

TEACHERS AS COMMUNITARIANS:

A CHARTER SCHOOL COOPERATIVE IN RURAL MINNESOTA

By Eric Rofes

When I was growing up during the 1960s and 1970s in the suburbs of New York City, one of the memorable television commercials which frequently would flash before my eyes advertised canned vegetables from the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant. I recall nostalgically, a tall, green woodsman smiling on the screen as he spooned peas and carrots down his gullet. As the gentle giant chomped on his hearty vegetables, a musical refrain played:

Good things from the Garden,

Garden in the Valley

Valley of the Jolly—ho ho ho—Green Giant

Green Giant commercials created a homey picture of bucolic life in the Midwest: wholesome families, rural vistas of forests and farmland, and fresh, healthy food. My Avon lady mother bought Green Giant vegetables when we went food shopping at the A&P. She'd tie on an apron and serve them piping hot from the stove during frigid Northeast winters. I recall cans upon cans of peas, carrots, and mixed vegetables stacked on our kitchen shelves. When my father told us children, "Eat your vegetables," he likely was referring to one Green Giant product or another.

I am not sure whether my boyhood imagination wondered whether or not there was an actual Valley of the Jolly Green Giant, but I do know I was stunned a few decades later when I saw what appeared to be a green giant looming above the trees on the side of the highway as I entered the town of Le Sueur (population 3,763) on my first visit to the Minnesota New Country School (MNCS). On my drive down from the Twin Cities, I passed plenty of John Deere tractors, grazing farm animals, and an occasional “Abortion Kills Babies” sign. These simply served to situate this part of Southern Minnesota in familiar narratives of small town life. The farmstands with local produce and billboards advertising quaint home-style family restaurants, affirmed my urban sensibility’s impression of the rural Midwest. I knew I wasn’t far away from Lake Wobegon and all the Lutherans and Norwegian bachelor farmers in stories spun out by Garrison Keillor. Yet the sudden appearance of the Green Giant from my childhood looming high over the horizon as I rounded the crest of a hill and entered the town limits of Le Sueur, caught me off guard and almost caused me to run off the side of the road.

The town of Le Sueur is located 70 miles south of the Twin Cities amid the verdant farmland of the Minnesota River Valley. While downtown Le Sueur features several gas stations, a small shopping mall, the offices of the town newspaper, and a few government offices, its distinguishing feature is the abandoned Green Giant plant—numerous executive office buildings and a three-block long canning and processing factory. The conspicuous nature of these vacant facilities make it impossible to forget the town’s recent economic decline. Not only was Le Sueur battered by the 1980s farm crisis which forced many farm families to the auction block, but a decade of corporate buyouts and reorganizations ultimately resulted in the closure of the Green

Giant facility and the loss of hundreds of jobs, many of them well-paying management positions.

During the Green Giant years, Le Sueur had been a modest but thriving community thanks to the white collar positions linked to the company's executive offices. By all accounts, Green Giant had enhanced the local community for several decades, but when the buyout came and the jobs were relocated out-of-state, Le Sueur lost a large portion of its middle class base and became primarily a blue-collar community. The town attempted to lure new companies into the area, but succeeded only in attracting small technology manufacturing firms which did not have the number of well-paid executive management positions which Green Giant previously had maintained. As one local resident told me,

They got several small companies that paid fairly poor wages [to move into Le Sueur]. Nice companies, but you know, they don't pay what Green Giant paid. So you don't have any executives left in town. Even the people who came in here to run the companies that moved in here don't live here. There's been a lot of houses for sale. At one time there were 90 or more houses for sale, just a few years ago. That is something for people to handle.

A decade after Green Giant's withdrawal from Le Sueur, the public schools in the area show evidence of the departure of corporate executive families from the area. Test scores have declined to a point of alarm among local residents and educators alike. Public school teachers who'd become accustomed to having significant numbers of

children from upscale families now have fewer and face the challenge of teaching large numbers of students from lower middle class, blue collar, and poor families. The pride local residents had come to feel towards their local schools during the Green Giant years has declined and some veteran teachers now feel burdened by their charges. It was this context of economic decline, profound transformation in rural farming communities, and sagging spirits within the school district, the Minnesota New Country School was founded.

If Teaching Were Organized Like Farming

Charter schools frequently have been promoted as offering new opportunities for innovation within public education (citations). Yet few charter advocates have grappled with the question of precisely what would be innovative about charter schools. The pedagogy? Curriculum? The system of school accountability for student achievement? If charters are also intended to shift power and responsibility to the local school site, would they also be expected to take on forms of governance congruent with local communities?

For over a century, farm life in the Upper Midwest has been heavily influenced by the cooperative movement, an impulse which has earlier precedents in America and currently is more widespread than many realize:

The history of democratic economic enterprise reaches 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 the mutually supportive activities of neighborhood, town and village life. But the tradition is much broader than most people realize--well beyond farmers and food consumers, to include people with disabilities and local governments, neighborhood organizations and hardware store wholesalers, all together claiming a membership of 100 million Americans (Nelson and Ziewacz, p. 5)

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, farmers throughout Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, and the Dakotas banded together in producer and consumer cooperatives to protect their interests amid dramatic economic shifts of the time (citation). Resisting social and economic forces dominating the expanding U.S. economy, farmers sought alternative ways of structuring their industry which could offer them a measure of independence, while still ensuring the ability to sell their products and purchase what they needed for the best possible price . Professor Brett Fairbairn of the Centre for the Study of Cooperatives at the University of Saskatchewan links upswings of cooperative activity with economic upheavals:

You could say that all cooperatives have their origins as responses by people to economic restructuring. I've argued elsewhere that the free trade liberalism of the 1860s, which helped spread industrial change, made up a first round of what we now call 'globalization.'" (37)

Rochdale cites examples in the founding of the first rural credit co-op in Germany in 1862, the first rural consumers association in Denmark in 1866, and a range of other responses to economic trends of the 1860s. (37 Eger; see also Fairbairn, 1991). Germans and Scandinavians were among the prime groups which emigrated to the Upper Midwest in the late 1800s, bringing with them experience and commitment to cooperative organizing (citation). This immigrant stock is but one of the factors contributing to making this region a seedbed for cooperatives:

