



Doug Thomas, co-founder, Minnesota New Country School

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

July 1, 2011

Present : Verne Johnson (chair), Dave Broden, Janis Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Sallie Kemper, Sara Kemper, Curt Johnson, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald (phone), Wayne Popham (phone), Clarence Shallbetter

***Summary of meeting :** Seventeen years ago Doug Thomas co-founded the Minnesota New Country School, a successful charter high school that incorporates self-directed project-based learning, autonomous school management, teacher "ownership" and democratic governance in an innovative small-school setting. He describes what makes the school different from traditional "command/control" public schools, and how this radically changes the experience for teachers and students. He describes the process of helping to replicate the school model and explains that while this school is perhaps unconventional at present, the principles that underlie its design are sound and far more compatible with both teacher and student needs than the more common traditional school models.*

A. Welcome and introductions - Doug Thomas is Executive Director of EdVisions Schools (<http://www.edvisions.com>), Henderson, Minnesota. A former teacher and business owner, he was a founder in 1994 of the Minnesota New Country School, now a nationally recognized innovative charter school located in Henderson, and was founding president of EdVisions Cooperative, the affiliated teacher professional practice (<http://tinyurl.com/3rss5mw>) cooperative. Since 2000, when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded EdVisions a school replication grant, Thomas has led the effort to create new small secondary schools across the country based on the New Country model. He also was a four-term board member of Le Sueur-Henderson Public Schools and worked for ten years as the Southern Minnesota representative for the Center For School Change at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute. Thomas earned a B.S. in Secondary Education from Bemidji State University and a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Minnesota State University-Mankato, where he taught a graduate course in educational reform and leadership for ten years.

B. Discussion - "I started out as a frustrated young teacher, in Springfield and St. Peter, Minnesota," Thomas began, and described trying to change and improve curriculum for his classes. That was not easy to accomplish and certainly not encouraged. Much of the job was incompatible with his beliefs about education, so he left and went into the construction business, which suited him for some years, until he began taking courses at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute.

"In 1987 I took John Brandl and Ted Kolderie's seminar, 'Public Service Redesign', and everything changed."

After that experience Thomas went to work for ten years at the Center for School Change, then at the Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota. His tasks there included traveling around the state to identify and stir up potential innovation in schools.

Thomas soon was elected to the school board of his local public school district, Le Sueur-Henderson. Something stood out to him there—a piece of data that he found startling.

"Seventy percent of the students said in a survey that their high school was not a good place to be," Thomas remarked. "This was otherwise known as a good, Lake Wobegon type of high school, in a good Lake Wobegon sort of town. So there was something about that disturbing survey information, and the more obvious failings of the educational process, that led us to believe something had to change."

Thomas and his colleagues on the district board appreciated and encouraged students' taking advantage of the school choice legislation that the Legislature and Governor Perpich enacted in the late 1980's, including post-secondary enrollment options and open enrollment.

When the chartering law was passed in 1991, a new opportunity opened up for those interested in creating different forms of schools. A steering committee was formed, and work on what became the Minnesota New Country School began.

"Our primary purpose in creating the school was to give students two kinds of educational experiences—both the basic 'core content' and the experience of doing things, engaging in projects and benefitting from all the motivation that comes along with that."

The model of a teachers' working professional partnership is practicable.

The founding group of teachers consulted with a lot of people early on, read many books, and laid out their guiding principle that less is more. Thomas said their greatest concern as teachers was the lack of engagement of students. Even the best of teachers could only truly engage about one-third of their students in the traditional school model, he said, and then those students tended to be only those that happened to be energized and doing well within the traditional constraints.

"We spoke with Ted Kolderie, and he kept asking us to pursue this notion of teachers in professional practice—teachers operating their school as cohorts much as partners practice in a law or accounting or investment firm." Thomas commented that this kind of approach to the teaching profession appealed intuitively to him when he began early in his career. But soon that notion of professionalism was dissipated and he had to ask himself "why teaching did not seem much different than working at a glass plant?"

"The whole notion of professionals serving at the will of administrators didn't make sense to me from the beginning."

