The Star Schools Project: A New Model for Urban High Schools

Twin Cities Academy High School
Minnesota North Star Academy
Great River School
Augsburg Fairview Academy
Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists
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In September 2002, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation awarded a $3.025 million, three-year grant to fund the Star Schools Project. Developed by the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute, the Star Schools Project proposed to create five small, high-quality high schools in St. Paul, Minnesota. During the next 3 years, the project did create five small high schools.

Great River School (grades 7-12) and Minnesota North Star Academy (grades 9-12) opened for the 2004-05 academic year. Augsburg Fairview Academy (grades 9-12) and Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists (grades 9-12) opened for the 2005-06 academic year. Twin Cities Academy (grades 9-12) opened the following year.

Key accomplishments:

- At the four Star Schools that had a graduating class in 2008, 96 percent of the students graduated—compared to 91.6 percent of Minnesota public high school students according to federal guidelines used to determine high school graduation rates.
- An exceptionally high number of 2009 Star High School graduates—126 out of 147—reported enrolling in some form of higher education for the 2009-10 academic year. That is 85.7 percent, far higher than the Minnesota average of 65.3 percent (as last reported by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education in 2006). Star Schools added distinctive, new quality options for families in the East Metro area.
- There were numerous examples of cooperation of the schools, as originally envisioned. These included cooperative summer school programs, cooperative staff development focused on helping more students enter college, cooperative sports programs and a cooperative staff re-certification program.
- The original investment from the Gates Foundation generated more than $2.5 million in additional revenues, including state and federal funding and grants from other local and national foundations.

Despite these and other successes, some very simple changes could open the door to even more success:

- For example, the schools have entirely independent—and different—daily schedules and school calendars.
they all had the same (or more similar) class hours and school calendars, it would automatically open the door to easier cooperation and collaboration—ranging from shared classes, to shared transportation, to easier participation in collaborative sports teams and other extracurricular activities.

- They have made no progress in using a “shared services” approach to meeting their operational and facilities management needs—or their needs for services such as academic advisement. Clearly there is an opportunity to save money here.

The cooperative model explored by the Star Schools Project shows considerable promise. That promise might be more easily realized if the model were adapted to use in starting new schools that have similar missions and seek to serve similar populations of students. Having more common ground would eliminate some of the barriers to cooperation that arose in the Star Schools Project.
For almost a decade, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been committed to preparing “all students for college, work, and citizenship.” These are the goals suggested by William Gates, Sr., co-chair and trustee of the foundation.

Part of the Gates Foundation’s strategy to achieve these goals has been to help start small schools based on strong research, that seek to help more urban students graduate and enter some form of higher education. The Gates Foundation also wants schools organized in ways that better prepare graduates for some form of higher education.

The Star Schools Project was proposed and supported with these goals in mind. The basic premise behind the Star Schools Project, according to Joe Nathan, project lead and director of the Center for School Change (CSC) at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute, was to start a small group of new, high-quality high schools that would cooperate with one another to do a better job of educating students.

Project goals included increasing students’ achievement; improving four-year graduation rates; raising the level of interaction between the students and their communities; increasing the percentage of students who attend post-secondary educational institutions and improving their preparedness to do so; and providing more opportunities for students to learn about being effective citizens and employees or employers in the world outside the classroom.

In addition, the Star Schools Project identified several other critical components of effective schools and stipulated that the schools that were to be funded would:

- Cooperate in ways to help improve student achievement and help the schools operate more efficiently,
- Develop programs in which students were aided and encouraged to learn from and contribute to the community,
- Hire strong, experienced leaders,
- Provide new options not available in the communities they serve,
- Feature strong family involvement programs,
- Use a variety of assessments to measure student achievement,
- Use a variety of assessments to refine and improve their programs,
- Develop ways for students to earn college credit while still in
high school,
• Use emerging technology, and
• Take advantage of opportunities to co-locate with other organizations.

It seemed a simple enough idea, but simple doesn’t equal easy. The Star Schools Project encountered some stiff challenges right from the beginning—some of them completely unanticipated.

“I had hoped we would be able to start up a group of schools that was a mixture of charter schools and small schools that were part of the St. Paul school district,” says Nathan. “We had worked successfully with the district before, but after several months of discussion, district officials did not agree to participate.”

Nathan was also surprised about how difficult it was to get enough strong proposals to start five new high schools. But, as the word got out, CSC identified five suitable prospects and grants were awarded to the selected schools.

