

History of Educational Reform in Minnesota

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Many have asked how Minnesota got so many educational initiatives under way often prior to actions in other parts of the country. This brief paper takes a look at some of the developments that shaped our current systems of education in Minnesota.

A report prepared by the University of Minnesota, *Minnesota Education, 1967* had a startling and somewhat embarrassing sentence in its summary, "For Minnesota educators to see 'lighthouse' school practices, they would have to go outside the state's boundaries." It was a discomfiting admission for reformers in a progressive state during an era of national calls for school reform. This in spite of a Minnesota Department of Education Bulletin #1 dating from the 1940s, which promoted progressive educational practices noting in one sentence that "Each classroom should operate as a miniature democratic society."

Few people remember that in the 1940s, the Floodwood, MN school district totally reorganized its high school courses along interdisciplinary lines and involved students in many community study projects. The program was described by the leading educational philosopher, Theodore Brameld in his book, *Design for America* and by then Superintendent, Lewis Harris and his high school principal wife, Rae Harris in their book, *Bootstraps: A Chronicle of a Real Community School*.

Actually, the 1967 report missed a number of important developments, including, that of the Minnesota Core Teachers Association that had formed in 1961 to promote interdisciplinary and thematic instruction. Annual conferences were held for 18 years with attendance exceeding 300 and a statewide newsletter that promoted experiential learning. I know because I did the newsletter, helped organize some of the conferences and was at one time president of the organization.

Several of the core curriculum teachers in secondary schools during the 1950 and 1960s actually involved students in planning the year's curriculum and how it would be taught--in effect, student-directed learning. These included: Jenny Ann Cloet, Don Sonsalla, Ken Osvold, Wayne Jennings and Joan Sorenson, all in St. Paul school district which encouraged the program. In the 1960s, 80% of St. Paul junior high students were enrolled in the core program, a block of time program combining English and social studies and in a few cases, highly student-centered..

In Minneapolis, about 1950, the Board of Education abolished conventional English and social studies courses in every junior and senior high class and established a new interdisciplinary core curriculum course called "common learning" under Superintendent, Willard Goslin. The policy raised protests and cost the superintendent his job, the program rapidly disappeared, and status quo reigned again.

Actually, the publication of the 1967 report coincided with the inception of exciting new programs around the state:

- Duluth, Washington Elementary School was organized as an “open school.”
- In Staples, Lincoln Elementary School opened as an innovative school.
- In Winona, Washington Elementary School contracted with Westinghouse Learning Corporation to computerize most of its courses for individualized instruction.
- In Mankato, Don Glines became the new director of the Wilson Campus School and instituted 69 changes which made it the “most innovative school in America” in the national press.
- Several at-risk programs were well-underway in Minneapolis and St. Paul. The Career Study Center in St. Paul opened in the train depot in 1969. Both St. Paul and Minneapolis had programs for at-risk students dating from the early 1960s.

Three major developments occurred in 1971.

- Minneapolis won one of five huge national grants to reform education and instituted the Southeast Alternatives Project. Students were given a choice of five educational models: free school, open education, continuous progress, contemporary (traditional), and school within a school. The project received major funding (e.g., \$1.5 million for evaluation alone) and ran for five years. The availability of choices of programs for students within the project was an immediate hit with parents and after just three years Superintendent, John Davis declared the project a success and made the choices citywide. With few modifications, this remains a permanent policy in Minneapolis.
- The St. Paul Open School selected 500 from 1,500 applicants to begin as a K-12 citywide research, demonstration school. The school opened as a replica of the Wilson Campus School. It received over 10,000 visitors in the first ten years. Wayne Jennings was the director for the first seven years. The school continues as a city wide alternative, at this writing, in its 35th year.
- The St. Paul Public Schools began the citywide program, Learning Centers, which established some 30 thematic centers serving K-12. Thousands of students participated in exciting programs such as a commercial greenhouse, video productions, running small businesses, traveling in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, cross-country skiing, etc. The program ran for about eight years with great success but budgetary problems and the back to the basics movement terminated the programs.

The pace of change picked thereafter:

- In 1972, Minneapolis began to contract with private nonprofit organizations to serve youth not succeeding in district programs. This grew to some 20 schools

statewide including schools in St. Paul and Duluth now funded through state statute as "contracted alternative schools."

- In 1973, the legislature established the Council on Quality Education deliberately apart from the Department of Education to provide grants for innovative ideas. The program ran for eight years and fostered exciting practices.
- In 1985, the Legislature enacted the Post Secondary Enrollment Options, which allows junior and senior high school students to enroll in public or private post high school courses at the expense of the high school. Some students now graduate from high school having completed two years of free college or technical school.
- In 1987, the Legislature enacted open enrollment so that all students in the state could enroll in any public school (space permitting) outside their resident district.
- In 1987, the Legislature established the High School Graduation Incentives program which defined students who were "at-risk" of dropping out of high school. The Legislature established Area Learning Centers and other state approved alternative programs for at-risk students. These programs operate year-round and offer flexible programming and individualized learning plans. That program alone serves 150,000 students per year.
- In 1991, the Legislature established charter schools which permit educators and others to create independent public schools funded directly from the state and outside local district policies and contracts. 115 charter schools enrolled 20,000 students during 2005-2006.

The four previous programs have been amended and strengthened over the past decade. It is estimated that about 200,000 students of Minnesota's 850,000 total enrollments avail themselves of these programs part or full-time.

Two organizations have emerged to service these new types of schools. The Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs is a volunteer organization of about 900 members and sponsors state and regional conferences, has a newsletter and works at quality programming. The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools serves the charter schools with a host of services, training, a newsletter and special education guidance.

Minnesota led the nation in a number of these developments and takes pride in its leadership with school innovation. In 2000, Minnesota won the prestigious Innovations in American Government award from the Kennedy School at Harvard University for its charter school statute.