"I was working at the Center for School Change at the time we founded New Country School, so I was a mentor to our teachers there in the beginning. A group of us got together to form a professional

association, by means of a cooperative." The teachers at the school were members of the co-op, and were being paid through the co-op. "There were others who were members of the co-op, helping with the school, but not paid. There were lots of us in the community that were involved, both because the school is central to the community experience and because the learning done there was very much of an 'experiential' nature."

Kids learn through involvement, a participant observed, to which Thomas agreed. "If you can get away from the time schedule of traditional schools it opens up all kinds of possibilities for learning."

To accomplish this non-traditional approach to learning, New Country School is organized around 'advisories' instead of classrooms. The school's learning space is open, with each advisory comprised of an advisor (teacher) with a desk, surrounded by 10-15 students, each with their own workstations including desk and computer. The students are treated like adults in that they are given responsibility for self-directed, project-based learning. This type of learning is driven by a 'constructivist' pedagogy, which emphasizes student needs and interests incorporated in a personalized learning plan, and is aided by the extensive use of technology.

Two advisories are put together in an open area, with an additional teaching assistant. This enables teachers to work with students from both advisories, with mixed grades and no static concept of schedule. One teacher can lead a group outside of the school for example, while the other stays back to oversee the remaining group. There are, for the most part, no strict bounds of time or physical space.

The only static, defined times of the day are for math and quiet reading, Thomas said. EdVisions has worked to ensure that in all the schools they work with they hire at least 2 or 3 people certified in higher-level math. After the time set aside for math instruction, everyone in the school, including all staff, engages in quiet reading time. This all-school quiet reading requirement, Thomas noted, both helps to define the culture of the school and significantly improves reading scores.

One ongoing responsibility the students have is tending an orchard. "I think they'll have a bumper crop this year," Thomas said, "so they will have about 500 bushels of apples to harvest and sell. That will be fun but also a good learning experience." They have acquired an apple press, so that the students will produce fresh apple cider to sell as well. This type of project learning involves biology, horticulture, meteorology, business planning, marketing and all the tangential elements of raising, processing and selling a crop.

Teachers find and apply the technology they need.

As students began using more technology outside of school, the teachers decided early on that they needed a way to bring it into school instead of discouraging or prohibiting it. They searched and found a group from Milwaukee of former young offenders called Homeboys Interactive. This group designed a computer-based program they called Project Foundry. It provides a protocol for the work done in a project-based environment, walking students through a process of proposing and refining projects with questions such as "*how will this make me better in 5 years?*" and "*what learning standards does this meet?*"

"By using this type of tool," Thomas said, "the students can be shaped toward more positive, productive thinking. Parents need to sign off on projects that students do, as must a teacher-advisor for the project, so families are involved all through the process of the students' experiences." Further, each year seniors are required to do a minimum 400-hour project, and present it at a public forum at the end of the year. In addition to their individual project work students are required to do two group projects per year.

"If you're a small district and you haven't already moved to some form of blended learning with an online-learning block, you're behind the 8-ball." A district called Thomas recently complaining that they lost a quarter of enrollment to a nearby district that offered the opportunity to obtain associate degrees online from colleges. I asked why don't you just meet the competition and offer the same opportunity as well? It's basic business sense."

"You need a couple of people on the staff that are really technically savvy and can go out and find the necessary technological tools from outside the school walls," he said, "because that is where it is."

You learn as you go when starting an innovative school.

When the founders opened the school in 1994 approximately 65 students enrolled from the river valley, and half of those came from the district. "The first years were absolute chaos," Thomas said. "Nobody had done this before and we were working our way through both the startup of a school and the implementation of a new model."

There was no real standards system in place at the start, he said, only validations for state standards. "There were something like 400 standard validations, and students were finding ways to fit almost anything they did to a validation." Going to a movie for example might meet a particular requirement.

"We had teacher meetings almost every day. The teachers were crying, saying we can't do this." As with many school startups, they built the school gradually, piece by piece, finding ways to create the best structure, processes, and environment for effective learning and interaction. Today the school operates with unusual efficiency, directing more money directly to student learning than almost any school in the state, and maintaining a productive environment that-though in an open room with over 125 students-operates at a low-hum.

Gates decides to replicate the new model.