In the fall of 2004, the first two schools opened: Great River School (GRS) a Montessori junior-senior high school and Minnesota North Star Academy (MNSA). MNSA—a junior-senior high school serving deaf and hard-of-hearing students—shared space with Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church. Augsburg Fairview Academy (AFA) opened in 2005, sharing space with GRS. AFA is a college preparatory high school that focuses on healthcare careers. Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists (SPCPA)—the only downtown performing arts high school in the Twin Cities metropolitan area—also opened in 2005. Twin Cities Academy (TCA) high school—which is an extension of the successful Twin Cities Academy middle school—opened in 2006.

The Gates Foundation grant monies invested in these schools generated more than $2.5 million in additional grants, government funding, and private contributions. The additional support came from: Bremer Bank, the Carlson Family Foundation, the Dellwood Foundation, Dollar General Corporation, the Eco-Lab Foundation, the Gage Family Foundation, the Atwater Family Foundation, the F.R. Bigelow Foundation, General Mills, Inc., the Huss Foundation, the Lemelson-MIT Foundation, the Mardag Foundation, Medtronic, Inc., the McKnight Foundation, the McNeely Foundation, the Minnesota Department of Education, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the O’Shaughnessy Foundation, Pak Properties, the Pohlad Foundation, Prospect Creek, Ramsey County, the St. Paul Foundation, the Streisand Foundation, 3M, Toshiba America, Inc., Toyota, The Travelers Companies, Inc., the U.S. Department of Education, Wells Fargo, and many individual parents and community members.

Late in the project, with the Gates Foundation’s permission, the Star Schools Project also contributed to the establishment of a Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) school in Minneapolis. The ultimate goal was to help create a network of several KIPP schools, grades 5-12. The $100,000 from the Gates Foundation was matched by an additional $400,000 from other funders. Since this happened late in the project, the only involvement of the Star Schools Project was in helping write a proposal to KIPP that helped convince them to come to Minneapolis and the financial contribution, that as noted above, generated a 4 to 1 match of the Gates Funds.
One measurable outcome that has been gathered by the school directors is the number of graduates who have enrolled in post-secondary education institutions after graduating from their schools. This is an area in which the Star Schools have performed well.

On average, 65.3 percent of Minnesota high school students enroll in some form of higher education after they graduate, according to the latest statistics (as of 2006) from the Minnesota Office of Higher Education. For the 2008-09 academic year, the Star Schools graduated 147 students; 126 of those students reported enrolling at post-secondary institutions for the 2009-10 school year. That is 85.7 percent.

Individually, the numbers of graduates who enrolled in traditional post-secondary institutions are as follows for each of the schools:

- AFA: 17 of 20  (In addition, one graduate enlisted in the Job Corps, which might be considered a nontraditional form of higher education.)
- GRS: 17 of 21  (Two of the 21 graduates did not report their plans.)
- MNSA: 4 of 7  (In addition, three graduates enrolled in transition programs designed to better prepare them for continuing their education.)
- SPCPA: 82 of 91
- TCA: 6 of 8

According to the Minnesota Department of Education, at the four Star Schools that had graduates in 2008, 96% of the students graduated. This compares to 91.6% of Minnesota public high school students, according to federal guidelines for determining high school graduation rates. One of the Star Schools had its first graduating class in 2009. MDE officials say data for 2009 graduation rates won't be available until spring or summer, 2010. As Cathy Wagner of MDE explained, "four of the five (Star) schools did not have enough students to participate in the official grad rate computation." So watching graduation rates of these schools in coming years will be important.

The availability of trend data on Star Schools' test scores also is limited because the schools are so new, and small. Sample sizes are too small to be considered valid for public reporting of test data for three of the five schools. For example, MNSA has an enrollment of 32 and averages just 7-8 students per class. But several of the schools reported that their...
students were making excellent progress. For example, SPCPA made significant progress.

“Last year, 90 percent of our students passed the writing test and 87 percent passed the reading test,” said Tofte. “We still have a ways to go with math—but, we have essentially doubled the amount of class time we spend on math in the 9th and 11th grades so that we get our scores up there, too.”

Other schools reported similar progress in the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA – II) standardized testing program.

Beyond the test scores and other hard data, the success of the Star Schools Project can also be described in terms of how well these new schools have performed relative to the project directives. The following are evaluations of how the schools performed in regard to each of the directives. These were compiled from extensive interviews with each of the school directors and Project Designer Joe Nathan, school site visits, and classroom observations.
The Star Schools have found many ways to cooperate—to boost both student achievement and operating efficiency.

One of the biggest successes in terms of cooperation was also one of the simplest of processes: the attendance of all five directors and Nathan at monthly meetings. Everyone agreed that these meetings were extremely productive—and that they helped reduce the isolation inherent in their jobs.

“The monthly meetings were the best thing we did,” says Liz Wynne, TCA principal. “In these jobs, you really are on an island. It’s not like working in a big district. When some problem arose, you could turn to the heads of the other schools for a second opinion.”