While the region's people embrace the ideas handed down to all rural Americans by the Jeffersons and the Jacksons, the Northwest has a more narrowly defined culture that was shaped by immigrants, period of settlement and development, distance from markets, and shared experiences on the frontier. It is a culture that found cooperatives to be a useful tool for development and problem solving in earlier years....Northwest residents inherited political approaches to problem solving from immigrant ancestors who settled on the frontier, and from Native Americans who were already there. (Egerstrom, 33-35)

Dan Mott, an attorney who assisted in the founding of MNCS, explained that "the co-op concept really is pretty well entrenched in the Midwest. It tends to be focused on agriculture and utility co-ops and a lot of people in the rural parts of the state are members of a co-op of one sort or another." He explained how co-ops have functioned historically:

Typically, the co-ops in the Midwest are either supply cooperatives or marketing cooperatives, and what they're doing is taking a grower's product and marketing it on their behalf, or collectively purchasing a service or a product and selling it to the farmers at a reduced cost...Historically it was a way for small people--in terms of the scope of their economics--to band together to compete more effectively with larger organizations....The people who own it are the ones who use it. And to the extent the co-op makes money, the money is distributed back to the members.

Nadeau and Thompson (1996), in a book on America's cooperative revival of the late twentieth century offer a useful explanation of the contemporary functioning of cooperatives:

A cooperative (or co-op) is a business own and controlled by the people who use its services. All co-ops share four additional features:

- > Service at cost. This means that co-ops are not designed to maximize profits, but rather to provide goods and services to members at a reasonable price.
- > Benefits proportional to use. Unlike for-profit businesses, co-ops distribute profits to member-owners on the basis of the amount of business transacted with the co-op during the year rather than the amount of capital invested in the co-op...

- > Democratic control. In most cooperatives and credit unions, each member has one vote in the decision-making regardless of the number of shares owned or the amount of business done with the co-op...

- > Limited return on equity...People buy equity in co-ops not to make a lot of money on their investments, but rather to enable the co-op to provide the products or services they want. They may get a return on their investment...but these dividends are a secondary issue (Nadeau & Thompson, p. 8)

Ted Kolderie, a St. Paul-based policy analyst who helped craft Minnesota's innovative charter school law, was visited by MNCS founders of during the school's formative phase. Familiar with the cooperative concept from his own Midwest rural roots, he suggested they consider the co-op model as a way to bring about a shift in teacher role, from worker to owner. Kolderie explained,

Farmers tend to be owners, and the benefits of productivity always go to the owners, so it's fine when the worker is the owner, owner is the worker. But in the Industrial Era, when the work and ownership separated, the owners who are not the workers take the profits, take the productivity, gains, so workers have to organize and strike, trying to fight for their share of the productivity, gains to which they contribute their labor.

Kolderie encouraged this small group of educators, farmers, and small business owners to experiment with cooperatives in order to realize a vision of teacher/owner rather than teacher/worker:

What would happen if teaching were organized like farming? Well you begin to think about what happened to productivity in farming in the 19th century, I mean the rate at which the worker/owner took up the machinery that was produced, the crops, the materials, the better methods...you look at the whole structure that we put out there through the county agents, and a system to show them how to do better. The worker/owner farmers couldn't just wait to do better. It's what Seymour Sarason calls a self-improving system. You became richer and your labor became easier at the same time. You worked less and you earned more.

Kolderie's suggestion resonated with the founders and seemed to offer an especially valuable tool in the aftermath of the decimation wrought on the nation's rural landscape during the farm crisis of the preceding decade. They became determined to draw on the strengths of the cooperative model in establishing their school. Operating in isolation and with only one or two other educational ventures in the United States aiming for an authentically cooperative approach to governance (citations), MNCS has broken new ground which merits examination. A close relationship has emerged over the school's first five years between the teaching cooperative which owns the educational program of

the school and the farming cooperative model, with the former repeatedly drawing on the hard-learned lessons of the latter.

Thus MNCS has been organized in a unique manner: while the board of directors of the school is vested with oversight responsibility for the school, they have contracted out the total educational program of the school to a cooperative of local educators. MNCS, was chartered by the Le Sueur-Henderson School Board in November 1994 and opened as a school of 75 students in grades 7 through 12. Since its opening, the unique educational program of the school has been featured in local newspapers and journalistic case studies as an example of innovative, alternative approaches to traditional secondary schools (Smetanka, 1996 April 25; Wensman, n.d.). The complex relationship between this charter school and reform activity in the local district schools has been documented and analyzed (Rofes, 1998; Corson, 1998 July-August). Significant local and national media attention has been directed toward a group of MNCS students whose discovery of large numbers of deformed frogs during a science class triggered action on the part of the Minnesota Legislature, and won them an award as environmental heroes from the Minnesota Wilderness and Parks Coalition and an appearance on ABC-TV's *Nightline* (Franklin, 1997 October 5; Brataas, 1996 May 9).

Yet little attention has focused on the school's uncommon structure of governance, perhaps its most radical departure from other American schools, whether public, private, or charter. While scholars and educational policy makers examine the possible blurring of public/private distinctions through charter schools (citations), and the private management of charter schools becomes a point of controversy for journalists, state policy-makers, and teacher unions (citations), few have discussed privatization in

the form of a teacher cooperative owning the educational program of the school. At MNCS, the for-profit cooperative conceptualizes, designs, and implements the entire educational program for the school, hires and evaluates the school staff, plans the budget for the school's educational program, and is responsible for all of the day-to-day operations of the school.

In a bold attempt to reconceptualize teacher identity and teacher work, the governance structure was designed to afford teachers the opportunity to function as professionals, entrepreneurs, and owners of their work. If the Minnesota River Valley is a site where sugar beet growers have organized themselves cooperatively to sell their beets (Nadeau & Thompson, 1996; 18), and farmers throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin and other Midwest states have organized themselves cooperatively to own grain elevators (citations), why shouldn't teachers organize themselves to cooperatively develop, implement, and own the educational program of a school?