In the early 2000's Tom Vander Ark from the Gates Foundation and Tony Wagner from Harvard visited Henderson, and were immediately impressed by the school. That same day they told Thomas and his colleagues that they would provide money for the group to work to replicate the school model elsewhere.

As the founding team had moved toward creating New Country School, they had formalized their organization in legal terms as a cooperative instead of the typical 501(c)3 non-profit. They found this in keeping with the teacher-professional partnership model for management, and it enabled both the non-teachers and teachers involved in the school's founding to serve in the cooperative-with the teachers being the only paid members, Thomas said. That cooperative came to be known as EdVisions.

When the offer came to replicate, the cooperative asked the teachers of New Country whether they would like to keep the effort based in Henderson, or house it in established non-profits such as the Center for Policy Studies or the Center for School Change. "They said they wanted to keep it in Henderson," Thomas said, "so I left the Center for School Change and started EdVisions Schools, Inc., the nonprofit organization."

Unlike charter management organizations (CMO's) like KIPP or Green Dot, Thomas noted that EdVisions is not a management company and never will be. "Instead we help show through professional development how teachers can structure a school around project-based learning, and then how they can manage it themselves, as professionals hiring administrative staff."

Meanwhile the co-op provides benefits to the teachers so they are not left alone to purchase insurance and invest in retirement. "We all belong to the co-op," Thomas said-not only the teachers. Some of the other EdVisions schools belong to the co-op as well, and others do not. Not all states allow for the arrangement.

With the Gates Foundation money EdVisions helped to create 12 schools in Minnesota, and more across the country. "It doesn't matter for the model whether we're urban or rural," Thomas said. The student- and teacher-centered learning and management model appeal to and succeed with people of all backgrounds and settings.

"It really is a counseling model in a sense," as every student has his or her own advisor, and his or her own customized learning plan.

"This kind of model is more sustainable than it used to be. If you think back to schools like this that tried to start in the 60's, most of them aren't around anymore. Now there is a system in place that provides for funding. Now there is to a certain extent in the chartering sector a parallel system to the traditional district schools, and this parallel system can function as the research and development arm of the district or state.

Does the system need competition to improve? "You need options that allow for experimentation," Thomas said. "We don't see it as competition with the district schools. However, if you don't have an on-going R&D program then where's the pressure to innovate going to come from?"

"In our EdVisions schools, we're seeing a lot of students graduating," Thomas said, "and we're seeing a lot of students going on to college. We do the standard testing and we're doing well on the testing, but we really shine on other measures not covered by the standardized tests, such as that of the Hope Survey."

EdVision is also trying to use the same charter authorizer for their new schools. The new law in Minnesota allows a single-purpose non-profit authorizer. "The new authorizer, Innovative Quality Schools (IQS), has given us a favorable response to an initial inquiry," Thomas commented.

Design essentials are outlined.

EdVisions has developed certain essentials for teacher-run, project-based schools in order for them to function effectively. The design essentials include:

1. Small learning communities of less than 150 students to assure highly personalized education.
2. Self-directed, project-based learning supported by a technology-infused environment.
3. Authentic assessment to assure that intended results are achieved; enabled by multiple adult advisors for each student, electronic standards tracking, community involvement, ongoing life skills measurement as well as standardized testing.
4. Teacher-ownership and democratic governance of the learning community, with autonomous control over budget and staffing, and full accountability for financial and academic success.

While this is the ideal for all EdVision schools, Thomas remarked that only about a third of the schools within the EdVisions sphere really adhere to all the design essentials. Another third do a pretty good job, and the staff understand them, but there is still that pull back to the traditional school model. Then another third have not managed to align with the design much at all—just sticking to the traditional model of schools but trying to be more student friendly.

Difficulties working with the state education agency are outlined.

A participant asked Thomas to describe some of the difficulties the school, as an educational innovator has faced with the state Department of Education.

Generally, Thomas said, the particular assessment requirements of the state and federal governments don't line up with New Country's model. The school is not built to be measured by assessments tailored to standardized programs. The students take them and do well, but the EdVisions schools do not pay so much attention to them. Instead the progress made by students can be best measured other ways.

He cited graduation as an example of the school's performance, with 92 percent of the students going on to some form of post-secondary education. Their surveys of alums indicate that around 70 percent are completing a post-secondary program.

