



# Carrie Bakken of Avalon School and Joe Graba of Education|Evolving

For improved academic performance and cost savings, look to teacher-led schools

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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## Present

John Adams, Carrie Bakken, Dave Broden (vice chair), Janis Clay, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Joe Graba, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Amir Gharbi, Sallie Kemper.

## Summary

Carrie Bakken of Avalon School, a teacher-led charter school in St. Paul, and Joe Graba of Education|Evolving discuss the benefits of that type of school governance, both in terms of school performance and in terms of empowering teachers. According to Bakken, teacher-led governance at Avalon, which has used that model since it opened in 2001-2002, is cost-effective because the teachers there have a 95 to 100 percent retention rate, much higher than the average rate. As a result, the school doesn't have to spend money continuously training in new teachers and is able to do long-range strategic planning.

Graba notes that nearly half of all beginning teachers across the nation leave the profession within five years. He says we need to make teaching a better job and teacher-training programs need to prepare teachers to lead schools. He says that teacher-led schools significantly increase the engagement of teachers and students in the educational process.

Bakken says the intense focus on testing has limited teachers' jobs even more than before, because they're told what curriculum to use and even what page they should be on. She argues that empowering teachers is essential. Graba points out that there are more teacher-led schools around the country and that teachers and their unions are starting to get active in negotiating for those kinds of schools.

**Issues to discuss.** Prior to the meeting, Carrie Bakken and Joe Graba were asked to be ready to discuss the following issues: whether replicating the kind of teacher partnership school structure that Avalon School has would make Minnesota more competitive; the reasons for teacher partnerships; how important it is that high school students get work experience; whether administrators are threatened by the idea of teacher partnership schools; and whether teacher partnerships would help Minnesota have a better-educated workforce.

## Biographies

Carrie Bakken is program coordinator, advisor and half-time social studies teacher at Avalon School, a democratic, teacher-led, project-based chartered school in St. Paul, serving students in grades seven through 12. In 2001, Bakken was hired with a team of teachers to open Avalon. As program coordinator, she hosts national and international visitors and researchers who come to investigate Avalon's unique and successful model.

Most notably, she accompanied Education|Evolving to Washington, D.C., in 2010 to participate in a dialogue with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his top advisors. In 2012, she started a two-year Aspen Institute/Pahara Teacher Fellowship and won an Outstanding Educator in Ethics Education Award, sponsored by the WEM Foundation. Prior to her work at Avalon, Bakken taught for three years at Plymouth Youth Center, an alternative education program in Minneapolis that serves at-risk students.

Bakken has a B.A. degree in women's studies, with a minor in Latin American studies, from Beloit College. She has a J.D. degree from Hamline University School of Law and a M.A. degree in teaching from the University of St. Thomas.

Joe Graba is senior associate of Education|Evolving, a Minnesota-based group of thought leaders in education reform. His career in public education spans 40 years and includes an array of leadership positions that reflect the origins and evolution of both his and Education|Evolving's thinking on system reform and legislative policy.

Graba began his career as a science teacher at Wadena Public Schools and served three years as vice president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers. He served three terms in the Minnesota House of Representatives, with four years as chair of the School Aids Committee.

Following his legislative service, Graba was appointed deputy commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Education, director of Minnesota's Technical College System, deputy executive director of the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board and interim executive director of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office. More recently, he was dean of Hamline University's Graduate School of Education.

Graba received his undergraduate degree from Bemidji State University and has done graduate work at Northern Colorado University and Bemidji State University.

## Discussion

**There are many good public policy reasons to include more teacher leadership and more teacher-led schools in all districts, to empower teachers, and to reframe the teaching profession in a powerful way.** Carrie Bakken of Avalon School, a grade seven-through-12 chartered school in St. Paul, said teacher leadership of Avalon has been cost-effective and has led to good results for students, as well. "With empowered teachers, we also have an empowered student body," she said.

Avalon has 190 students, with a higher-than-average population of students in special education. There are 24 staff members, many tied to special education. The school has no principal.

Bakken said Avalon is modeled after Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, Minn., a small, project-based, teacher-led school. Minnesota New Country was awarded a \$10 million grant to replicate its model at other sites and Avalon was the first of several replication sites. "We've had hundreds of visitors come to see our model," she said.