SPCPA’s Executive Director Terry G. Tofte remembers taking advantage of these regular meetings to get ideas from the other directors. In particular, SPCPA tried to incorporate some of the successful ideas the others had used to develop their family involvement programs and to provide remedial support for students that were struggling with certain subject matter.

“I think the structural approach behind this—creating a group of charter schools who are very different and who talk to each other on a monthly basis—was a stroke of genius,” says William G. Spira, lead teacher and executive director at AFA. “It created what amounted to a very focused brain trust, with lots of cross fertilization.”

The meetings also played a role in helping to develop a number of formal collaborations, including a summer Math Academy. During the summers of 2008 and 2009, three of the five schools participated in a cooperative, five-hour-a-day, five-week summer school session for any of their students who wanted or needed more work in math.

“We saw significant growth among our students who participated—and perhaps more importantly—they reported a very high level of satisfaction,” reports Tofte.

The schools also cooperated to provide staff development activities related to doing a better job of preparing students to succeed in postsecondary institutions.

“That was a big help to us,” says Kimberly Kause, MNSA director. “We couldn’t have afforded to bring in the presenters on our own.”
“One of the biggest successes in terms of cooperation was also one of the simplest of processes: the attendance of all five directors and Nathan at monthly meetings.”

The schools and their teachers asked for more help along these lines, and the Star Schools Project delivered. In May 2009, about 30 teachers from all five of the Star Schools met with experts in helping inner city students get into college. The following month, about 30 faculty members, again representing each of the Star Schools, participated in a daylong workshop led by faculty members from Minnesota colleges and universities. The presenters shared with them their expectations for incoming freshman in math, science, and writing. Along with showing them course outlines, assignments, and tests—the presenters answered a multitude of questions about how to address specific teaching challenges and better prepare high school students to do college-level work. Participants rated this workshop 4.5 on a one-to-five scale.

Three of the schools—GRS, MNSA, and TCA—joined together with a fourth, independent charter school, to begin to offer athletic programs sanctioned by the Minnesota State High School League. They hired an athletic director, shared practice facilities, transportation and other costs, and participated in soccer, basketball and ultimate Frisbee. The plan is to add more sports, once they get the program on firmer footing. They also have developed a cooperative effort allowing faculty members in the Star Schools to satisfy state requirements for re-certification. This has filled an important need for the faculty.

The successes to date seem to be generating additional interest in cooperation amongst the schools. Several of the schools are interested in starting a program for science similar to the Math Academy. MNSA, which doesn’t offer classes in physics and calculus, is looking at the possibility of having some of their students take physics and calculus classes—as well as some International Baccalaureate classes—at GRS.

The collaboration amongst the Star Schools also led to two collaborative efforts that involved many other Minnesota charter schools. The first of these is a
directory of charter schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. This directory, which was produced with the help of CSC, is sent to more than 40,000 area families and it has inspired similar efforts in other parts of the country. All of the Star Schools participated in this effort.

The second effort is a series of annual, statewide charter school writing contests. CSC initiated this project in 2005, in part to promote and recognize quality work by students. This year more than 1,100 students in grades K through 12 submitted essays. (see image on page 13). Winners were invited to read their essays on the Minnesota State Capitol steps. Several key legislators and the Minnesota Commissioner of Education listened to the winning essays and spoke to the students. Twin Cities Federal provides $1,000 to fund small cash awards to winning students. Star School students have won several awards in these contests.

Despite these successes, however, cooperation and collaboration is an area in which the Star Schools have underachieved. More could have been done, relative to both the project’s stated objectives and to what Nathan and some of the school leaders believe they could accomplish.

“I’m disappointed that the schools didn’t find a way to cooperate more when it comes to ‘back-office’ or other staff,” says Nathan. “I hoped that some of the schools would share personnel; perhaps a business manager, a counselor, and so on.”

For a year, GRS and SPCPA shared a college counselor. But neither school was satisfied with this person. Ultimately both schools decided to hire their own staff member to do this work.

“I think this has been one of the biggest failures of the project,” adds Tofte. “I believe we could have set up one central office to handle HR, business functions, guidance, and similar functions at one-half to one-third of the cost of us each doing it separately.”

While this was initially proposed, most of the schools declined to participate. According to Nathan, part of the problem was that schools ended up starting in different years (and thus did not have the same needs at the same time). Part of the problem was that some of the early Star School directors declined to cooperate in this area.
Despite these shortcomings, all of the schools have committed to continuing with their monthly meetings, even though the project has officially ended.