"I think they're sympathetic," Thomas said of state department officials, "but they're so bound by the structure they operate in. Until we read Clayton Christensen we didn't know how we fit in public education. When we read his work we understood we were the "disruptive innovation" in the system."

The school has run into challenges with the treatment of authorizers. The LeSueur-Henderson school district authorized the new school until the authorizer law was changed by the Legislature in 2009 as it sought to strengthen the oversight of charter schools. Authorizers have since been required to reapply for official status, but the process for approving their applications has been slow. Because of the length of the application and the complexity of its requirements LeSueur-Henderson district chose not to re-apply, so New Country School has been seeking alternate authorizers.

The agency has been saying in recent weeks that they are using the process to reexamine schools, which leaves those that do not fit traditional mold, including New Country, unsure of who will be judging them, and on what grounds. They were recently approved to transfer authorization to Novation Educational Opportunities, a Minneapolis non-profit single purpose authorizer and have a new three-year contract.

In addition, "There is a group of people in the community of Henderson that are pretty irritated by the department," Thomas observed. "We've been trying to get an elementary charter enacted for three years now and haven't been able to get the state department to sign off."

Why does the department care, a participant asked? "We don't know-we can't get a straight answer to be honest. The reasons seem to be pretty innocuous."

You would think the state should be celebrating you, a participant wondered. "Yet," Thomas asked rhetorically, "if EdVisions were applying for a charter today, would it get one? I don't know. Unfortunately I think right now we have a department that is also pushing back, because of a lack of resources and concern over some charter schools that have not done well. There are some people at the department that would love to work with a school like ours but are lacking sufficient resources."

A personalized school can be run for less than traditional schools.

The New Country School has run a surplus for many years after spending around \$9,000 per year per student, Thomas said, and was able to cover the state's 30 percent holdback of revenue with its cash reserves alone.

But does the state save any money, a participant asked? Thompson replied no, because New Country is still receiving the same money per student as other schools-they just get more for it, in part because students are involved much more in contributing to the net 'labor' at work in the school. "The course-and-class model is the most inefficient model for small high schools," he said.

While the school serves an unusual number of special education students, Thomas said, most observers-and students-would have a hard time pointing out who qualifies. "If you'd ask any kid at new country how many are special education, they'd probably say 6-when the reality is 36." In a school model like New Country," he said, "every student, not just those in special education, has an individualized education plan (IEP). I've always believed that special education to a certain extent is driven because a student can be labeled as requiring "special education" because he or she might lack in the particular area of intelligence being measured-yet may be proficient or even excel in others."

When asked who their typical student is, Thomas said they get pretty much anyone but they tend not to get the students who want to focus on athletics. He said he was speaking recently to a community member that likes the New Country School concept but sent his child to the traditional high school so he could play football. "A lot of people still say, 'well, they don't have football. They don't have basketball.' And this sometimes becomes a deciding factor." There are some New Country students that participate in athletics programs through an arrangement with the LeSueur-Henderson district, but when he talks with families that are interested in the school Thomas said many don't choose it because it is just too much of a hassle to get a New Country student involved in other schools' athletic programs.

There is an element of self-selection in choosing schools. "I don't want to cast aspersions, but the reality is lot of those traditional high school kids tend to work, act and dress the same. We tend to get the kids that want to be a bit different, who might tend to be more creative."

Teachers manage their own compensation.

The school is governed by a board, and purchases services from the cooperative. When it comes to management teachers make all the decisions and hire administrative staff and contract for services to assist them.

A participant asked how the teachers, as the school's management, go about figuring compensation. The teachers select their personnel committee (which changes on a regular basis), Thomas replied, and the committee sets compensation. To aid this the personnel committee does a "360" evaluation of teachers including parent and student surveys, as well as use of the "Hope Survey" <http://www.hopesurvey.org>, which evaluates student motivation. "If your hope survey is low you're really in trouble," Thomas said about teachers, because learning is about motivation.

The personnel committee negotiates with the coop for a lump sum for compensation, which they include in their budget. At one point the school was paying teachers around \$4,000 above the state average, Thomas said, but now are about at average.

