



# Making the School The Teachers' School

Professional Autonomy  
As the Key to  
Introducing  
Student-Centered  
Learning

December 2022

By John Kostouros & Ted Kolderie

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MAKING THE SCHOOL THE TEACHERS' SCHOOL

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## Introduction

This is the third booklet in a small series we've been writing on Minnesota's innovations in public education.

First came one on the innovation of chartering itself; an R&D program in which new forms of school can be tried within public education. After that, one describing the 'single-purpose authorizer as Minnesota's innovative way of chartering schools. Now this one, on an innovative arrangement for the schools chartered; a partnership in which the teachers are responsible for handling the 'professional issues'.

It opens with John Kostouros reporting what he saw in Minnesota New Country School, on a site visit arranged for educators taking part in the meeting November 4 and 5; part of Education Evolving's initiative to spread the idea of teacher-powered and student-centered schools nationwide. John also describes what he saw and heard at the meeting itself, in Minneapolis.

The obvious need next is to explain where this idea came from and how it developed. Ted Kolderie tells that story.

Let's start with the way 'teacher-centered' looks today; including John's report from his visit to Minnesota's first teacher-run school and from the Minneapolis meeting.

## New Country School, 30 years on . . .

We boarded the bus a little after 8:30 a.m. Fifteen in all, teachers mostly, joined by a writer who coauthored a popular book about the effective strategies for building knowledge. He's curious about the school's teaching methods.

We're heading to the small Minnesota River town of Henderson to visit one of the nation's first chartered schools and the first to be run by a team of teachers organized into a cooperative. (Teachers in 12 other schools across the state have joined the cooperative over the years.)

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The riders signed up to visit one of seven schools whose primary distinction is that teachers either share in the decision-making with administrators or run their school without administrators. 'Teacher Powered', as Education Evolving identifies it.

Over the next three days about 250 educators will attend a conference hosted by the Teacher Powered Network ([www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org)) a consortium of schools run in part or entirely by teachers. The program, which supports several regional networks as well as the national forum, is an initiative of Education Evolving ([www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org)), based in Minneapolis, which describes itself as a "nonpartisan organization driving transformational designs for learning, larger professional roles for educators, and policies that catalyze community-led innovation".

In its eight years the network has grown to more than 250 schools spread across 20 states. In addition to the work of the national network, regional networks serve member schools in Boston, Los Angeles and member schools in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. The program has trained a number of "ambassadors" to provide support to teacher teams at member schools seeking increased autonomy or guidance on effective shared decision-making.

In teacher-powered schools teachers make some or all decisions about curriculum, age configurations, budgets, student discipline, hiring and firing, facilities management and more. This morning, we're visiting Minnesota New Country School, (MNCS) a K-6 elementary and 7-12 upper school where teachers they call advisors make all the decisions.

We're told and shown throughout our visit that In addition to being teacher-powered, MNCS is highly student focused. Students participate in how the school operates, in what they study and in how they demonstrate their learning. Student motivation is important to the advisors at MNCS. They believe that when students aren't motivated to learn their learning lags. That the best way to motivate students is to find subjects and learning methods that energize them.

*Student motivation is important to the advisors at MNCS.*

First stop: the elementary school that operates out of an historic two-story brick building. About 75 students in all, spread

## TO MAKE LEARNING TRULY STUDENT-CENTERED



“Students at Work.” This was the students’ work area in 2010.  
“Like a messy Kinkos.”



School has learned that some students want a quieter workspace.  
Wearing headphones means “don’t bother me.”

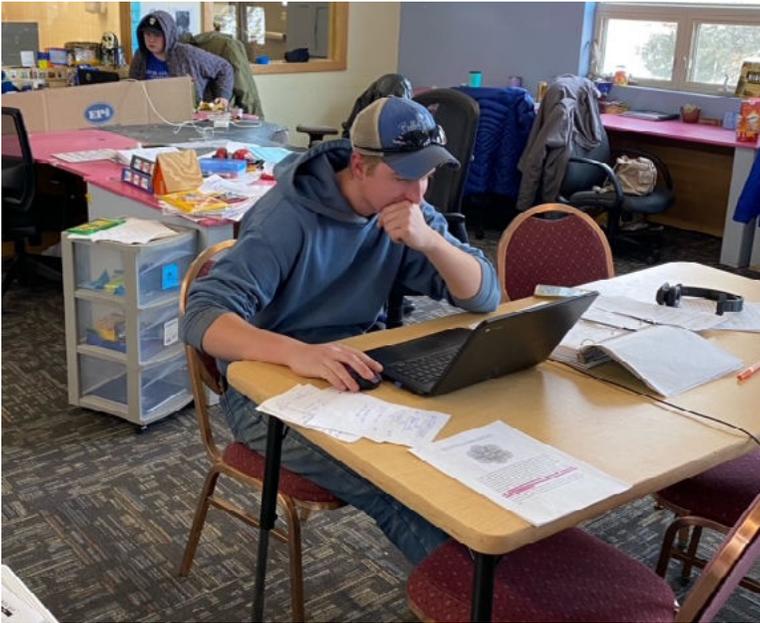
throughout the building in various states of organization. Student work is on the walls, ceilings or floors throughout the school. You would never mistake this place for a traditional elementary school.