**Avalon has used a teacher co-op governance model since it began operations in 2001-2002.**

According to the school's website, the teachers have fine-tuned the system over the years. The model has two important components:

1) "All people on the teaching staff have equal authority in all decision-making situations. No one person, or group of persons, can make a decision without the consensus of the entire staff. While this is sometimes difficult and time-consuming, it does give all staff a feeling of empowerment, which translates into a great amount of ownership for our program.

2) "All teaching staff members assume administrative duties. By the beginning of 2005, we had pulled two teachers out of 'advisories' in order to fill the roles of Business Manager and Program Coordinator. Since 2006-07, two teachers have job-shared the Program Coordinator position. These teachers increased the percentage of their time spent on administrative duties and decreased the percentage of time spent with students, but had no increase in authority or decision-making power."

An interviewer asked how Avalon is different from a typical district school. "Avalon is kind of the extreme," Bakken said. "It has the most autonomy on a continuum of teacher-led schools. Because we are a chartered school, we don't have a district that tells us what our salaries should be." Avalon has no union contract. "We decide all aspects of running the school," she said. The teachers decide what the salaries are and how people will be paid. The school has a personnel committee and the teachers do peer evaluations. Avalon's only constraints are the policies determined by the Minnesota Department of Education, state laws and federal laws. The school uses the state graduation standards.

**Avalon teachers use a consensus model to make decisions.** Bakken said the staff holds two meetings a week. One is a learning program meeting, which includes all teachers, and one is a business meeting, which includes all staff members: teachers, the office manager and six educational assistants. The entire staff votes on budget matters and business issues. In the meetings, the staff decides things by consensus. The school is working on its budget now and will bring that to the whole staff, which has to approve it. She said the group uses " **Fist to Five** ," a method of achieving consensus on an issue using a hand vote. If everyone holds up three or more fingers, the motion

passes. If anyone holds up less than three fingers, the group needs to continue the discussion. Bakken said Fist to Five is a very efficient way to conduct meetings.

**Avalon is a project-based-learning school, so the students get to design their own education .**

Bakken said students each have to do large projects where they work with the community. She said some Avalon students use the Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program, through which juniors and seniors can take free classes for credit at any postsecondary institution in the state. Sophomores can also participate in PSEO, but are limited to taking career and technical training classes.

Bakken said Avalon serves both students who have special education needs and students who are highly gifted. "Students are out doing amazing things," she said. Avalon has no sports teams, but students can play sports at their home school districts. The school offers more academic- and arts-oriented activities such as theater and robotics. It contracts with Schmitt Music to teach instrumental music and students play in small ensembles.

**Avalon's contract with its authorizer contains performance criteria for the school.** An interviewer asked how explicit the performance criteria are for the school and for its students. Bakken said that's where charter schools are more regulated and have more criteria than district schools. Every three years, Avalon goes through a contract renewal with its authorizer, Novation Educational Opportunities (NEO). Working with NEO, the teachers design a series of goals for the school and the students: testing and academic goals and school culture goals.


"There's a lot of framework that's imposed on us by the state," Bakken said. "But then we get to decide how to do that. We don't have the district layer."

**Teachers from large districts often suffer from "initiative fatigue," since a new initiative is announced on almost every professional development day.** At Avalon, Bakken said, the teachers gather all the data from the past year and then decide at the beginning of the next year what they should work on. "Nobody outside of us who's not in the classroom is telling us what to do," she said.

**Teacher empowerment is cost-effective.** The reason teacher empowerment at Avalon has been so cost-effective, Bakken said, is that over the last seven years, it has helped the school achieve a 95 to 100 percent teacher-retention rate. "Retaining teachers is incredibly cost-effective," she said. "You don't have to spend money on getting people up to speed and you can do long-range strategic planning, knowing that the personnel there would be able to achieve those goals."

**Many schools, such as those in North Minneapolis, have a high level of teacher turnover.** "This is a solvable problem, if teachers were more empowered to do the work," Bakken said. "It's the constant turnover that is really damaging and not cost-effective."

"I don't know how many parents would be super excited to always have a first-year teacher for their children," Bakken continued. "Yet one year of experience is the most frequent amount of experience among teachers, i.e., the mode. That's not a healthy, sustainable model where you can do long-range planning. You can't turn around a school in a year. You can't make major changes in a year."