This case study of the MNCS suggests the true potential for innovation emerging from charter schools may lie in their potential to meld local traditions and community-specific forms of organization with public schooling. The Le Sueur school stands as a powerful example of ways in which the charter school initiative may harness the energy and talents of local community members in re-visioning the ways schooling may be organized and delivered. Drawing lessons from ways in which the industry of farming has been structured in the Upper Midwest for over a century, the founders of MNCS not only have initiated a form of school governance which has the potential to complicate, perhaps even shift, debates on privatization, but they've designed a school where the process of teaching and learning itself resonates with the same agrarian traditions. The

fascinating developments which I observed at this school went beyond an innovative form of school governance: teacher identity, student work, and classroom life have all been reconceptualized through the lens of agrarian cooperatives.

More Like a Workplace Than a School

The economic shifts in Le Sueur during the 1980s had a profound impact on the local schools. Not only did the town lose a large number of its higher-paying jobs, but a main source of the tax revenues which funded district schools left with Green Giant. A rural district which had prided itself on its schools and had created a successful college preparatory program serving the children of Green Giant executives, fell into decline. As the middle class students moved elsewhere, and as farm family incomes dwindled, local educators faced a range of new challenges borne out of the shifting economics of the area: increasing numbers of students from welfare, unemployed, and underemployed families; a fall-off of academically-motivated students seeking a college-prep track; increasing numbers of dropouts and incidents of school violence.

Rural districts experiencing dramatic socio-economic shifts and an out-migration of residents often find themselves facing consolidation. Governmental authorities—ever concerned with the fiscal bottom line and the ability to capture economies of scale—see small rural schools as financially inefficient and often argue that students are best served by using transportation to create schools with larger numbers of students. It was during this moment of district consolidation that the seeds of MNCS were sown.

Henderson, Minnesota (population 750) is located a few miles down the road from Le Sueur. In the early 1990s, when the State of Minnesota began a process of merging the two districts into one, resistance emerged. Lost in the shuffle of transferring students, teachers, and programs from one school to another was a unique partnership Henderson High School had forged with a small technology-oriented business. Because Henderson High School had plenty of empty rooms, it had leased vacant office space to the company. In turn, the company provided computer time to the students. Thus the partnership provided students with the chance to gain a great deal of expertise in computers ; it also allowed teachers to begin teaching high-tech activities and working across disciplines. The small program had drawn its share of admirers among students and parents and, when the consolidation resulted in separating the high school students from the technology of the company, people began thinking of alternatives to losing the program.

Hence out of the ashes of the consolidation of Henderson and Le Sueur, came the impetus to organize a new school. A group of parents and teachers who had learned of Minnesota's recent charter school law, began to gather and discuss opening a charter in their area. Other interested parties were drawn into the organizing efforts and by the fall of 1992, an active planning committee had formed. This committee included several local teachers as well as interested parents and community members with strong ties to the land; several key members of the group had a long history in the area and had been involved in farming for generations.

The founders faced many of the challenges now documented as typical when a group of community members sets out to gain approval for a charter school (citation). A

hostile superintendent bad-mouthed the organizers and barred them from holding their organizing meeting in the local schools. A provision in the state's charter policy explicitly prevented organizers from forming charter schools in response to consolidation. Members of the organizing committee who were employed as teachers at Le Sueur High School faced hostility from their peers and the approbation of the teachers union. It took about two years of diligent work, deep disappointments, and school board rejection, but the charter planning group eventually won a charter from the Le Sueur-Henderson School Board by a vote of 6 to 1 in November of 1993, and the state board of education endorsed the charter in January of 1994.

The school opened its doors the following September with 75 students and four teachers housed in two storefronts in downtown Le Sueur, one drugstore which had been closed for years, and the other a bar and café which had shut down a year earlier. When an adjacent carpet store closed after MNCS's first year, the school grabbed it for expansion space. While such sites may be non-traditional spaces for a school, with long countertops, sinks in odd places, and built-in cabinetry, they oddly seem to fit together nicely with the school's progressive and innovative educational philosophy. It seems appropriate that, hanging over the front door is a sign saying, "It might not look like school, but it looks like learning."

Teachers were recruited from the founding committee. Two of them were veterans of the Le Sueur schools. Another came to the group as a mentor teacher from a nearby university, Mankato State. And the fourth was a non-certified person who was the group's technology expert and had worked at the small high-tech company which had been housed at Henderson High School. From the start, teachers at MNCS were known as

"advisors" to reflect the shift in both teacher identity and teacher role which was a central feature of the school's charter.

It wasn't hard to find students. The founders held a series of public information meetings in Le Sueur, Henderson, and other local towns, which drew 6-25 participants, often families seeking alternatives for their children amidst the limited options available in rural areas. The initial group of students entering the school included a fair number of "techies," students eager for the computers and technology-rich curriculum the school promised. One newspaper appropriately cited this charter school as representing the "high-tech entrepreneurial edge to education." (citation) A fair number of home schoolers were drawn to MNCS because their families welcomed the strong partnership the school aimed to establish between parents, student, and advisor. An additional group of kids came from what one person called "free-spirit families," folks seeking open classrooms, free schools, or other alternative models for educating their kids. The school had little trouble finding an appropriate number of students who they then funneled, not into rigid age-based slots, but instead into two simple cohort groups: Level I. (generally 7-9 grade) and Level II. (10-12 grade).

The school's admissions guidelines makes it clear that, while the educational program of the school fulfills the Minnesota Graduation Standards, the school "provides a rigorous educational program within a flexible setting and structure," and that they seek students motivated to learn in an informal setting. Yet after the school's first year, the founders issued a Foxfire-like two page list of what they'd learned, and at the top of the page titled "Things That We Found Have Not Worked Well," are

1. Students who do not have self-motivation still do not become motivated to do well! Some still refuse to try to fulfill the curriculum, even when they are given every opportunity.
2. Students had a very difficult time adjusting to becoming the "worker" rather than the receiver"! Many still wanted to sit back and let the teacher do the work.