Students in the lower grades meet in fairly normal looking classrooms; students in the middle grades are spread throughout the building working independently or in pairs or groups. Students are

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allowed to wear headphones when they are working on their laptops to improve concentration in this busy building. The mood is casual; interactions between staff and students are mostly face-to-face. Very little of the teacher-in-front-of-the-class talking to everyone that you see in traditional schools.

One student we talk to is completing an assigned lesson on his laptop. Another is designing an animation. Some chat in groups; others work alone.



This student hated math, but has finally ‘got it’, using a program that knows his achievement level and individualizes his progress.

“In a traditional school you’re just a worker,” says a teacher who transferred from the upper school to the elementary school so he could develop a physical education program for the school. “Here you’re an entrepreneur. I get to do things I want to do.” Teacher retention is high at the school at a time when teacher turnover is a growing problem for many schools.

The advisors do everything at MNCS, including cleaning their workplace. It's more work than in a traditional school, we're told, sometimes a lot more work. Committee work and consensus building takes time, but the advisors say they wouldn't trade the autonomy they enjoy at MNCS for the constraints of teaching in an administrator-driven traditional school; the kind where most worked before moving to MNCS. Retention is high at the school.

Next stop is the upper school, which operates in a newer, large open building that could pass for a factory from the outside. It was designed in the once popular "open school" model where students and staff work in one large setting. That proved too distracting, so the space was broken up with walls and dividers. In the middle sits a metal silo like you would find at many of the surrounding farms.

Visitors pepper advisors at both schools with questions: who determines teacher pay? A finance committee makes recommendations. All advisors vote on the decision. Do some get paid more than others? Yes. Advisors who take on more responsibility get paid a stipend for their extra contribution to the school. How do they tell if a student is learning what they are supposed to in order to succeed at the next level? We're told assignments and student projects incorporate the state's learning standards for different age groups. Students demonstrate their learning through presentations, reports, and other work products. Today a group of students is operating a student-planned restaurant. Lunch is being served to a group of volunteer staff in the silo.

*How do they tell if a student is learning?*

If the school relies on a project-based model, what about the state's required standardized testing? We're told that the students take the tests. "We don't pay a lot of attention to the results. For one thing, most of our students come to us having struggled in their previous school and are often behind when they get to us. For another, we don't think the tests measure the skills, knowledge and mental acuity that matters most in life." State regulators have criticized the school for not having better scores on the tests.

The visitors are curious about every aspect of the school. What happens when a new advisor isn't fitting in with the school's learning

philosophy? A personnel committee works with that advisor and if necessary recommends a move to a school that offers a better fit.

What are their biggest challenges? The pandemic eroded or ended many of the partnerships the school had built in the community. New ones will have to be created. The students came back from the pandemic shutdown less focused on learning, and less disciplined. Family dysfunction has increased. Many more students are homeless. “Sometimes a student just needs to go take a nap; they’re too tired to focus on schoolwork.”

As many as 30 percent of the students at the upper school suffer from emotional or social issues. In response, the staff has been reconfigured to allow for hiring two counselors and a behavior-intervention specialist for its 150 students. It’s a troubled time in rural America and the students reflect that.

The ride back to the Minneapolis is noisy, buzzing with discussion about the visit. The visitors are clearly energized by this visit to a school where teachers—advisors—are in charge.

