If the teacher-run school fails, their jobs go with them. Except for the limited retreat rights in the Milwaukee setting, there is no soft landing position. At the same time, there seems to be less faculty churning and less chafing against authority than in the typical management-driven charter school, some of which have business plans that depend on a constant replacement of younger teachers. Thus, we find the working paradox of people willingly signing up for harder jobs with less economic protection but more control over the content of their work. Clearly, not everyone who goes into teaching is willing to accept this bargain, but those who do find the rewards of controlling their own jobs to be a good trade.

Teacher-run schools also reveal an interesting paradox about achievement. They are subject to the same test score accountability as teachers in district schools, and because the schools are for the most part charters subject to decisions about renewal, they are on a shorter accountability leash than most district schools. At the

⁴⁰ Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

⁴¹ Hess, Frederick M. *Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2010.

⁴² Bryk, Anthony S., and Hermanson, Kim L. "Educational Indicator Systems: Observations on Their Structure, Interpretation and Use." *Review of Research in Education* 19 (1993): 451-84, at 454.

same time, there is a clear belief that the goal of their schools is not to produce higher test scores. There is a broader curriculum in which measured cognitive achievement is subordinated by important student skills in solving problems, in personal discipline, and self-control.

The existence of these managed paradoxes suggests that teacher-run schools are a useful experiment on their own and that finding policies that extract the important lessons about school practice is a worthwhile undertaking.

Finding Policy Levers

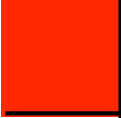
Two types of public policy instruments are necessary to support the founding and operation of teacher-run schools. The policy mechanisms for creating teacher-run schools that bundle project-based learning and student-as-worker-and-citizen with a workers' cooperative are already known and in place. It is the mechanisms for building the educative capacity of these schools that are severely underdeveloped.

Policy that establishes teacher-run schools

We know what is required in public policy to create a teacher-run school: get autonomy and money to the schools. The experiments with school site management that sprouted in the 1980s and 1990s floundered largely on the inability of school districts to devolve sufficient authority to schools so that the people involved in them were willing to keep working at the process. When there were relatively few substantive decisions to make, teachers and school administrators in so-called site-managed schools fell back on protracted arguments about decisional process and ultimately became burned out and disillusioned.

Thus, it is of little surprise that most of the existing teacher-run schools use charter school laws to legitimate their governance and finance. Charter laws are well suited to this purpose, and they appear to work well to allow groups of teachers who want to form schools to do so. In addition, there are two emerging structures that could also be used to allow and encourage teacher-run schools in existing school districts.

In 2009 Minnesota authorized "site governed schools," essentially in-district charter schools but where school boards authorize them and teachers remain employees of the district and members of the same bargaining unit as those in conventional schools. There were two ideas behind the legislation. First, districts needed some of the flexibility found in the charter sector. Second, innovative arrangements needed an anchor in statute so that the granting of rights to a group of teachers to form a school would not depend on continuity in leadership of a school district. It is too early to know the effects of the law: whether school districts will use it to set up internal innovation labs or whether the cultural imprint of traditional public schools is so strong that innovation from within will not persist. In fall 2010 the Minneapolis Public Schools will open the first teacher-run school using the new statute: a French immersion school.



Teacher-run schools have also been founded through the Pilot School model, another form of in-district charters that was founded in the Boston Public Schools and which has migrated to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and other locations. Rather than relying on legislation as their source of legitimacy, the 21 Boston Pilot Schools, which now enroll 9,000 students, are the creation of a collective bargaining contract between the Boston Teachers Union and the school district. LAUSD has 10 operating Pilot Schools and 10 more are due to start in 2010. A traditional public school in Denver has converted to Pilot Status and a teacher-led school is starting in Detroit.⁴³

The Pilot School experiment has been sufficiently long running to have both substantial operational evidence and an ebb-and-flow political history.⁴⁴ As was the intent of the Minnesota law, Pilot Schools were formed explicitly to serve as research and development sites. Only a few of the pilots are teacher-run in the sense that Avalon is, but all of them have autonomy over budget, staffing, operational governance, curriculum and assessment, and the school calendar.