Motivation appears key for MNCS students because of the school's philosophy and educational program. As one researcher has written, the structuring of time at this year-round school "is a flexible, evolving concept based upon student needs and tasks at hand. It operates more like a workplace than a school." (Wensman, 5). The five cornerstones of the school are technology, parent involvement, teacher/student accountability, community as a place to learn, and Ted Sizer's Essential Principles. The school stresses interdisciplinary learning and students are more likely to tackle topics which capture their imagination, and approach them utilizing several disciplinary lenses, than work narrowly on "English" or "science." Each student at MNCS has a "Personal Learning Plan" which is created, monitored, and evaluated in a partnership between student, teacher, and parents. While students meet daily in advisory groups (20 students with one teacher), afterwards, they take off in many different directions. Each day might include several structured groups focused on particular current areas of inquiry, but most students seem to head off to participate in community service work, project-based activities, and individual computer research.

What some might call the "curriculum" of the school emerges out of specific learning benchmarks, dubbed "validations," in which the students must exhibit proficiency in eight key areas: the arts, communications, earth systems, citizenship, mathematics, personal management, technology, and life long learning. These are listed in a volume aptly called "The Bible" which appears to be frequently consulted by students. While the Minnesota Graduation Rule guides these validations, staff members make use of rubrics they've designed to set standards for each area of competency. There is a strong emphasis on portfolio evaluation--including electronic portfolios which each student is expected to maintain. Drawing on a long tradition in rural schools of exhibition evenings for parents and local community members, the school convenes monthly Community Presentation Nights in Le Sueur where students display and discuss completed projects, perform readings or concerts, and exhibit their research findings to gatherings which might approach 100 participants.

The school began and has remained an interesting mix of intensive individualized programming and strong collaborative learning mirroring the culture of many worker co-ops. Because students are expected to be self-directed, the school's emphasis on technology offers endless opportunities for exploration of the Internet which students apply to a wide variety of learning areas. At the same time, students participate in community service projects, technology work-study projects in partnership with local businesses, school-to-work apprenticeships, and student-initiated entrepreneurial businesses.

The school's first four years saw a steady growth in students (from 75 to 96) and advisors (from 4 to 6 plus an aide), an expansion of their facilities, and a focusing and

clarification of their educational programs. In addition to tackling the key issue of matching the school's need for highly-motivated and self-directed students with their applicant pool, the school has also initiated parent and student education on an ongoing basis. Despite the clarity of its founders and the explicit discussion of the school's educational philosophy in all of its literature, there has been an ongoing need to train school participants in both the school curriculum and "the meaning of the validation process" (MNCS study, page 7). Because of its unorthodox approach to teaching and learning, for the school's commitment to meaningful parent and student participation in developing individualized work plans to work, an intensive process of reeducation needed to be initiated.

Owners of the Cooperative, not Employees of the School

In the aftermath of charter approval, in early 1994, the founders became determined to draw on the long history of Midwestern cooperatives to create a unique way of organizing the school. The founders had three primary motivations for organizing the school's educational program through what became known as the EdVisions Cooperative: to maintain the original vision of the school by providing founders with a formal organizational role; to provide teachers with a professional identity and ownership role in the new venture; and to avoid what some experienced as the negative aspects of traditional district/union relations.

Kim Borwege, a founder of the school who had been raised in a nearby community and became one of MNCS's advisors, has worked there day-to-day since

doors opened. She cited the desire to maintain the involvement of the entire founding team during the early years of the new school. Borwege said, “There are a lot of people who were involved in the starting of the school, and they aren’t all teachers, yet their input into education, their interest is there. We needed their continued involvement and expertise.”

Doug Thomas is one of the non-teaching members of the founding team referred to by Borwege. A regional director for the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota and a former member of the Henderson School Board, Thomas had no interest in working at MNCS on a day-to-day basis. A co-op member since the inception of EdVisions, Thomas recalled that he thought forming the cooperative was a good idea because it allowed him to remain involved with the school beyond the founding. “I was part of the original planning team,” Thomas recalls, “and I wanted to stay involved with the school.”

Participants' concerns here seemed to be less about ego or personalities or maintaining collegial linkages and more about the continued purity of the school vision. Founders believed new charter schools risked departing from their original vision if a role was not found to keep them involved in a meaningful way. Thomas said,

I think one of the downfalls with charter schools—at least what I’ve seen—is that the original planners are often left out in the dark. When the school actually starts, they have no role. They don’t have any kids in the school, and they don’t run for the school board as a parent, and they’re not teaching in the school.

They're out of the loop. Yet they're the ones who have had the vision from the start.

In addition to the desire to keep the founders involved as a way to maintain the school's original vision, EdVisions founders were also seeking a way to shift the ways in which teachers conceptualized their position in the power structure of education. Thomas explained that once the planning group was awarded a charter by the Le Sueur-Henderson School Board, they took the time to consider a range of options for the school's governance and operations—an issue rarely considered at all by the founders of new charter schools who generally assume a narrow range of possibilities for designing their school's governance and operational structure:

Once the original group got their sponsorship and we were thinking about ways to organize and ways to keep the group together, and the ways that teachers could be entrepreneurs as a part of this, in a sense, then we decided...that one of the ways to organize was that the teachers would be the owners of the instructional program, and would contract with the charter school board.

John Schultz, a school founder and the fiscal liaison and school planner of the school for its first four years, succinctly summarized the difference between the organizational structure eventually adopted by MNCS's founders and that of teachers in the district's traditional schools: "We're all owners of a cooperative," he stated, "rather than being employees of a school." Schultz insisted that as much as a key part of the

founders' decision to organize as a cooperative was about creating an identity for teachers distinct from district employee, key to this new identity is the attitude and lens people bring to their work in the co-op:

It requires people to have a professional perspective on their work and on their organizational relationships. This is no different than what doctors, architects, engineers have—there is no different.