## In Minneapolis: The Network in Action

Back in Minneapolis 250 educators from around the country are gathering to learn about or broaden their understanding of doing school with teachers in the lead or in partnership with administrators. Fifty-four schools are represented, 31 charter schools and 23 traditional district schools. Other attendees work in teacher preparation programs, colleges or related fields

*Many are from more traditional schools, intrigued.*

Some attendees are from long-standing teacher-led schools, here to share their experiences and pick up some new tips. Many are from more traditional schools, intrigued by the idea of teachers taking a more direct role in decision-making. Some are from struggling schools in search of ideas on how to confront the challenges that are overwhelming them.

A former principal in traditional schools is here because she’s been appointed to oversee 80 of Michigan’s charter schools, most of these teacher led.

Four New Hampshire teachers are searching for help, saying “Our school is really struggling. We need help.”

An Arizona principal and three teachers are here to explore how a teacher powered model might work in daily practice at their school.

While most conferees attended breakout sessions, a side meeting of about 20 educators focused on how to better prepare teachers to create teacher-powered schools. Attendees represented Arizona State University, Appalachian State University and Grand Valley State (MI) and a number of professional development programs, including the National Center for Teacher Residency and Elevate Teaching.

Teachers from several states, including Arizona, California and Minnesota also participated. A key finding: Teacher preparation is a highly silo-ed industry. Programs rarely interact or compare experiences. There is widespread interest in a conference on innovative teacher preparation coming up in four months.

Several themes surface during three days of meetings, starting with widespread agreement that teaching has gotten even more difficult because of the pandemic. Students are more troubled; out sick more; more disruptive; less able to focus or work hard. Gaps in student knowledge and work skills have been exacerbated by two years of disruption. Families have become more dysfunctional. Student homelessness has increased. Long established community partnerships have been disrupted or gone.

Over and over attendees talk about having to operate in this difficult environment with a large number of teaching and support staff vacancies. The past three years have seen many retirements of veteran teachers and more are expected to go in the next few years.

Attendees say that their state and local administrations, desperate to show student progress in the face of declines in state test scores and student attendance have been pressuring schools to pull back from innovative approaches and just focus on getting test scores up.

There is widespread agreement that teacher-led inevitably leads to more

*A side meeting focused on how to better prepare teachers to create teacher-powered schools.*

*Teacher-led inevitably leads to more student-focused teaching.*

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student-focused teaching strategies, such as student selected, project-based learning; flexible learning modes (in school; on-line; community based); etc. Veterans of teacher led schools emphasized that student-focused schools put student interests and needs first because it leads to better student engagement and better student engagement leads to better student learning and fewer discipline problems.

MNCS and six other site visits had exposed many of the attendees to teacher leadership in practice. During the visits there were lots of questions about how they make day-to-day decisions; successes and failures; challenges, etc. There is candid discussion about the political challenges of operating a non-traditional school in the highly top-down, calcified system that dominates American education, especially about how to keep innovations going through changes in administrations, school boards, funding cuts, etc.

The Sunday morning final gathering is called a prototyping session; attendees are asked to use some of what they have learned at the conference to create an initiative in their school. They are urged to be thorough, candid about the challenges they might face, how best to generate staff support, and to pilot test their concept before making it school-wide.

*Sunday morning attendees are asked to create an initiative in their school.*

Over the two-hour session the sound level rises as conversations become more animated. Many teams work beyond the time allocated, clearly energized by the thought of bringing back a possible solution to one of the challenges facing their school.

### Leading the Education Evolving effort

The Teacher Powered Schools program is led by **Amy Junge** a former California public elementary and middle school teacher and assistant principal. She started working with teacher-powered schools in 2009 and was a contributing author for *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots*. Today, Amy works with Education Evolving supporting teacher-powered schools through the Teacher Powered Schools Initiative.

Education Evolving is led by **Lars Esdal**. A graduate of Minnesota New Country School, Lars was inspired by a desire to make student-centered learning available for all young people. He began working part-time with Education Evolving while at Macalester College in Saint Paul. He became executive director of the organization in 2016.



## How did this idea develop?

Gradually . . . through a fascinating process.

When public education began in Minnesota the school was the teacher's school. State law (122A.42) preserves the original, now archaic, language: "*the teacher shall have the general control and government of the school and classroom*".

As the one-room rural schools were consolidated, multi-school districts appeared. Administrators' role grew; teachers became employees working for district central management, told to use the prescribed curriculum and pedagogy.

Years ago this worked well enough: eight years of schooling in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Good jobs were available for graduates with no more than this.

Neither of the two major efforts to change public education at first altered its arrangements significantly.