“It’s not about what we can’t do,” says Wynne. “It’s about what we can do. We just have to be creative to make collaboration work.”
Develop programs in which students were aided and encouraged to learn from and contribute to the community. This is one of the areas in which the new high schools performed exceedingly well. Each of the Star Schools has already developed programs and partnerships within their communities—and there are many examples of how these programs are benefiting the schools, the students, and the communities.

SPCPA provides a number of opportunities for its students to work directly with local arts organizations such as the Penumbra Theater and the Illusion Theater. Students have helped out in areas ranging from providing administrative support to helping with technical production. The Ordway holds an annual Children’s Festival and SPCPA students have worked at the festival the past two years.

“These organizations are typically resource poor,” says Tofte. “And our students are a big help to them. At the same time, the students benefit tremendously from the experience. For example, recently one of our students served as technical director for the Illusion Theater. As a result, he was accepted into one of the best four-year programs for technical production in the country.”

TCA has one of the most extensive community involvement programs of any of the schools. Community action, according to Wynne, is at the very core of what TCA is all about.

“Part of our philosophy is that we believe that no matter how disadvantaged some of our students might be, there is always a way for us to make a difference,” says Wynne.

At TCA, every student is required to put in a minimum of 15 hours of individual community service annually. In addition, every six weeks, the entire school body—teachers and students alike—takes an afternoon off to go into the community and work on projects like visiting nursing homes, helping out with Toys for Tots, or cleaning up the Mississippi River. The TCA chapter of the National Honor Society organized two blood drives and invited the community to participate.

MNSA has a similarly strong focus on community service. Many of their volunteer activities are directed at providing service to the deaf community. One student, for example testified five different times at the State Capitol to try to get changes in the law that prevents deaf teachers from driving vans or buses that transport students. Their students also...
have done volunteer work to help organizations in their community at large, such as the Humane Society and neighborhood food shelves.

“We also bring people from the community into our classrooms,” says Kause. “We’ve had representatives from Communication Services for the Deaf come in and talk about interpreter rights, and how students can advocate for themselves.”

MNSA students and faculty members secured their own grant from the Gates Foundation to develop a DVD that teaches hearing business owners and workers how to better serve deaf customers. MNSA worked with a local TGI Friday’s restaurant to produce the DVD. The restaurant managers liked the DVD so much that they are distributing it to other restaurants around the country.

Along with some traditional volunteer activities, such as working for the Humane Society, GRS students wrote a play about reducing waste—and then took their production out into the community and performed at three or four different elementary schools. Some of their community activities are directly linked to classroom work. For example, GRS offers a course on the literature of activism. As part of their studies, the students have to define a community problem, devise a solution, and then go to the Capital and attempt to lobby legislators.

AFA students are required to complete a minimum of 20 hours of volunteer time annually—and they’re encouraged to shoot for 100 hours. The school’s academic programs are closely linked to many of their volunteer activities, which are generally focused on healthcare and other community services. For example, AFA students collaborate with a neighborhood eye clinic to provide vision screening to elementary and middle school students in the community. They also team up with students from the University of Minnesota Dental School to provide information about dental hygiene. And recently, they launched their own program to provide free blood pressure tests and information about hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. The students are able to help eliminate some of the distrust between healthcare providers and the communities they serve, according to Spira.

“These students can really relate to the younger students—usually much better than the adult ser-
vice providers,” said Spira. “Programs like this help them learn what it feels like to be a valued member of a healthcare team—and it helps them begin to network with healthcare providers and college students.”
Leadership has been one of the issues with which the Star Schools have struggled most. Despite their youthfulness (MNSA and GRS have been open for five years; AFA, SPCPA for four and TCA for three), the schools have gone through numerous changes in leadership. Only TCA has retained the same leader. Each of the other schools has had at least two directors, and one of the schools—GRS—will open in September 2009 with its fourth director.

In some cases, it seems the school boards countermanded the project’s stated objectives regarding hiring experienced leaders—at least in terms of teaching experience and school administrative experience—in selecting their school directors. SPCPA, for example, hired an accomplished performing artist to serve as its first director and AFA hired a very experienced community organizer to serve as its first director. Neither of these individuals had significant experience in teaching and/or education administration. And both were let go before the schools opened and replaced by directors with significant experience in teaching and school administration. In both cases, the schools opened one year later than they had hoped to.

SPCPA went from zero to sixty with its change in administrators. Tofte, the current director at SPCPA, came to the job with 30+ years of experience as a teacher and school administrator, including stints as superintendent in three different school districts. Similarly, AFA landed an experienced teacher, school administrator, and businessman in Bill Spira. Early in his career, Spira spent fifteen years on the faculty at Johns Hopkins University. He followed that with a long career in business as an entrepreneur before returning to the educational arena for eight years, first as a high school teacher, then as a high school administrator before taking over the directorship of AFA.