For example, teachers voluntarily choose to work at Pilot Schools and sign an “election-to-work-agreement” that contains the working conditions that will pertain to that school in the coming year. That agreement is revised annually.⁴⁵ The school governing boards have a great deal of autonomy, but working through the budget process with the school district has been historically difficult.

Although not all the Pilot Schools are teacher-run, that form of governance has generated its own support mechanism, much as EdVisions has. In Boston, the non-profit Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) acts as coach, trainer, evaluator, and advocate for the pilots.⁴⁶ It has also assisted the schools in Los Angeles. That

⁴³ Khadaroo, Stacy. 2010. School Teachers in Charge? Why Some Schools Are Forgoing Principals. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2010/0901/School-teachers-in-charge-Why-some-schools-are-forgoing-principals> (accessed Sept. 13, 2010).

⁴⁴ Pearlman, Bob. “Smarter Charters? Creating Boston's Pilot Schools.” In *Creating New Schools: How Small Schools Are Changing American Education*, edited by Evin Cinchy, 38-45. Teachers College Press, 2000.

⁴⁵ French, Dan. “Boston's Pilot Schools: Progress and Promise in Urban School Reform.” *Education Week*, April 19, 2006, 33-34. As is often the case with charter-sector organizations the performance record of Pilot Schools in Boston depends on which evaluation one reads. A CCE evaluation in 2007 found that Pilots outperformed district schools on a number of measures. A January 2009 report by the Boston Foundation found that charter schools in Boston outperformed Pilots, whose results were not significantly better than those of district schools. Rebuttal was offered by CCE claiming selection bias in the charter school sample that included only the top performing charters.

⁴⁶ For history and test score controversy, see: <http://www.ccebos.org/index.html> (Accessed June 8, 2010).

city is also developing its own Pilot School development organization, an outgrowth of a compact between the city's labor organizations, the school district, United Way, the Chamber of Commerce, the city, and surrounding colleges and universities.⁴⁷

A 'text' to develop and improve teacher-run schools

The second needed policy instruments are those necessary to support the development and improvement of teacher-run schools. Although EdVisions and CCE exist as supports for teacher-run schools, the infrastructure for developing their operations and training their personnel remains underdeveloped. As Thomas Kuhn wrote 40 years ago, one way of telling whether a paradigm shift has taken place is to see if anyone has written a text about the new idea.⁴⁸ The schools such as Avalon need a text.

They need a text so that others can follow their ideas. Simply structuring a school as autonomous does not provide instruction in its operation, and, indeed, the lack of organizational guidance for schools that are organizationally innovative may explain why most charter schools look a great deal like conventional schools and why the charter school movement has proven to be a disappointment for those who thought it would be a source of great innovation.

A text is not simply a book, although it might be that in part. It might be a series of pamphlets, a web site, a series of apps for a handheld computer, summer conferences, a virtual reality experience, or all of those things. The text is a guide to practice, that says, in effect, that if one believes in the bundle of ideas that constitute Avalon and similar schools, here's how to put those ideas into action. It takes the ideals of Education|Evolving and EdVisions and creates a coherent vision of practice.

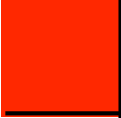
The first function of a text would be as an organizing manual. Public education has done this before: in the work of the administrative progressives to organize school districts early in the 20th century and more recently in the most successful union organizing campaign in a half-century. In both cases, there were both organizers who did the work and a text on how to do it. The primary union text of the period was not hard bound, but held together with post binders so that new pages could be inserted as experience warranted.⁴⁹

If teacher-run schools are to thrive and grow, it is extremely important that they have an organizing mechanism, just as it has been to the charter school movement. By

⁴⁷ <http://www.lacompact.org/index.php> (Accessed June 8, 2010).