One was 'school reform'; the effort to find different and better ways for students to learn. This had had a long history, mostly of failure. It was bound to fail. The new-and-different would have had to appear as new schools or as changes in existing schools—and the established system was not about to do either. Many of the good ideas appeared, as a result, in private education.

The other, more recently, was unionization. Beginning in the 1960s teachers won the right to

*Never have unions been able to win the right to bargain professional issues.*

organize and bargain collectively. Union leadership was interested in 'professional issues', but the basic deal was that bargaining would be confined to wages, hours and working conditions and that control of 'professional issues' was reserved to management. Never, in negotiation or in legislation, have the unions been able to win even the right to bargain professional issues.

It is only quite recently that union leadership is becoming active in promoting teacher-professionalism, and that a way has been found for new and different approaches to teaching and learning to appear.

This gradual process proceeded roughly as follows.

## Before public education began to open

Initially the new and different arrangements appeared outside, or at the fringes of, public education.

## 'Alternative schools'—Minneapolis in the '60s

'Street-front' programs had appeared, offering social services and recreation to young people, many of whom had quit school. Dave Nasby at The City on Lake Street persuaded John Davis, then Minneapolis' superintendent, to contract with these nonprofits for a learning program as well. Soon a dozen or more such programs had appeared, organized in the Federation of Alternative Schools.

In 1987 Rudy Perpich, then governor, got legislation under which Saint Paul contracted with a nonprofit on the West Side. Teachers in these alternative schools were employed by private organization serving public education on contract. Soon after this the Legislature created the Area Learning Centers program in which an individual district would organize an alternative learning program with which other districts would contract. MAAP, the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs, still operates.

In all these the essential idea has been to offer a non-traditional education to young people for whom conventional schooling did not work well.

## Teachers in private practice

At the same time there were teachers working as independent professionals, coming into district schools by the day to offer some particular different and engaging lesson.

John Cairns, heading the new Minnesota Business Partnership, created Public School Incentives. Ruth Anne Olson, working for PSI, found and interviewed such teachers; one memorably taking into a school a bag of cows' eyes from the packing plant. With an eye in each hand the students got a memorable lesson in the eye and how it works.

In a report for PSI Ruth Anne developed the concept of teachers forming a private practice, with which a district or school would contract. Concurrently, Lois Moffitt had a program that brought individuals in interesting occupations into schools in the southwest suburbs, on contract to districts.

## Talking with professionals in law and medicine

In 1982 Eugene Mammenga, then lobbyist for the Minnesota Education, brought a group of teachers into an evening discussion with a senior partner and the office administrator of a law firm and a medical clinic.

The teachers found the arrangements in these professions fascinating, in contrast to their own; partly the compensation and partly the relationship of professional to administrator. "At our office meetings," the law partner said, "the administration never says 'no' to our lawyers. If it is something the partners want the administrators will say, 'We'll find a way.'" The teachers asked who earns how much. The answer was: "In a law firm the administrator might make about the salary of a starting lawyer. In a medical clinic the administrator's salary is about the median for the doctors."

There was a silence. Then a teacher said, "In education the superintendent makes twice the top teacher."

Notes from that long conversation went around the country to people in education

*'In education the superintendent makes twice the top teacher.'*

policy, producing reactions variously enthusiastic, intrigued, puzzled and outraged.

At the end of the '80s new thinking appeared, both in teacher union leadership and among policymakers.

## After public education began to open

A change in thinking came first from the head of the American Federation of Teachers.

### Albert Shanker sees a professional future

In his QuEST talk to the AFT membership in 1985 its president put it plainly: We're never going to get there just bargaining for higher salaries and smaller classes. Education can never outbid the other occupations that want top people.

Shanker had cautioned members not to criticize the "A Nation At Risk" report in 1983: Too much of it, he said, is true. He got the Carnegie Corporation to finance a response. "A Nation Prepared", appeared in 1986, containing the idea of teacher professional partnerships.

We have to rethink our strategy, Shanker argued. "*We could change the way teachers teach*", he wrote, reflecting on his '40 years in the profession'. "*We could change the structure of schools and of the teaching profession. (Young people) learn in many different ways. Schools as now structured don't work well for large numbers of kids. Nor can teachers do much to accommodate these differences.*"

In a talk to the National Press Club in April 1988 he picked up Ray Budde's suggestion that teachers be allowed to start small schools; what Budde had called 'charter schools'.

The following October he repeated that suggestion at the Minneapolis Foundation's Itasca Seminar.