“Getting a charter school going is an entrepreneurial undertaking,” says Spira. “In many ways it parallels starting a small business.”

In some respects, the leadership challenges confronting directors of charter schools may well be the nature of the beast. Even Nathan is quick to note that these are incredibly difficult jobs.

“Being the director of a charter school is very different from being
a principal in a traditional school district,” he says. “It requires an enormous amount of knowledge about facilities management, finance, operations, and personnel management.”

As the only original administrator still leading her school, Wynne provides a good example of the kind of leadership Nathan had in mind when he designed the project. Wynne spent six years as a teacher at the beginning of her career, before leaving to work in the business world for several years. She later returned to education, working first as an administrator in the West St. Paul school district, then as principal for Twin Cities Academy middle school for six years prior to adding the role of principal of TCA high school to her duties when the school opened in 2006.

It’s worth noting, however, that as the schools have worked their way through their leadership issues, they seem to be migrating toward the original intent of the stated goals. Along with SPCPA and AFA, the other schools bolstered their leadership. Kause, who has just completed her second year as the director of MNSA, has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, a master’s degree in deaf education and has completed the principal licensure program at the University of Minnesota. She spent seven years teaching before assuming her current role.

In its ongoing search for effective leadership, GRS hired Andrea Martin to serve as an interim director while they conducted a national search for a new director. Martin is an experienced administrator and the founder of another Minnesota charter school.

Additionally, the current crop of administrators has been working diligently to continue to develop their leadership skills and styles.

“I think the leaders of these schools have really grown over time,” says Tofte. “They truly want their schools to be successful, and they’re working very hard to make that happen. They’ve shown that they’re open to feedback. We’ve developed a very healthy networking relationship among the leaders—and as a result, we’re truly building schools that serve the needs of our students and their families.”

In part because of these experiences, CSC has joined with the MDE to create a Leadership Academy for Charter and Alternative...
School Directors. A five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education is allowing CSC to work with current and prospective directors.
Each of the Stars Schools performed very well in terms of providing new options for the communities they serve.

AFA is unique in a number of ways. First, it was designed to provide a very direct career path for high school students interested in healthcare careers. Second, AFA targets various segments of urban students who have been traditionally underserved, including a large number of people of color.

“We reach out to students from marginalized communities—kids who aren’t part of the American dream,” says Spira. “In many cases, they’re impoverished, they come from broken homes. In some cases, they’re even homeless. We try to give them hope.”

Like the other schools, AFA emphasizes college preparedness, but it also offers students direct links to healthcare careers through certifications offered in collaboration with Minneapolis Community and Technical College. While still in high school, AFA students can earn the following certifications: First Aid/CPR, First Responder, Registered Nursing Assistant, and Emergency Medical Technician.

What’s more, AFA offers two innovative options to serve a student population that needs flexibility. The first is somewhat more traditional and includes a regular school week that runs Monday through Thursday, but offers Friday morning school for remedial help. The second option offers students even more flexibility through night school and online learning.

GRS offers an unusual one-two punch of opportunities to its students in that it is a Montessori high school—and it offers the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. It is the oldest Montessori high school in the nation and the only one in Minnesota. In addition, it is one of only three Montessori high schools nationwide that has an IB program.

As a Montessori school, GRS emphasizes providing “hands-on” learning experiences as part of its curriculum. For example, GRS offers a number of off-campus learning opportunities during what is known as “May term”. Organized outings—such as a southern Minnesota bike trip or a backpacking trip along Lake Superior’s North Shore—provide the framework for combining classroom work with real world experiences.
MNSA offers deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing students in the community a unique option. It is the only high school in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area that offers deaf students the opportunity to have a high school of their own. What's more, it is the only one in the state that uses a bilingual approach; classes are taught in both English and American Sign Language.

“Most programs—including those for groups of deaf students who are taking classes at mainstream high schools—focus only on English, which can create problems related to grammar and structure in both English and ASL,” says Kause.

Similarly, SPCPA is the only high school in Minneapolis or St. Paul offering a comprehensive program for pre-professional performing artists.

“Most high schools offer a variety of arts programs—typically some theater and music programs,” says Tofte. “But none of them come close to what we offer in terms of complexity and seriousness. And we’re the only one that offers a dance program.”

Perhaps more importantly, SPCPA routinely offers its students opportunities to work with accomplished professional performing artists, directors, and technical production professionals in collaboration with local theaters, dance companies, and other organizations.

What distinguishes TCA from other schools in the community—in addition to its size—is what might be called an “old-school” approach to education. Both students and teachers wear uniforms. Classes assign homework every night. Once a month, they hold “Saturday School” for remediation and/or detention purposes.