⁴⁸ Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

⁴⁹ Wollett, Donald H., and Robert H. Chanin. *The Law and Practice of Teacher Negotiations*. Washington, D.C.: The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc, 1974.



definition, teacher-run schools are not scalable in the same way that bureaucracies are, and scalability and growth are chronic problems of cooperative organizations outside of education. Charter management organizations are unlikely to take up the banner of teacher-run schools, and the concept is still alien to school districts and most teacher unions. So, it is extremely important that the mavericks and visionaries who are intrigued by the idea have a network of knowledge and process to follow.

The text would also serve as a training manual. In hundreds of teacher education programs throughout the country, teachers are trained to work in bureaucracies. There is no teacher education program for teachers who want to run their own schools. As even the short descriptions contained in this case study illustrate, these teachers have quite different occupational lives than those in conventional schools, and they need practical guidance in how to take on those roles. They need to be able to mate higher order concepts, such as democratic schooling, with the practicality of getting rowdy, pubescent junior high school students to understand how to express disagreement in productive ways. They need to get teachers with communitarian instincts to understand budgeting, forecasting, and planning. They need to get those who want to nurture students to link their instruction to high standards.

As in any start-up, the first wave of teacher-run schools has been the product of true believers who were willing to treat their own lives as vocations and occupations as an experiment. They put in ridiculous numbers of hours to create productive relationships with one another and to learn the craft skills of leadership, and of followership, which is in many ways more difficult. And while it is the case that each new school will have to found itself as a community, later adopters should benefit from accumulated knowledge of practice.

There are good historical data on how training programs for non-standard schools work and don't, and there are currently running experiments in organizational settings as diverse as High Tech High in San Diego, California, which runs its own graduate school, to Teach for America, which operates its own training programs.

Finally, a text would create routines. These allow teachers and students to learn from their daily experiences that make them better at their jobs and the schools smarter as organizations. Schools, such as Avalon, are well structured to avoid the problem of that Peter Senge calls "organizational learning disability," and to become *smart*, continuously improving organizations.⁵⁰ The project creation and reflection format, and the use of a rubric for evaluation lends themselves to organizational knowledge collection with every student undertaking. Yet, because the schools are

⁵⁰ Senge, Peter. "The Industrial Age System of Education." In *Schools That Learn*, edited by Peter Senge, Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Timothy Lucas, Bryan Smith, Janis Dutton, and Art Kleiner, New York: Doubleday, 2000.

small, and their operations unbureaucratic, much of this knowledge is tacit. It needs to be made explicit, captured, written down, passed along.

The schools also need routines to deal with their data. Schools such as Avalon have a particularly hard time dealing with the official numbers, state test score data, and the like. They are willing to use positive results as evidence that they are achieving, but there is a fundamental belief that these indicators are not worth much. Student results, such as the SAT, have high consequences for students and may lead to favorable comparisons, but they don't help the schools learn.

These schools could benefit from building a data pyramid: a set of high-level indicators at the top, based on the best quantifiable information that the schools feel represent their values and goals, and a set of much more behavioral, authentic indicators at the bottom. It is important that this network of schools make these indicators explicit.⁵¹ Otherwise, they will be judged only by test score results or the data other observers choose.


These schools already engage in a practice that, with a little augmentation, would raise their student's work to the level of a public indicator. Each project-based school I visited used exhibitions as a means for students to display and explain their work to peers and advisors. The aggregate of these individual displays is a school-wide exhibition that provides exemplars posted on the school's web site and available for public inspection along with, data on the numbers of projects completed and the rankings projects received.

At the second level of the pyramid, schools would collect data about themselves, much as Avalon now does for its annual reports to its charter school sponsor, and also more private data for use inside the school itself. For example, Avalon can boast a 96 percent graduation rate, and relatively few discipline issues, but these data are not part of the state's report. It's projects are on public view during Presentation Nights, that have been attended by 150 observers during the year.⁵²

At the third level of the pyramid—classrooms or advisories as they are called at Avalon—these schools produce very rich data, most of it qualitative. These data are often the most insightful, but it is often not caught and fed back into the school. These schools need routines to collect and analyze school and classroom data just as conventional district schools do. For example, engagement is a huge indicator of whether students are getting on with their projects. Teachers and students have to be able to discern when apparent idleness and playfulness is time necessary for the creative aspects of a project to come together and when it is goofing off or work

⁵¹ Bryk and Hermanson: 469.