## Minnesota's legislature adopts chartering

Two legislators, Senator Ember Reichgott and Representative Ken Nelson, picked up Shanker's idea. In the 1989 session, and again in 1990, Reichgott got chartering into the Senate bill. The House resisted. Governor Perpich then asked his commissioner, Tom Nelson, to form a task force to rethink the idea.

In the 1991 session, thanks largely to Representative Becky Kelso, a compromised version prevailed in the conference committee. Among other things it required that teachers be a majority on the board of a school.

The first school appeared in Saint Paul; Milo Cutter's City Academy. In subsequent sessions the Legislature expanded the law; removing the cap from the number of schools allowed and adding other entities as authorizers.

Through the '90s chartering was enacted in almost 40 states. Education writers gave the idea remarkable coverage. Clearly it tapped an unrecognized public desire for something different in our public education.

The laws took different forms in different states. In many states—in Minnesota, too—many of the schools created were conventional. This state's program is, though, distinguished by its public character and by its interest in innovation. The motto of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools is "Liberating Education from Convention".

*Chartering tapped a public desire for something different.*

## The idea of teacher autonomy appears

The idea of a different role for teachers came into the discussion in the planning for a school chartered by the board of the district in LeSueur, Minnesota.

## 'Do form a cooperative for the teachers'

The educators planning what became Minnesota New Country School needed to decide whether to organize the school as a nonprofit or (which the law permitted) a cooperative.

*Do form a cooperative as a vehicle for the teachers.*

They met with Dan Mott, who had been legislative aide to (then-Senator) Tom Nelson while in law school and who had gone to practice in the area of cooperative law.

Form the school as a nonprofit, Mott advised. But do form a cooperative, he said, as a vehicle for the teachers. Those organizing the school accepted both suggestions: They very much wanted a dramatically different kind of school.

It was arranged for the board of the new nonprofit school to contract with the 'workers cooperative' of teachers to handle both the learning program and the operation of MNCS. The cooperative, EdVisions, then set up a program of personalized project-based learning. That school was soon receiving almost 500 visitors a year. It has now passed its 30th anniversary.

## Word of this model spreads nationally

In 2000 Tom Vander Ark, handling education for the then-new Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, visited MNCS. He made EdVisions Inc. grants to explain the learning program and the cooperative idea nationally.

Among those visiting the school (by this time in its new building in Henderson) was Cris Parr; a veteran teacher in Milwaukee. With her father, John—who had headed the AFSCME local in Milwaukee—she helped organize ultimately about a dozen workers-cooperative schools in Milwaukee. On trips to New York City and Washington DC, she and her father met with those in both union leadership and education policy.

*Adam Urbanski created the Teacher Union Reform Network.*

In 1995 Adam Urbanski, the union president in Rochester NY, had created the

TURN, the Teacher Union Reform Network. Its concept of ‘reform’ looked both to the education system and to unions themselves. Its members were the elected leader and the senior administrator from union locals about equally from the NEA and the AFT.

One person active in TURN was Louise Sundin. She was a longtime president of the AFT local in Minneapolis. As a member of the AFT executive committee she had bought into Shanker’s vision of teaching as a profession.

## Louise Sundin creates a charter authorizer

In 2009 Minnesota legislation had created the ‘single-purpose authorizer’; a newly-created nonprofit receiving its authority from the commissioner to approve schools in the state’s charter sector.

Three were initially allowed, and quickly approved. Next in line when the window closed was Sundin with her proposal for the Guild of Public Charter Schools; aimed at creating schools that would be ‘the teachers’ schools’. In the 2011 session the Legislature removed the ‘cap’. The Guild did then form. It now authorizes about 16 schools. It is the only union-initiated authorizer in America; embodying Shanker’s vision.

## Education Evolving opens a national initiative

Sundin had made it possible for Joe Graba to take part in the discussions in TURN. Graba had been a teacher and legislator (chairing the House Education Finance Committee). He knew the unions had never been able to win for their members the right even to bargain ‘professional issues’. He explained to those in TURN how in Minnesota some teachers had come to have *full* control of ‘professional issues’.

When TURN met in Minneapolis in 2012 it invited-in teachers from these teacher-run schools. Graba then said: This is ready to go national. The Minnesota nonprofit Education Evolving picked up that role; publishing *Teachers As Owners* and *Trusting Teachers with School Success*. It began a series of meetings:

*Graba said:  
This is ready to  
go national.*

in Minneapolis, at the University of Southern California, in Boston, now again in Minneapolis. About 300 teachers from roughly half the states have paid their way to spend a weekend discussing how get this responsibility and how to exercise it once they have it. The initiative is described and its network mapped at [www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org).