“We have very challenging classes, focused on doing college preparatory work,” says Wynne. “And we deliver a quality product in a smaller, safer environment.”
When it comes to developing strong family involvement programs, success has been mixed among the Star Schools. Some have thrived, others have faltered. Each of the schools holds parent/teacher conferences and each uses its website to communicate with parents and students alike, but for most of the schools that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Leading the way are TCA, GRS, and MNSA. Each has active parent groups that meet regularly. And, they offer parent education sessions about subjects such as college entrance requirements, and so on. All three have developed vibrant programs that go well beyond the traditional parent/teacher conference model.

“At TCA, we try to get our parents involved right away,” says Wynne. “It starts with the application process, and grows from there.”

Parents are told upfront that they are expected to participate in their children’s success at TCA, according to Wynne. TCA’s parent/teacher conferences, which are held on Saturdays and must be attended by parents and students, have achieved a remarkable participation rate that has ranged from 95 to 97 percent.

TCA also incorporates a team approach in meeting with parents when problems arise.

“If we call a parent in, we have them meet with all their child’s teachers so that they get to see the depth and breadth of that student’s performance—not just the negative issue that’s come up,” says Wynne.

Several of the schools have parent newsletters. And they get their parents involved through a number of volunteer activities. These include coming in to school to speak about careers, helping with extracurricular activities, and more.

“Parents have helped remodel our school, helped with fundraisers, and more,” says Martin, who notes that a group of parents and students worked together to inlay a symbolic “great river” made out of a tile mosaic in the floor of the school cafeteria.

“Our parents volunteer to help with everything from fundraising, to making costumes for our drama club, to helping out with our athletic programs,” says Kause.

The directors of both SPCPA and AFA readily admit that they’ve fallen short when it comes to
family involvement, but both are actively working to improve their performance.

“This is an area in which we’ve struggled quite a bit,” says Tofte. “Right now, we have conferences twice a year, but we’re trying to develop some new programs based on the success some of the other Star Schools have had. Part of the challenge for us is that we have students from more than 40 different school districts at SPCPA.”

“We haven’t done very well at all, in this regard,” notes Spira. “In part, our struggles are related to the socioeconomic groups we serve.”

AFA is planning to reinvent their approach to family involvement programs when they make the move to their new location next year, according to Spira.

“We’re going to try to piggyback on services,” notes Spira. “For example, we intend to offer help with personal finances, healthcare interventions, and so on, to get people into our offices, and then work with them through traditional parent/teacher conferences and other family involvement efforts.”

Each of the schools, in accordance with the requirements of the MDE, incorporates the MCA-II tests and the GRAD tests into a battery of assessments and other tools they use to track their students’ progress and achievement. It is also clear that they have worked hard to adhere to this project directive.

Most of the schools use the “Stanford 10 Achievement Test,” a series of reference tests that allows the schools to compare their students’ level of achievement to students from across the United States. The Star Schools also use college readiness tests (PSAT and PLAN) to help prepare students for standard college entrance exams (SAT and ACT).

Several of the Star Schools take 10th, 11th, and 12th graders to a local two-year college to have them take placement tests. These tests are used to determine whether students are ready for college-level work in reading, writing, and mathematics. “Schools report this is an important ‘reality test’ for students and faculty,” says Nathan.

Some of the schools also use the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress tests, Degrees of Reading Power tests, and a variety of internally developed assessments. “We find that some of the standardized tests are a bit burdensome—and sometimes not all that useful,” says Spira. “So we use some shorter, quicker diagnostic tests that give us a good picture of where our students stand.”

More importantly, from Spira’s perspective, AFA monitors a number of indicators—such as diligence and deportment—on a
daily basis, to keep abreast of their students’ progress.

“These behaviors have been validated as very reliable indicators that our students are making the kind of significant effort that we know will lead to success,” says Spira.

SPCPA uses a juried process in the spring of every year to assess students’ strengths and deficiencies in the performing arts. For example, last year, they brought in the casting director from the Guthrie Theater to observe all their theater students and provide feedback.

Similarly, MNSA regularly tests its students in ASL. What’s more, they use a series of tests that examine the development of the social and emotional skills their students will need to make a successful transition to a “hearing” world.

Because GRS is an IB school, their students also take a variety of IB tests—either for certificates in individual subjects, or for the IB diploma itself.

Beyond that, through the discussions with the school directors, it became clear that they have an attitude of doing whatever it takes to effectively track their students and determine what kind of support they need. Two of the schools, GRS and TCA, maintain student portfolios that contain grades, test results, and other pertinent information about their students from the time they enroll until they graduate.