Dan Mott, a St. Paul attorney who Ted Kolderie had suggested as someone who might assist the school with the legal work associated with school formation and then created the documents for EdVisions, remembered that school founders were seeking to create a professional role for teachers, rather than the usual teacher-as-district employee role. “Why is it that lawyers and doctors and accountants organize together as professional associations, but teachers simply work as employees for some school?” Mott asked. While Minnesota maintains a “professional corporation statute” available to licensed professionals which allows them to organize themselves into associations, the list of professionals includes architects and nurses and lawyers, but not teachers (citation). Mott recalled the early conversations about organizing as a cooperative:

I think the people at New Country School liked the concept of it being a co-op. It sounded good. Out in the rural community, everybody knows what co-ops are. It's an accepted way of organizing a venture and I think they liked that idea. It

really fit the model for them to create a professional association using the co-op structure.

Mott supported the founders interest in organizing as a co-op in because, “To me, it’s a model for how you take and professionalize teaching by treating teachers as professionals, as opposed to a traditional employer-employee relationship. I think it gives them a chance to get out of the traditional mold.”

There are two aspects to this departure from the traditional mold: not only did educators avoid placing themselves into the role of employee/worker, but they carved out a job description for themselves as a member of the cooperative which allowed them to take on assignments for the cooperative beyond their daily work with MNCS. Part of this involves assuming the role of educational entrepreneur. As John Schultz said, “Educators don’t just limit their vision to this locale, the site they are at. They realize there is a larger reality that they’re part of and that they need to stay plugged into, that they need to be active in...they’re concerned that we have contracts with more than one place.”

Linked to the desire to professionalize the role of teachers in the school, was a parallel desire to circumvent unionization. Malcolm Maxwell, a retired farmer who served as chairman of the Board of MNCS for three of its initial four years of operations and the parent of a MNCS student, understood the cooperative as offering an appealing alternative to a teacher’s union. “Teachers feel they should be regarded as professionals, and I have no problem with a professional association,” Maxwell stated emphatically. “But an association is quite different from a labor union.”

Maxwell had served a term as a member of a school board of a local district and during that time developed frustration with the district bureaucracy:

I've somewhat felt that the traditional school system is not as cost-effective as it could be because of the many layers of management: superintendent, assistant superintendent, business manager...then there's the activities director, and a dean of students. All people who are drawing a larger salary than the classroom teacher, the person who actually does the work. Somebody's got to be the boss and I've very easily accepted that, but they don't have to have all of that huge stack here before the work gets done down here. And I feel considerable funds are wasted in that administrative stack up here, that could be applied down here.

Maxwell felt MNCS has avoided what he sees as administrative waste by organizing as a cooperative. "What I have a problem with is the bureaucracy that the [district] engenders. That's my big problem. Here, we don't need the bureaucracy because we're small. The staff and people can sit down over a cup of coffee and hammer things out."

Maxwell also carried a backlog of frustration with the local district to his support for the cooperative model at MNCS. "Often the bureaucracy protects—and the union protects—incompetence and mediocrity. And that I don't like," he insisted. "Because my industry—farming—the marketplace weeds us out of there in a hurry. If you don't measure up—psssst!—you're gone." Maxwell cited the marketplace model as key to the cooperative's success:

The members of the cooperative are professionals—they are real teachers, and they know that they have to perform or there won't be anybody in their school. It's simple as that. It's a business, in a very real way. They realize that individually. At least some of the people even had businesses of their own. Dean was a farmer, he tried farming. The eighties came along, the farm depression of the eighties, and he was knocked out. He thought he'd try teaching again. That's fine. He understands that. Dough Thomas was in construction. He understands how to run a business.

Doug Thomas also spoke of valuing ways the cooperative offers an alternative to a teacher's union, and cited both the professional role teachers assume when they are owners rather than employees, and the avoidance of cumbersome and time-consuming district-union collective bargaining:

I think there is a genuine excitement about not having to go through the traditional patterns and negotiations and all of that crap. That is destructive to the whole educational process...In that old mode you're not really thinking about yourself as a professional, you're gonna wind up in a fight because they're just not on the same plane.

Attorney Mott argued that one of the unique features of the MNCS/EdVisions partnership is the impact it has on labor relations. "This is not the traditional employer-

employee model,” he mused. “It’s not something that really is consistent at all with the labor movement or labor union concept.: Mott went on to say:

Theoretically the members of a teacher association, teacher cooperative, could be members of a union but I’m not sure why they would be. I mean they can’t bargain with anybody, because they are it. They’re setting their own direction in compensation, in dealing with their own policies on how you run your operation. So it changes pretty dramatically the employer-employee relationship. I don’t know whether that’s good, bad, or indifferent, but it is a very different model from what the traditional policymaker has looked at.”

Dean Lind, a former farmer in the area and one of the school’s current advisors suggested that power was key here. He argued that the cooperative model offers teachers “a lot more ownership” and the opportunity to share power in the day-to-day management of the school. Mott also saw shifts in teacher work, authority, and power as key for advocating for the cooperative structure:

What you are really talking about is a group of teachers who have formed an association to provide services on a broader scale than one site, and they’re doing it sort of in a collective model, where they decide, and they govern themselves, and they decide how they’re going to operate, and how they’re gonna divide up their compensation, and at the end of the day how they’re going to share the profits...The exciting piece of this from the teacher’s perspective is that it

professionalizes what they're doing, and it says "We're not going to just be an employee of a school anymore, we're going to try to develop a business that relates to teaching.

Hence the formation of the cooperative frequently was linked in the minds of co-op members with professionalization, autonomy, empowerment, and personal pride.

Three Key Players: The Le Sueur-Henderson District, MNCS, and EdVisions

To understand the unique way MNCS is organized and governed, one needs to distinguish the three key entities who have a stake in the success of the school: the Le Sueur-Henderson School District which chartered the school, the MNCS Board of Directors which oversees the school, and the EdVisions Cooperative which provides for the educational program of the school. An "Outcome-Based School Contract" between Le Sueur-Henderson School District and MNCS's Board of Directors serves as the school's charter and identifies the basic conditions under which the school operates. An "Instructional Services Agreement" between MNCS's Board of Directors and EdVisions Cooperative, sets out the conditions under which EdVisions will provide the school's curriculum development and educational services. Hence the Le Sueur-Henderson district contracts with the MNCS board which, in turn contracts with EdVisions for the day-to-day operation of the school.