**More than 40 percent of all beginning teachers leave teaching within five years.** According to Joe Graba of Education|Evolving,  a 2012 study by Richard Ingersoll and Lisa Merrill notes that over 40 percent of those who enter teaching leave the profession within five years. And many teachers last only one year. Following the 2007-08 school year, 13.1 percent of first-year teachers, or 26,000 teachers, left after their first year. Since these rates of leaving have been increasing, Ingersoll and Merrill say, there is a growing flux and instability in teaching.

"We could save money and increase quality if we didn't have to keep exposing our kids to brand-new teachers," Graba said. "Our biggest problem is the turnover of personnel in district schools."

The study observes that minority teachers are more likely to work in difficult-to-staff schools with less-than-desirable working conditions. It notes that important factors in these teachers' decisions about whether to leave the profession are school working conditions, the degree of autonomy and discretion teachers are allowed over issues that arise in their classrooms and the level of collective faculty influence over school-wide decisions that affect teachers' jobs.

**We need to make teaching a better job and better prepare teachers to lead schools.** "Our teacher preparation system doesn't do much to prepare teachers to lead schools," Graba said. "We focus on academic content." Neither Graba nor Bakken could name any leading teacher empowerment programs around the country.

"We have in the U.S a strong movement to improve the quality of teachers," Graba continued. "We're trying to identify the poor ones and screen them out of the system. Ultimately, we need to make teaching a more attractive job, to make the job better for the people who are teaching. Teacher-led schools significantly increase the engagement of teachers and students in the educational process."

"Making teaching a profession where you see a professional arc is important," Bakken continued. "The job you start with shouldn't be same as the job you end up with 35 years later. Having some professional opportunities for teachers is critical, while not losing that connection to the classroom."

**Bakken described the variety she has in her own job as program coordinator, advisor and half-time social studies teacher at Avalon.** She was hired as the school's founding teacher and handles contact with the state and other tasks. She's been teaching for 17 years, uses her law degree in her daily work and continues learning about all the things that go into running a school. "At the same time, I still get to have my time with the students and apply to my teaching what I learn about as program coordinator," she said.

**Empowering teachers is essential.** An interviewer asked what the reaction has been as the idea of teacher partnerships has been discussed more broadly. "There's a lot of momentum now," Bakken said. "It's a great time to talk about this, because under No Child Left Behind, the intense pressure on testing made large districts and districts and schools that are struggling really focus on scripting teachers and scripting curriculum. Now, because teachers have been told what curriculum they should use, what page they should be on, they have been under tighter scrutiny and their job has been limited even further. There's a backlash of, 'Wait a minute. I've been teaching for 15 years. I understand what the issues are that affect my students. I understand that this curriculum that was designed by people who are not in the classroom isn't the best thing for my students at this time.'"

"Whether or not you move in the direction of teachers running schools, empowering teachers is essential," Bakken said. "It can be on a grade. You don't have to empower a brand-new, 22-year-old teacher in the same way you empower a veteran teacher."

Graba noted that there are more examples of teacher-led schools around the country and that teachers unions are starting to get active in negotiating for those kinds of schools.

**Traditional district schools can also be teacher-led.** "The freedom is there to do things differently," Bakken said. "Sometimes the barrier is the superintendent and sometimes it's the union, because they're worried about different conditions for different teachers and whether changing the contract would make them vulnerable. There really shouldn't be a barrier to having one of these schools in every district." Graba noted, though, that unions don't like schools where teachers don't need unions.

In response to a question about the recent teacher contract settlement in Minneapolis, Bakken said her children attend Minneapolis public schools and she's frustrated by the district's failure to try something new long enough to see if it works. "They don't give enough support," she said. "They need to follow up rhetoric with the actual support and the time. The data won't show it in one year, especially when there's high turnover and the schools are getting new personnel."

**We have a terrible record of doing innovation and sustaining it in public education.** Graba said there are a lot of issues with making change inside the districts. "The tendency is to do it inside. Then over time you get turnover in the people that created it and the old culture rubs off the creative edges. But we're making progress on that. Sometimes it's the superintendent. Down through the mid-level bureaucracy, people's jobs are designed around controlling the schools in the district. If you pull out one school and change it into a teacher-led school, it radically alters their self-image and their jobs."