In Minnesota we are conscious now that much of the groundwork has been laid for a major national effort to enlarge teachers' professional role.

## Conclusion

The innovation represented by giving teachers professional autonomy takes new forms as it continues to develop.

Two districts in the Twin Cities area, Farmington and Spring Lake Park, have found an ingenious approach; not forming any new and different school but telling individual teachers they may if they wish work with their students in any way that will develop the characteristics the board has said it wants to see in its graduates.

These approaches to teacher professional autonomy embody the lesson Professor Paul Kennedy presents from his study of what it took to solve the problems that had to be solved to win World War II. This lesson is that ***the role for leadership is to create for those close to the action "a culture of encouragement" for people to try things.***

Important also is John Lienhard's explanation that ***every major change in the handling of information has led to a change in methods of education.*** We all know about the invention of print, but the history he relates includes also the development of public libraries and—after the invention of the fast rotary presses—the correspondence schools; mail-order education.

Today of course, the computer and the Internet are such a change, perhaps the greatest ever in 'the handling of information'. We are struggling now to figure out what 'new method of education' this should produce.

How can it be anything other than the transition from courses and classes and age-grading to the personalization of teaching and learning; with students working on what motivates them as individuals, progressing as fast as they are able to go.



## About the Authors

**John Kostouros** has been ‘in education affairs’ as a teacher and journalist, as a consultant to business leaders, school district leaders and teacher-union leadership and as a community volunteer for over 40 years.

**Ted Kolderie** has been involved in the system’s issues while on the opinion pages of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, while executive director of the Citizens League and while a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota’s school of public affairs.

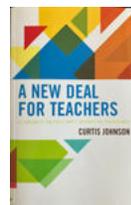
## Other good reading

As the interrelated ideas of student-centered and teacher-powered have evolved in Minnesota, books have appeared from several of the individuals and organizations involved. Here are three, in chronological order:

In 2002—*Teachers as Owners: A Key to Revitalizing Public Education*; edited by Edward J. Dirkswager, Rowman & Littlefield Scarecrow Press

In 2013—*Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens when Teachers Call the Shots*; Kim Farris-Berg and Edward Dirkswager, with Amy Junge; Rowman & Littlefield Education

In 2021—*A New Deal for Teachers: Accountability the Public Wants, Authority the Teachers Need*; Curtis Johnson, Rowman & Littlefield Publishing



Websites, as publications, have also kept up with developments. One is [CenterforPolicy.org/Papers](http://CenterforPolicy.org/Papers). Another is [EducationEvolving.org](http://EducationEvolving.org)—a link to which appears in the text of this booklet. The latter contains also a short video in which a teacher in the White Bear Lake district explains how and why he individualized his class of third-graders. To see this go to [www.EducationEvolving.org/pai](http://www.EducationEvolving.org/pai).

It is worth looking at the program for student-centered learning on the website of the Bush Foundation: [www.bushfoundation.org/school-design-student-centered-learning](http://www.bushfoundation.org/school-design-student-centered-learning) . . . and also at websites of or about individual schools that make schooling student-centered learning; notably High School for Recording Arts in Saint Paul, described [here](#) by Education Reimagined.



## Student-centered Requires Teacher-centered

The idea of making the school ‘the teachers’ school’ is an effort to help the young people who come to school disadvantaged for what conventional school requires. Enlarging teacher professional autonomy is a means to that end.

- Early adolescents especially, those 11, 12 and 13, need a schooling they will find engaging; that deals with them in terms of their individual background, aptitudes, interests and motivations; that is student-centered. The middle years, veteran teachers say, is “where we start to lose them”.
- For the schools to be truly student-centered they must also be teacher-centered. That is: The teachers must be able to adapt to the differences among their students; to personalize their work and their learning.
- So the innovation described here, while important for the life work of the teachers themselves and for the public’s interest, is fundamentally about equity; about making district public school work for the young people who come lacking the early preparation that middle-class students have, and that public education traditionally has assumed and required.

*On the cover the photo shows Mary Cathryn Ricker, executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute, at the opening session, in Minneapolis, of the fifth national meeting of teachers in Education Evolving’s network of ‘teacher-powered schools’.*