The school district's role is primarily related to chartering the school and holding it accountable for key outcomes. While MNCS has been chartered by a vote of the Le Sueur-Henderson School Board, the Minnesota charter law ensures that the school is legally constituted with a status similar to that of a tiny, independent school district. Hence while the Outcome-Based School Contract sets forth the purpose of the school ("improve pupil learning," "encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods," "create new professional opportunities for teachers" ...), exemptions from specific statutes and rules which apply to most traditional public schools, continuing statutory requirements ("no tuition charges," "non-sectarian," "applicable state and local health and safety requirements" ...), admissions policies (student selection by lottery, between 25-75% of the school as residents of the district, first option availability to parents of currently enrolled students), and financial considerations (the school must be "revenue neutral" in regard to the district), the school is a separate legal entity and not part of the district. Following Minnesota's charter law, the Outcome-Based School Contract requires the MNCS board of directors to be comprised of a majority teachers at the school and ensures that the remainder of the board be made up of current parents. The first contract was for a period of three years; in 1997, the school board voted 6-1 to renew the charter for an additional five years.

The role of MNCS's Board of Directors is to maintain the legal status of the school and ensure that the requirements of the contract with Le Sueur-Henderson are fulfilled. The Board has generally maintained a membership of seven, three of whom are parents of current students and four of whom are advisors at the school (and hence members of the EdVisions cooperative). The MNCS Board meets monthly and considers

key policy and planning issues as within its jurisdiction and attempts to stay out of day-to-day school operations, such as personnel conflicts. The Board of MNCS has seen its primary responsibility as contracting out the design and management of the educational program of the school and regularly evaluate the success of that contract. Hence MNCS's board has shifted from the traditional school board function of employer and manager of day-to-day operations, to the role of contractor and quality oversight board, a shift proposed for district school boards in several recent works (citations: Guthrie, Paul Hill, Kolderie).

The EdVisions Cooperative is responsible for providing "all curriculum development and educational services" to MNCS students, according to a five page "Instructional Services Agreement" between EdVisions and MNCS. This involves a range of tasks which are usually assumed by boards of directors of other charter schools and which are rarely contracted out by traditional school districts. Because those working in the school are members of the cooperative rather than employees of the school, issues such as the hiring, evaluation, and termination of staff, or negotiation of staff salary and benefits occur within the cooperative. Hence the cooperative owns the instructional program of the school; it is not the property of the MNCS board of directors.

The Articles of Incorporation of EdVisions spell out the specific purpose of the cooperative:

The Association is organized as a cooperative association by associating a number of education professionals for the purpose of providing employment and income

to its members in a manner that will permit them, individually and in concert with each other, on a cooperative basis, to employ their skills, talents and resources for the development and implementation of instructional programs.

Educators involved with the cooperative are eligible to apply to become voting members and hold a share of the association's common stock. Since its inception, an average of about fifteen members have comprised the co-op's membership and occupy two distinct categories. Full membership entails the purchase of a share of stock at \$100, which grants voting privileges. Non-stockholder membership requires the payment of a co-op fee of \$25. The majority of members have been stockholders (full members); the non-stockholder members tend to be supporters of the cooperative who live at a distance from Le Sueur. The cooperative functions primarily through its executive committee who handle day-to-day operations and meet with the membership monthly to decide key policy issues.

Hence people in the EdVisions Cooperative are not only people involved in the day-to-day operations of the school and are not only teachers. Because EdVisions was started in part to ensure that the holders of the school's original vision would continue to serve as a resource to the school, the cooperative includes people who were not trained and do not self-identify as teachers, John Schultz, the president of the cooperative during its early years, is a key visionary for the school's educational program and has worked in an administrative capacity with the school, but is not a teacher. Another important feature of the cooperative is that it allows teachers to leave their day-to-day work in the school and

still maintain a connection to the school's operation by remaining members of the cooperative.

While the co-op membership has remained stable at about 15 members, with a few original members departing and new ones joining in, in the school's fifth year, EdVisions is expecting to expand, simply because, as MNCS enlarges its student population, additional educators are hired as advisors. As it seeks out new members, finding suitable folks who share the school's overarching commitment to teacher professionalization is key. As John Schultz noted,

If you're not interested in taking on a professional role, then don't do the co-op model, because it won't do you any good. This is a lot of hard work. If you're still thinking in the old employee mode and you're really not thinking about yourself as a professional, you're gonna wind up in a fight, because they're just not on the same plane.

When asked about how they conceptualize their primary relationship to the EdVisions/MNCS partnership—are they members of the cooperative or teachers of the school?--EdVisions members' responses fell into two distinct categories. The first is exemplified by Doug Thomas, a founder but never a teacher at the school or formally involved in day-to-day operational work at the school. Thomas's responded to the question without a moment's consideration:

I'm definitely, definitely part of EdVisions. That is my only role here. I'm an interested advisor in a sense as a member of the co-op. That's my only connection to the school, other than that I am on the sponsoring board [the Le Sueur-Henderson School Committee]. But as a sponsoring board member, I wouldn't be stopping down here once a week and talking to the teachers and the students or anything like that. That is a different role. I do that as a co-op member.

Thomas's identification as a co-op member was shared by the non-teachers in the cooperative who were interviewed including John Schultz, who while key to providing the educational vision for the school and the cooperative, works half-time as the school's fiscal administrator. Other cooperative members who work in the school shared a different identification. Kim Borwege, a founding teacher who has worked in the school since it opened, best exemplifies this identification. Borwege situates her primary identity with MNCS and not EdVisions.

My first love is MNCS. That's where my heart is. When people say, "Where do you work?" I don't say I work for EdVisions. I always say I work at MNCS or I work for the school. I don't think of it as "I work for EdVisions." To me, I work at the school, and this is my job...I will do whatever it takes to be where I am now, and to keep the school up and going. And EdVisions is second to me. Maybe that's not right, I don't know. But this is how I feel, because MNCS is my business. The co-op may or may not be there, but to me, if MNCS goes down,

that's when I go down. I don't think, 'If the co-op dies, then I'm done.' Know what I mean?