TCA’s Wynne seemed to represent the attitude of all of the school directors, saying: “We’re always asking ourselves: Are our kids learning the things they need to learn? Are we providing the right instruction? Are we using the right materials?”
Just as they have done in terms of testing and assessing their students’ progress, the Star Schools have all demonstrated a substantial commitment to evaluating the performance of their faculty and their programs.

“That’s something we try to do twenty-four, seven,” says Wynne. “We bring our staff in two weeks before schools starts, look at what we did well the year before and what we need to get better at—and we make a plan. At the end of the year, we meet again and evaluate how well we did with our plan.”

Wynne and others say they also try to pay attention to the latest research.

“If the research shows our students need four years of science, we give them four years of science,” she says. “If we want students to succeed, we have to give them the support they need.”

Student and parent surveys are a key component of the Star Schools’ self-assessment. Some use SurveyMonkey electronic surveys; others do it the old fashioned way. Either way, they try to pay attention to what their constituency is telling them.

“At GRS, every teacher surveys students in every class,” says Martin. “We also meet with our parent organization—Parent Voices. They frequently identify areas that they think need improvement.”

AFA uses peer review and student surveys to assess its performance. On the student side, they identify a stratified random sample of students who are brought in for hour-long assessments of every teacher. From a peer review perspective, each teacher is observed by at least two other teachers during the school year. And, at year’s end, they do 360-degree survey assessments of the entire faculty.

“Everybody looks at everybody else,” says Spira. “We complete a 16-page assessment that looks at nine different dimensions of performance.”

Moreover, several of the Star Schools have arranged for their 10th and 11th grade students to visit local colleges and take their placement tests in reading, writing and math. This helps students, families and faculty understand where they are in relation to the minimum that colleges expect in these areas.
This is another area in which the Star Schools have succeeded across the board. It seems to begin with the schools’ mission statements, their leadership, and the entire staff of each school—but there was a consensus among the directors that a critical factor to success in this area is consistent and constant communication with the students.

“We are constantly emphasizing to our students the commitment and discipline it takes to be a professional performing artist,” says Tofte. “After their visit to our school, the representatives of the North Central Association said they had never seen such an awareness of mission at a high school.”

At TCA, the school’s mission, and the high expectations they have for their students, can be found everywhere, starting with numerous posters on the school walls.

“It’s a culture we have here, a climate,” says Wynne. “It’s modeled by everyone from the teachers to the custodians to the office staff.”

MNSA’s Kause echoes Wynne’s sentiments.

“It starts with our staff—letting them know our expectations are high, and making sure they communicate that to our students regularly,” says Kause. “We don’t treat our students differently because they’re deaf.”

MNSA provides class syllabi, outlining what will be covered, what the students have to deliver, and what level of achievement is expected.

Like the other Star schools, GRS emphasizes regular communication of expectations to the students—and those expectations extend to behavior, too.

“We’re very clear about what kinds of behavior are acceptable and what kinds are not,” says Martin. “Each student signs a contract at the beginning of the school year that outlines what we expect of them as members of this community. That includes respect and compassion for fellow students and teachers, as well as expectations around timeliness in completing homework assignments.”

Some of the schools, such as AFA and MNSA, link their expectations directly to their grading system.

“We use an ‘A-to-C’ grading system—combined with a pass/fail system,” says Spira. “Our students don’t get a letter grade unless they are college ready. If our students get a ‘C,’ that means they are ready to do entry-level work at a non-selective college—without remedial assistance. Students who are not ready for college-level work can still graduate, if they achieve a passing grade.”
Research has shown that students who take college-level courses while still in high school develop some “momentum” that carries over and makes them more likely to succeed at the next level. This is a concept not lost on the Star Schools. From the common-place to the unique, each of the Star Schools has been diligent in developing ways for its students to earn college credit while still in high school.

First, each of the schools offers its students the opportunity to participate in Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO). PSEO classes enable them to take college-level classes on college or university campuses during their junior and/or senior year of high school at a multitude of nearby institutions. Each of the Star Schools has students who take PSEO classes. But each of the schools also offers additional ways for students to earn college credit.

“We’re very supportive of PSEO students,” says Martin. “And, because we are an IB school, students can also earn college credit that way as well. Plus, we offer them the option of taking classes online to earn college credits.”

TCA will begin offering its first four Advanced Placement (AP) classes in 2009-10 school year, in: biology, chemistry, history, and honors English. Students who score well on the final AP exam can earn college credit.

MNSA, which isn’t large enough to have its own AP classes, has one student currently doing IB testing through his home school district, and they hope to collaborate with GRS to offer more students the opportunity to access their IB program.

Similarly, AFA isn’t large enough to hold its own AP classes either, but in addition to PSEO classes, the school collaborates with Minneapolis Community and Technical College. AFA students can earn a certificate in their nursing assistants program, as well as paraprofessional training that earns them college credit in other healthcare related courses.

