

Minnesota New Country School (6th-12th)

- Charter school affiliated with EdVisions
- Began as charter schools
- Small school – 125 students & 20 staff
- Advisors are generalists first, then specialists
- Student population predominantly white with diversity in SES (30% lunch) and SPED (40%)
- Emphasis on self-directed learning through Project Based Learning (PBL)
- 91% go on to 2-4 year programs
- 100% passed Minnesota Basic Skills Test
- MNCS recognized in 2006 by US DOE as one of the top charter schools in country

The Program at MNCS



- Design looks more like open office space
- Teachers are advisors
- Approx. 18 students for 1 advisor
- Year is organized in Blocks of 5-7 weeks
- Students constantly working on projects
- 10 credits / year, 1 credit = 100 hours
- Academic standards set by state
- Students must document and defend credits

Project Based Learning

- Students submit project proposals
 - Topic
 - At least 3 questions to be answered
 - Value of project to community / world
 - Brainstorm outline for developing project
 - Define task / activities and time line
 - List resources, one must be a living person
 - List “Profiles” (State standards) to be addressed
 - Estimate total number of credits / hours
 - Project approval – parents, advisor, planning group
 - Final presentation before project planning group

Examples of PBL from MNCS

- Mummified Chicken
- Mutant Frogs – River Research
- Web design projects
- Canceling sound
- Weaving in Peru
- Illustrate History of Vikings in New World
- Software program to help ES students spell
- Geography coloring book

Student feedback

- Students focus on interests while also “getting done what we need to do” in school
- Positive sense of community and attitude about school
- Teachers as advisors, mentors, are able to give individual attention
- Hands on learning and work at own pace
- Projects motivate because studying something of interest
- Motivated – seeing others so involved in own projects - very positive
- Advisors work with you – do not “just memorize facts... squeeze (them) out on a test and forget it a couple of weeks later”
- Work is practical, related to future
- Not just learning how to learn, but also learning to enjoy learning

Reflections

- PBL provides wonderful opportunities to engage students in their own, meaningful learning experiences.
- Within the context of an existing, much larger school, perhaps a SWS model or pilot program would be a starting point.
- Teachers would have to shift from viewing themselves as specialists first to generalist first and specialists second.
- What is the balance between “mastering a limited number of skills and areas of knowledge in depth” v being exposed to a variety of learning opportunities?
- If students chose projects based on interest, how do they have the opportunity to learn new things?
- What is the role of world languages given the global society?
- Could we do more PBL within our existing structure?
- How do you measure and demonstrate the success of the program?
- Etc.....

Resources

- <http://www.edvisions.com/>
- <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7693959170730516557&hl=en> (Project Based Learning: Mummified Chicken, Mutant Frogs and Rockets to the Moon)
- <http://www.newcountryschool.com/>
- E-mail with Ron Newell from EdVisions