At the close of my interview with Borwege, I asked "Is there anything I haven't asked you today that you'd like to talk about, specifically about the co-op? Anything we haven't covered?" She promptly answered, "Not really. I don't think about the co-op much, you know? It's funny you should ask that."

One key factor seems to contribute to the identification of Borwege and most other day-to-day workers in MNCS with the school rather than the cooperative. The cooperative was organized as an entrepreneurial association which would take on a variety of projects. MNCS was seen as the group's first project and was conceptualized as becoming one of several projects—perhaps several schools—capturing the cooperative's time, energy, and creativity. Yet throughout the first four years, MNCS has been pretty much EdVision's only project. The cooperative has organized a conference, sold its curriculum to eight schools in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Minnesota, and applied (without success) to Minnesota's charter school network to provide professional development services. But the overwhelming thrust of the cooperative's work has focused on getting MNCS up and running.

This is expected to change dramatically in the school's fifth year. Members of the cooperative expect to deal with an expansion and key changes at MNCS including a move into their own site, an increase in student enrollment, and the opening of a satellite site in a unique partnership with a community of Hutterites, a small, faith-based community located 30 miles outside Le Sueur. Yet members also anticipate moving the

coop's work beyond MNCS by signing contracts to facilitate the development of additional charter schools in Minnesota, and have set a goal of beginning to develop two new rural charters each year.

This might bring about a change in another key area of interest to cooperative members: the fiscal bottom-line. At the end of each year, the cooperative—as a for-profit association—is expected to divide up its profit. Yet to date, the co-op has avoided this potentially contentious process by not turning a profit. John Schultz explained:

The fact that we haven't had to divide up the profit has been on purpose. We haven't sought to make any profit, but that is the direction we're starting to go into now, with the consulting we've been doing. Any extra money's we've generated from selling curriculum or whatever, was used up for staff development, postage, travel, whatever. But I think if we get the contract with the Mankato group, and right now there's also a group from Milwaukee that is considering giving us some kind of contract, there's serious dollars flowing through EdVisions over the next year. In that case, it's possible there's gonna be some profit.

A few individuals have remained members of the co-op because they expect to turn a profit on the venture over the next few years. Doug Thomas doesn't see it this way:

It's really interesting that there are a few people around who have stayed members of the co-op, including the insurance man, who believe that there's some money gonna come from all this [EdVisions] down the road. I look at them like, what?!!

Whether people remain cooperative members because they expect to make money, alter the professional stature of teachers, or simply create educational programs which are innovative and appealing to students, one thing is clear: the cooperative model, while cumbersome and time-consuming at times, has created and bound together a group of educational pioneers who maintain a steady and steadfast commitment to MNCS.

A Cooperative Model of Teaching and Learning

A visitor dropping into the school easily might become disoriented. On first entering one of the storefronts in downtown Le Sueur, one notices that the room is filled with activity, but not the sorts of activity one expects to observe in a typical classroom. Teenagers pal around informally with one another, as if they were in a club house, the family rec room, or a summer camp meeting hall. Some sit in front of one of the dozens of computer terminals—working alone or with friends—surfing the Internet, pointing out discoveries to neighbors at adjacent terminals, deliberating over mathematics challenges, playing computer games. Others come and go freely from the building, dashing off to a local store or restaurant, a class at a local community college, or an internship with a

nearby community organization. One small group of determined-looking teens huddle around a large table and debate plans for an upcoming holiday fundraiser. A few earnest adults move about the room, casually checking-in with the adolescents, pulling books off of shelves, pointing out a page on which song lyrics are scrawled.

The room is filled with noise, but not the sort of noise typically heard in a classroom. A telephone rings and a young woman runs and grabs it. One teenager puts a tape into a boom box and blasts some music which he'd told a friend about. A pair of girls at a computer terminal laugh loudly, point at the screen, then call out to a friend on the other side of the room to come join them. Doors slam, backpacks rustle, a boy in a baseball cap sits in a corner strumming a guitar. A few students consult charts of academic goals which they keep in individual three-ring binders and loudly haggle with the adults over expectations and standards. The group discussing the holiday fundraiser gets into a boisterous discussion, disagreeing, arguing, shouting. An adult comes over and tells them gently, "Keep it down, folks," then moves on.

The walls of the room are covered with materials grabbed out of popular culture—Far Side cartoons, posters of Garfield, a small plastic statue of Bart Simpson on his skateboard. A blackboard lists the names of those in the class and their current independent work projects including "aviation," practical writing," "subwoofer," "frogs," and "math." Coats and backpacks are scattered throughout the room, books are tossed willy-nilly, a fraying poster of Wall Drug, North Dakota looms over a computer terminal. The room has a feeling of informality, busy but not tidy, ragtag but not purposeless.

Somehow the look of the room captures the spirit behind the educational philosophy molded by the school founders. While they articulate their mission as

technology-driven, project-based, and intended to cultivate the intrinsic motivation of each student, they seem wholly unaware of the ways in which the same cooperative tradition which drives teacher work at this school, also infuses life at MNCS for the students. If the school's staff is opting for identities as owners and professionals rather than employees and workers, student identity at MNCS has been reconceptualized in a powerful way which resonates with key parts of the cooperative model.

I spent a day shadowing a 17 year old farmer's son, who'd come to MNCS as a refuge from a local high school where he felt socially different from the others. Certainly not a model student--either in the traditional district school or in this progressive charter school--Michael aptly summarized the altered sense of relations he observed among students and between students and teachers at MNCS: "People are just a lot nicer here, you know. There are really no social classes and you can really work on what you like." Michael highlights three features which are critical components to rural cooperative organizing: comfortable face-to-face relationships with other members, a flattened hierarchy, and a significant measure of autonomy.

Notes taken from a focus group of students convened after the school's first year had ended, summarized student comments reflecting this reconceptualization of education into more cooperative models (citation). Students appeared keenly aware that learning takes place in many ways and that students have a responsibility to participate as active learners. When asked "How do you learn at MNCS?" students answered:

Accomplish.