⁵² Avalon School. *Avalon School: Passion for Learning: Annual Report 2007-2008*. St. Paul, MN: Author, 2008, p. 12.



avoidance. Understanding the right balance, and making that knowledge explicit is a big part of making project-based learning effective and efficient.

However, finding the policy levers to build institutional capacity around teacher-run schools will not be an easy or straightforward task. Where is it costless for a legislature to give teachers permission to start a school, it costs money to provide the infrastructure, what we are calling the text, for them to develop and improve. In these fiscal times, the teacher-run schools are up against substantial reluctance to raise new tax revenue and the hoarding of resources by existing schools.

Private philanthropy could provide the venture funding to better document what has gone on in these schools. It could underwrite teacher training and professional development, as it has in the academies run by Teach For America and the graduate school run by High Tech High in San Diego. But this would require a level of commitment higher than that which these schools have received in the past.

The more open-ended but difficult source of policy leverage rests with public school coalition partners. The bundled model of teacher-run schools, as represented in Avalon and the EdVisions schools, will be difficult to replicate outside the charter sector unless there is a strong champion for it within the existing public school establishment. Teacher unions are the most likely candidates for this role, but to date they have done more sniffing around the edges rather than actively engaging the idea.

The Pilot School model has become attractive to unions who themselves seek flexibility or who fear the encroachment of charter schools into the district's enrollment. The politics for developing this model are at their most visible in Los Angeles, where the Public School Choice Initiative, begun in the summer of 2009, subjects newly constructed schools and those whose performance has lagged for years to a request-for-proposal process in which various would-be school operators present alternate designs for school management and operation.

The advantage to linking the teacher-run schools with teacher unions lies in the union contract and its capacity to influence the flows of school and district funds. The disadvantage is that most teacher unionists have, ironically, preserved the large scale public bureaucracy—the very thing that they organized against—as the last best expression of an idealized public sector. So, Pilot Schools, and any deviation for the current model, are distrusted. Substantial, and I suspect prolonged, political coalition building will be required.

A second policy lever can be found in teacher education, where the requirements for certification could be tweaked in ways that made it attractive to a hardy few universities to offer specializations in teacher licensure to those teachers who wanted to work in teacher-run schools. This would allow the normal flows of tuition and state support to help establish teacher-training programs.

The third policy lever lies in the unbundling of ideas. There are more project-based schools than there are teacher-run schools, for example, and the idea of building schooling around a connection between head and hands is gaining broader attention than that of teacher professional partnerships. States, and the technology industry, are much interested in the developments of pedagogy that breaks down the old batch process mode of learning regardless of whether the schools involved are teacher-run or operated as conventional hierarchies. Much of the text for school improvement, and semi-autonomous school organization could take place within a coalition of organizations interested in pedagogy.

Likewise, there is a broader coalition of people and organizations interested in self-management than those in education. Grass roots community based organizations, small non-governmental organizations operating in developing countries, a large league of cooperatives in the United States, operate on non-hierarchical or hybrid organizational styles. These are genuinely interesting, and have captured the attention of people who study organizations for decades. If one thinks of teacher-run schools as a special case of *cellular organizations*, then planning an infrastructure that causes them to spread and thrive connects with a well-known and developed research base.

The Bottom Line

Avalon and its sister schools exist on wonderful islands. It may be enough that they are refuges from the storms that have engulfed American public education. But there are larger lessons to be learned from them. If the claims that teacher-run schools are a valuable alternative to the national policy dialogue are to be made with much vigor, then much more needs to be done to capture the craft knowledge of Avalon and similar schools, to make it available to those who would want to start them, and to apply clinical knowledge to school improvement among them. This, along with necessary policy intervention, is the bridge between the islands of teacher-run schools and the causeway to the mainland.