New Country's cost for personnel last year was only 63 percent of total budget, Thomas said. That's far less than most districts. In the ratio of dollars sent to the classroom, New Country was tops in the state in a 2001 study by Education Evolving (86%) and five of the top ten schools on this measure in Minnesota were EdVisions schools, and some were the smallest schools in the state. "That whole notion of needing to be bigger to be more efficient just doesn't stand up."

Local control and decentralizing authority increases accountability.

There is a fundamental sharing of responsibility at schools like EdVision's, Thomas argued-students bear the requirement to work in order to make progress; parents must sign off on the projects their children do; and teachers, through the advisory model, are put into positions that compel them to be engaging and involved and not just lecture from the front of a classroom.

A participant asked whether this model could also provide a way to decentralize districts. "The state has tried a lot of stuff to localize control," Thomas observed - "site-management, the 2009 site-governed schools law-we have tried things inside the system. Some districts actually do now divide money up by the school site but most principals don't see that."

Thomas argued the lack of results, and his own experience dealing with the regulatory agency, shows this isn't enough. "I think what we're going to have to do is have a parallel system," he followed, where there are two systems operating-one is an R&D system, which is separate from the older institutionalized system. This is what Clayton Christensen has found to be necessary in other business, organizations and industries as well."

"We have to keep asking the question: *Why are we assessing a school like this in the same ways we're testing students in traditional schools?* We're trying to do something very different at New Country - and there are many other schools doing things differently, and there will be more.

"I think that the community of Henderson is supportive of the school," Thomas observed. When they started to build their current building the City contributed tax increment financing and 13 Main street

businesses and individuals added \$150,000 for a down payment. A federal USDA Loan Guarantee program backed \$750,000 in loans.

At-risk students served well by the model.

A participant asked whether this model could work with student populations that are "at-risk". "Absolutely," Thomas said—one of the schools with the most impressive performance in graduation rates is the High School for Recording Arts, which runs a similar model in St. Paul. They have taken a student population with almost no high school completion and increased it substantially.

"Hope and aspiration are higher where students want to come to school," Thomas said. And these students do want to come and do well so they will be able to get the "access passes" allowing them to use the recording technology available at Recording Arts. "I'll take that over a high test score any day," he commented.

Teacher development is key.

What are the teachers at New Country doing to develop themselves professionally?

They use a professional improvement plan every year, Thomas said, which he thinks is an important motivator. Each year they need to tackle new things that serve to keep energizing the students and energizing themselves. They like each advisor to show two new professionally enriching accomplishments each year that are spelled out in their improvement plan. Some examples are: the organic orchard project started ten years ago; the earthquake monitoring project with the US Geologic Survey contractor; and the new sophomore and junior projects added recently leading up to the capstone senior project requiring 400 hours of research and activity and including a major public presentation before graduating.

The teachers have regular Tuesday morning meetings that deal with the operations of the school, then on Thursday afternoon they deal with professional aspects of the school, and do professional improvement work. "I'd say it's one of the hardest things to maintain. It is very difficult to find the time and energy, and to really feel it's important enough, to continue pursuing professional development. But if you don't do it you'll slide backward pretty quickly."

"Occasionally you'll find teachers that really do slide back in their performance and you need to intervene. However, the turnover at the school is so low I think actually they might benefit from some turnover. After 17 years, New Country has already become an institution itself."

New Country has had good luck with involvement from teacher training programs. In particular, Mankato State University has a highly regarded experiential education department that has worked successfully with the school, Thomas said. "The urban colleges, with the traditional teacher prep programs, don't seem too interested in sending their student teachers to us."

"We're not driving the best people to teaching. The teacher training programs are beginning to see that and are changing slowly. We need to make teaching a better job and we're trying to do that at EdVisions Schools."

C. Closing

To close the chair asked Thomas what he sees to be the key to really moving this new education model into the district system?

"Gates gave us the strategy for replication in 2000," Thomas said. That money is gone now but their strategy was basically to scatter seeds. "We're trying to be a bit more strategic than that. We recently announced a 'ten high school initiative' in Minnesota called the North Star Schools Project, and are looking for bridge funding. We believe that if you have one school like ours within a 50 miles or so, it will provide the options that students, families, and teachers are looking for," and may begin to tip the scales in favor of the innovations we have developed and tested over the past 17 years.