"Chartering has a basic innovation inherent in the governance structure," Graba continued. "Public education generally is governed through administrative processes: process design and process enforcement." The central office controls what happens in the school, while chartered schools are governed through performance contracts with their authorizers. "That changes the nature of the organization," he said.

**Teacher leadership could work in larger schools.** In response to a question about how to transfer the concept of teacher leadership to larger schools, Bakken said there are different ways to organize this in a large, 1,000-student school. "You could have different people making different types of decisions," she said. "You could still have a principal, since there is a lot of administrative work to be done. Who controls what happens in the classroom is the central question."

**Avalon is connected to parents and to the community.** An interviewer asked what role parents and the community play in the school. Bakken responded that the high teacher retention at Avalon builds a network with teachers, students and parents. Teachers have students for four years, so they have a deeper relationship with students than in some schools. Parents have three 45-minute conferences with teachers each year. "Parents are more connected with what's going on," she said.

Bakken also said Avalon uses a network of community resources, such as the Guthrie Theater. The school is connected with 20 organizations and students volunteer in the community.

**Teachers unions are not always barriers to teacher-led schools.** An interviewer asked how to transform teachers unions, so they won't be barriers to teacher-led schools. Graba responded that the **Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN)** was created in 1996 as a voluntary organization of teacher union leaders who thought unions needed to be involved in changes to the education system. TURN's website describes the organization as "a union-led effort to restructure teachers unions to help promote the kinds of reforms that will lead to better learning and higher achievement for all students."

Graba pointed out that all older teachers have grown up with union management, but some union leaders are beginning to change that culture. Some unions are negotiating contracts with school districts that allow teachers to create autonomous schools. He said more teacher-led schools are being created around the country.

**Students and parents are part of the hiring process at Avalon.** An interviewer asked how Avalon recruits teachers who will fit the school's program. Bakken said the school gets many applications for every open teaching position. "We bring students and parents into the interview," she said. The prospective teachers have a first interview and some of them are asked back for a second interview. If school is in session, they are able to spend some time at Avalon. The school looks for teachers with many different interests beyond just curriculum. "We like people who've had another career and have then gone into teaching," she said. Avalon's staff does a lot of mentoring of new teachers.

**Teacher training would have to change in order to produce more teachers prepared to lead schools.** An interviewer asked what would have to change in college education programs to produce a greater number of teachers well prepared for the teacher-led model of school management. "Teacher training would have to change," Bakken responded. It's important to get teachers in the classroom as soon as possible, she said. She suggested that instead of expecting all teachers to be prepared for this type of role at age 22, perhaps they should have master's-level training in budgeting, data and administrative leadership.

**Change in education must be gradual and voluntary.** An interviewer commented that many people looking at education policy and reform think in terms of change must be comprehensive and there must always be "a fully developed plan." He said this is a problem and that this mindset, in fact, blocks major change. "A political consensus for radical change is a contradiction in terms," he said. "It means that if not everybody is ready for change, then no real change is possible. That's not so. Most systems change as new approaches and new models are adopted by those who are ready. You don't impose 'the different' on those not ready for it. Usually, then, 'the different' spreads gradually. This is the practical approach. We should arrange for education to change the way these other systems change: gradually and voluntarily and, in the end, often dramatically."

Bakken responded, "Politicians don't take the long view."

**There is increasing interest in teacher-led schools from unions and teachers.** Graba said, "We think we're gaining. But in graduate schools of education, students have no idea what you're talking about."

**Every school district should offer the opportunity for teachers to run schools.** "This means shifting the idea of teaching to let teachers use their expertise to design classrooms that are meaningful," Bakken said. In contrast, she noted that Minneapolis has moved to focused instruction, so everyone across the district is on the same page.

An interviewer referred to a recent [Education Week commentary by Paul Reville](#) of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Reville's message, the interviewer said, is that the education system is fundamentally incapable of producing the people we need to make the country successful. "The education system needs to have a strategy that can make this happen," said the interviewer.

**People want schools to be better, but not different.** Another interviewer commented that we need a political consensus to allow innovation and asked what must be done legislatively to eliminate barriers to innovation. Graba responded that the Legislature created the chartering sector to foster innovation, but now the state has recreated chartered schools so they're much more regulated. "Almost everybody in this country wants schools to be better," he said. "Almost nobody wants them to be different."