

History of Educational Reform in Minnesota

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People ask 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 Prof. Otto Domian of the University of Minnesota in, *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 despite Minnesota Department of Education Curriculum Bulletin #1 dated 1946, which promoted progressive educational practices noting 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 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 formed in 1961 to promote interdisciplinary and student-centered instruction. Annual conferences were held for 18 years with attendance exceeding 300 one year, 60% of junior highs had "block time" scheduling, 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 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, Joan Sorenson and myself, all in the 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 schedule combining English and social studies and in some cases, without subject matter designation.

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 program called common learning under Superintendent, Willard Goslin. The fiat raised protests and cost the superintendent his job. In what has to be one of the worse examples of top down management the program disappeared and status quo courses resumed. A few of the core programs lingered on for a dozen years in some schools.

The Minnesota Summerhill School began operation in 1960 on Spray Island of Lake Minnetonka and operated for about 10 years. The school was based on the totally democratic Summerhill School started by A.S. Neil in England now nearing 90 years of operation.

Actually, the publication of the 1967 report coincided with the inception of exciting new programs around the state in the late 1960s:

- Several programs for at-risk students were underway in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Both St. Paul and Minneapolis had programs for at-risk students dating from the early 1960s. The Career Study Center in St. Paul opened in the train depot to serve several hundred students sent from their high schools.
- In Mankato, Don Glines became the director of the K-12 Wilson Campus School and instituted 69 changes which made it the “most innovative school in America” as described in the national press. Thousands of people visited from around the nation. The school was year-round necessitating a change from ADA to ADM funding by the Legislature. Predating PSEO, students often graduated having also compiled college credits. Glines now in California as one of the most advanced educators in the nation is finishing a new book, *Learning Not Schooling*.
- In Duluth, Lester Park Elementary School was organized as an “open school” and attracted visitors from all over the state.
- 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.
- The Education Exploration Center under Linda Hutchinson and Miriam Wolf-Wasserman held the option North Country Festival conference for three days in October, 1970 at Macalester College. It drew some 400 participants and featured national leading speakers George Dennison, author of *Lives of Children*; James Herndon, author of *The Way It Spozed To Be*; Charles Weingartner, author of *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*; and, Don Glines, director of the Wilson Campus School as the final keynoter.

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 39th 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 working in a commercial greenhouse, video productions, performing arts, running small businesses, traveling in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, cross-country skiing, etc. The program ran for fifteen years with great success but budgetary problems and the back to the basics

movement terminated the programs.

In addition, Legislative and the Minnesota Department of Education supported reform and the pace of change picked up 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 such as rural urban exchanges and involving senior citizens as volunteers.
- Jack Lown with Ford Foundation funding began holding national education curriculum conferences in Minneapolis drawing thousands of people from around the country and featuring exciting speakers and the best of departures from conventional practice with the aim of stretching thinking about schooling.
- Minnetonka High School implemented a student-centered, democratic Summerhill school within a school which operated for about 10 years.
- The Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs launched in 1983 with annual conferences thereafter until the present day including regional associations.
- 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 institutions 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 a combination of 150,000 part time and full time 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 self-managed outside local district policies and contracts. 150 charter schools enrolled 37,000 students during 2010-2011.

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

Several organizations have emerged to service these new types of schools.

- The Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs a volunteer organization of about 600 members sponsors state and regional conferences 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 leadership.
- The Metropolitan Federation of Alternative Schools serves nonprofit agencies that contract with school districts to serve specialized populations of at-risk students.
- The Minnesota Online Learning Alliance services the fasted growing movement with virtual or online schools.

Minnesota led the nation in a many of these developments and can take pride in its past 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.

These changes came as a result of hard-working reformers and enlightened leadership. Minnesota needs to pick up the pace to continue its educational leadership into the 21st century.