Work in the community.

Learn by doing.

Pursue personal interests.

"Involve me and I learn."

By experience.

Optional classes.

Research projects.

Individual or group.

Student lead.

High school classes.

Learn from others.

When asked to describe the way they learn the most, students answered:

Learning by seeing.

Research projects tailored to what interested in doing.

Getting involved.

Can see what people re talking about. Internalize it.

By doing it.

Work on own.

Read, experience, variety of ways of learning.

Follow own interest.

Identify what it is you want to learn and then go ahead and learn it...

Former farmer and current adviser Dean Linn's insistence that the EdVisions cooperative offers teachers "a lot more ownership" and the chance to "share power" in the management of the school, could just as easily be applied to the students. The radical shift expected from MNCS students--from passive receivers of information, blank slates ready to be written upon to the designers and directors of their own learning programs--is essentially about assuming responsibility and ownership of their own schooling. While such a shift has been traditionally linked in educational circles to Paolo Freire (date) and other champions of critical pedagogy (Shor, Giroux, McClaren), or feminist theorists (Rich, 197X; hooks, 1992), in this rural Midwest contexts its roots may more appropriately be seen as emerging out of a century of cooperative organizing.

MNCS Frog Group serves as a wonderful illustration of the freedom of discovery which the school offers to its students, as well as the transformation in identity it offers young people. A group of students studying the local environment during August 1995, discovered a large number of deformed frogs in a small pond not far from the school. Some of the frogs had three legs rather than two, or were missing a leg; several had deformities of the eye. Advisor Cindy Reinitz worked with the students to observe and catalogue the deformities, and also participate in efforts by state and federal scientists to explore the causes of the deformities.

In a short period of time, the project mushroomed into a national media sensation. Dozens of local and national newspapers and television stations picked up the story, and The ABC news show *Nightline* highlighted the deformed frogs, including MNCS student work. *National Geographic* called. The cable-TV Discovery channel broadcast a reenactment of the students' discovering the frogs. Reinitz and a student were flown to

San Diego where Sea World presented them with an award of \$12,500 for environmental education.

While Reinitz and the students organized their work into an ongoing research project, offering the 11-14 year old frog scientists the chance to acquire a range of skills related to scientific inquiry, at the same time students learned about testifying before government regulatory bodies, the funding of scientific research, and the joys and headaches of working with the media. Hence students were empowered to see themselves, not as people too young and inexperienced to impact public discourse or participate in the arena of public policy, but as activists, spokespeople, environmentalists, and scientists. While the Frog Group, as it became known, serves as a powerful example of experiential education, one cannot help but see ways in which aspects of the cooperative model--democratic participation, individual empowerment rather than hierarchical sources of authority, and the collaboration-rooted impetus to confront problems head on, face-to-face, rather than ceding that onerous responsibility to others--suffuse teaching and learning at MNCS. Doug Thomas and Kim Borwege, summed up the schools pedagogy in a manner rife with the values of Midwest cooperatives:

The design of the Minnesota New Country School reflects a very different approach to schooling. The school is founded on the beliefs that young people have a strong desire to learn, that faith in that desire needs to be restored, and that it can be restored through a sensible, involved, and caring program. Furthermore, schools can no longer do "to" and "for" students and communities, but must work

"with" others to help future generations be productive and responsible. (Phi Delta Kappan 31)

This emphasis on productivity and responsibility, caring and involvement, "working with" rather than "doing to or for," is parallel to the values which have driven Midwest rural co-ops for the past century.

Innovation Runs Deep

What's especially impressive about MNCS is that, unlike many charter schools (Hassel, 1998), it has lived up to the mission of ambitious innovation promised by charter school reform. The school's philosophical commitment to cooperative organizing not only structures the organization of the school and its educational program, but suffuses the culture of teaching and learning in classroom life in ways students and faculty seem wholly unaware. Innovation runs deep at MNCS.

As MNCS ends its four year founding period, and begins a transition into a phase of formalization and institutionalization, it will be interesting to observe whether key stakeholders are able to keep alive the commitment to cooperation. The 1998-1999 school year at MNCS includes a move from Le Sueur to Henderson where they've constructed a new building designed to suit the school's pedagogy, the opening of a satellite site 30 miles away serving primarily children from an isolated religious sect which is culturally quite distinct from the current MNCS community, and an expansion in the size of the student body. At the same time, the EdVisions cooperative will also undergo a major

transition, as the co-op's original aim of providing educational services to several schools is realized, as they've signed contracts to assist in the development of three additional schools in rural Minnesota.

Historians of education have suggested that the reforms which take hold in public schools in America are often hybrids, emerging out of an intensive politicized process of negotiation among interest groups (teachers, administrators, parents, students, public officials, unions, academics) within schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Cuban, 1996). This certainly appears to be true of district-based reforms, as the power of bureaucratic forms of organization lies in formidable restraints to change and the accompanying stable institutional forms and processes (Cuban's "regularities" [p. XX]) which emerge from such systems. While we rely on the bureaucratic organization of public schooling to withstand the vicissitudes of ideological shifts, pedagogical trends, and frequent cultural quirks which impose themselves on classroom life, such a system of organization significantly reduces the potential for forms of innovation which are radical departures from contemporary norms.

While this cooperative model clearly springs from the rich soil of the Upper Midwest and its reliance on farming cooperatives to withstand the vicissitudes of natural disasters, demographic change, and profound economic transitions, policymakers seeking alternative forms of organizing public schooling would do well to consider seriously the organization of MNCS. During an era in which the Right tenaciously pursue voucher programs as the Messiah of public education, this charter school offers a compelling school choice alternative to the individualism and cultural fragmentation which characterize vouchers (citation). And during a period in which the Left campaigns against

privatization of public schooling in the name of teacher disempowerment and corporate profit (citations), this humble site in Le Sueur, Minnesota introduces a new form of privatization where educators not only are seen as professionals, but they are able to own and profit from the fruits of their labors.

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