Minnesota New Country School (EdVisions)

The Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) is a teacher-owned public charter school located in Henderson, Minnesota. It was founded in 1995 and has about 110 students across grades 6-12. Due to its success, the MNCS received a $4 million replication grand from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with which they formed EdVisions. EdVisions has now helped more than 10 schools to adopt the MNCS model.

Table 5-3 shows how MNCS rates on the core ideas described in Chapter 2. It is followed by an account of the 16 characteristics described in Chapter 4. More information is available at:
http://www.newcountryschool.com/
http://www.whatkidscando.org/archives/portfoliosmallschools/MNCS.html

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5-3. Core ideas in the MNCS.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attainment-based student progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customized learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project space and instructional space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion-referenced assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion-referenced student records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New roles for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New roles for technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New roles for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-age grouping &amp; multi-year mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills for self-directed learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning by teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-rounded development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small learning communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice for students, parents, and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A learning cooperative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Learning experiences.** Students create their own academic programs through self-directed projects. They explore topics that interest them in their own way and largely at their own pace. Students work with teachers to design individualized and occasionally small-group learning projects to meet specific state standards. They then work with different teachers at the school (and often with
other students) and also experts from the local community or professors at the local university to carry out their projects. “On-demand” seminars and “how-to” workshops are offered to provide direct instruction and practice in support of student projects. Basic skills instruction is provided to individuals or small groups when diagnostic assessments reveal the need. Online learning is often used. And students engage in experiential activities, such as service-learning, place-based learning, internships, and even community college courses.

2. **Teacher’s role.** Teachers serve two major roles: teaching and administration. For the teaching role, the teacher is a facilitator of learning rather than a disseminator of knowledge. This means that teachers do not define the course sequence for students, do not set the syllabus for each course, do not pick the texts, assign the work, create deadlines, measure progress, and give grades. In fact, there aren’t really courses, per se. Students have control over these matters, with teacher guidance as described in #1 above. Each teacher serves a generalist role as a mentor/advisor for a group of 15-18 students but also serves a specialist role for a particular subject area or two. For the administration role, the teachers collectively run the school without a principal (see #13 below).

3. **Schools as professional clusters.** MNCS is a professional organization, much like a law firm or accounting firm. It is a small learning community (EdVisions keeps it under 150 students). The teachers own and run the school without a principal and without supervisory control by a school district office. The teachers make all the decisions about instruction and administration in their school (including budget and staffing), within the limits of the law.

4. **Choice, incentive, and decision-making systems.** All students attend this school by choice. The teachers’ incomes depend on attracting enough students. This provides great incentive for the teachers to meet their students’ needs and listen to their students’ parents. This is a client-driven element of the decision-making system. However, since the teachers make all the administrative decisions by consensus (see #13 below), there is also a peer-based decision-making element. Performance-based pay also provides incentives for teachers.

5. **Clusters as learning organizations.** The school calendar is designed to facilitate organizational learning. Normal operations take place throughout the year in five- to seven-week blocks. Following each block, teachers have a planning week that allows them extra time to engage in reflection and dialogue on their work processes and performances. Furthermore, teacher evaluations are done by peers, students, and parents, which provides valuable information for personal and organizational learning.

6. **Learning centers.** [Is the large room divided into separate learning centers for different themes or subject areas?]

7. **Learning contracts.** All student learning occurs through projects, and students must complete a project proposal form that specifies what the student will do, the resources that will be used, a timeline for completing project tasks, which state standards will be met, and how much credit he seeks for doing the project. The proposal must be approved by a panel consisting of a parent, the student’s advisor/teacher, and two other teachers before the student may initiate the project. This proposal serves as a learning contract.

8. **Developmental levels.** The advisory groups are mixed-age. [Are they divided into developmental levels?] Students in grades 6-12 comingle in the 17,000-square-foot, one-room schoolhouse.

9. **Children with special needs.** Children with special needs have the same self-directed, project-based learning experiences as the other children.
10. Curriculum. The curriculum is driven by the state standards, but students design their own interdisciplinary projects to meet those standards. There are clear expectations and rules, including the expected yearly pace of 10 credits per year and 60 credits by graduation. A credit is roughly 100 hours of work, but that is adjusted based on the quality of the student’s effort, making it less of a time-based criterion and more of an attainment-based one. There is also a required hour of math and a quiet reading period every day. Recently, expectations have been established for three areas: respect/responsibility, academic achievement, and engagement. Four levels of development have been established in each area, and privileges increase with each level. For example, level-one students have supervised computer and Internet use, whereas level-four students have their own personal computers with Internet access and email any time. This broadens the curriculum a bit beyond academics, but it still falls short of addressing all aspects of child development. [Verify.]

11. Assessment. Once students have completed a project, they must present and defend the project before the same panel that approved the proposal for the project. Each student develops her own detailed, self-assessment rubric for each project. The rubric includes three main categories: project skills (e.g., task completion), critical thinking skills, and performance skills (e.g., organization). Instead of a grade, the student receives credits for her project work. The panel decides how many credits the student will receive, based on demonstrated achievement through authentic assessment. The student graduates from high school when she has completed all of the requisite state standards, as well as 60 project credits, required life skills, and a senior project.

12. Technology. MNCS is a high-tech learning environment in which all students have access to technology, and responsible ones have unrestricted access to the Internet. There is an electronic standards tracking and reporting system and electronic student portfolios.

13. Administration. There is no principal. The school is run, both instructionally and administratively, by a cooperative of teachers using a consensus model. The teacher cooperative has a contract with the school board to provide administrative and other services. Students also have a democratic role in the operation of the school through a weekly town meeting and a student senate comprised of two elected representatives from each advisory group.

14. Governance. The school is owned by the teachers, and the school board for the school district within which it lies provides overseership to ensure that academic, budgetary, and administrative standards are met.

15. Other human service systems. [Any collaborations with health, justice, family services organizations, etc.?]

16. Cost effectiveness. The MNCS has a lower cost per student than the average for Minnesota. Among other things, the students clean the school every day, giving them more of a sense of ownership and pride, as well as saving money.

Evidence of effectiveness. EdVisions reports the following on its Website:

- The ACT average composite score for students from EdVisions Schools in 07-08 was 22.3 (national average was 21.0).
- The SAT average composite score for students from EdVisions schools in 07-08 was 1749 (the national average was 1518).
- Over 82% of EdVisions graduates went on to two or four year degree programs in 08 (the national average is 68%).
- Alumni from the Minnesota New Country School, the flagship EdVisions school, report 69% are graduates of two or four year degree programs, and 22% are still enrolled – a total of 91%.
• Of those same alumni, 92% report they felt better prepared for college than their peers.
• In another study of graduates of EdVisions schools in Minnesota, 83% of the graduates felt competent in working toward their goals.
• In the same study, 72% of those in the work force said about their jobs that they either “like it a lot,” or “they love it.”

EdVisions also offers nontraditional measures of importance. For life skills, an alumni survey of MNCS graduates found the following percentage of alumni graded the school as good or excellent in instilling the following skills:

- Creativity 100%
- Problem-solving 95%
- Decision-making 91%
- Time management 87%
- Finding information 100%
- Learning to learn 91%
- Responsibility 92%
- Self esteem 84%
- Social skills 79%
- Self-direction 92%
- Leadership 84%

Related Readings