SPCPA participates in the College in the Schools program, an accredited program that allows students to earn transferable college credits at their high school campus. College in the Schools involves college faculty training high school faculty on how to offer a college-level class. SPCPA has been using the program since the 2007-2008 school year. In 2009-10, SPCPA will offer students seven courses through this program. Students who take all of the College in the Schools courses could earn a full year of college credit by the time they graduate from high school.
Again, all of the schools have used some forms of emerging technology—but the level of usage varies widely. For starters each of the schools has a website which they use extensively to communicate with both prospective and current students and parents.

At the sparse end of the spectrum is SPCPA, which according to Tofte, has a decent computer lab, and uses MOODLE to provide text materials, notes, worksheets and online tests to help students while they are away from the classroom.

TCA also has a computer lab. In addition, they use interactive whiteboards—the electronic version of the old fashioned chalkboard. The interactive whiteboards allow teachers to display and present information in media ranging from handwriting, to photography, to videos—and more. At TCA, teachers make extensive use of digital document cameras to prep materials for use on the interactive white boards, or with LCD projectors.

MNSA uses interactive whiteboards, video cameras, and related technologies that help them meet their curricular approach of teaching in both English and ASL. These whiteboards enable them to show video clips in which the presenters are using ASL—or to replay classroom presentations that have been recorded—in much the same way hearing students might use an audio recorder to record and then review an important lecture. They have made use of pod-casts in and out of the classroom, their students are trained on both Macintosh and PC platforms, and they are given instruction in basic website development. They also make extensive use of document readers, which allow them to transfer almost any kind of materials into video for effective use with their interactive whiteboards and projectors.

Instead of a computer lab, AFA has computer workstations for every student in every classroom. They also use interactive whiteboards—as does GRS—but both of these schools seem to have taken the technology angle a step further than the others by looking for ways to incorporate the social networking “technologies” available through the Internet.

“We’re recognizing that Twitter, and Facebook, and MySpace can be good tools,” says Spira. “We’re trying to find ways to fit them in with what we’re trying to accomplish, rather than have them be only used in soft ways.”

For example, AFA has its own Facebook page, and uses it to communicate with students about everything from student news to school events. Currently, AFA has photos of its latest graduating class posted on Facebook—along with a congratulatory message.

GRS has a universal school calendar online—containing everything from extracurricular events to homework assignment due dates by class—so that parents and students can keep track of everything. They use SurveyMonkey (an online tool that allows users to create custom surveys and view results in real time) and FaceBook.

Augsburg Fairview Academy’s music studios are very popular with students.
From the onset of the project, the Star Schools have found a number of ways of using co-location to their advantage. For starters, GRS and AFA were going to occupy the same building when they opened their doors. When AFA's start got put back a year, GRS opened alone in the building—but the following year, AFA moved in and they shared the same building.

In addition, GRS holds a student robotics program in facilities owned by a nearby business.

TCA is housed in what was once a local parochial school, along with its counterpart, Twin Cities Academy Middle School. However, it does operate some programs in partnership with other organizations and uses their facilities. For example, they collaborate with the University of St. Thomas in their science programs, regularly working in their laboratories. They have similar collaborative efforts with the non-profit organization, Eco Education.

MNSA started its life renting space from Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church. Although they are merging with Metro Deaf School (an elementary school that also follows the bilingual approach) and will soon be moving into a new, standalone building, co-location was integral to their startup and early success. Along with classroom space, MNSA was able to use the church’s gym for their basketball team. The basketball team has been a big source of pride for the school.

“We have had a great relationship with the congregation,” says Kause. “They have been very accommodating—and it was quite economical, which gave us a lot of budgeting flexibility as we were getting started.”

After starting in the same building as GRS, AFA grew too large and decided to move out on its own to a space in downtown Minneapolis. Starting next year, however, they will be moving into a new facility, co-locating with Messiah Lutheran Church. Their new location is in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis—in the middle of a much larger consortium of community service organizations with which AFA hopes to collaborate. What’s more, they will be located between two large hospitals, and near a community medical clinic. They have already begun discussions with these institutions to explore new opportunities for collaboration.

If there were to be a poster child for co-location among the Star Schools, it would be SPCPA. For starters, their primary offices and classrooms are located in the Landmark Center, a building owned and operated by Ramsey County for public uses. Most of their facilities are on the fifth floor—which had been deserted for several years.

SPCPA collaborates with numerous private and public partners in downtown St. Paul. They use St. Paul Central Library—which is located just across Rice Park—for their only library. They have dance studios in nearby Wilkins Auditorium and use the McKnight Theater for some of their J-term productions. They also use laboratories at the Science Museum of Minnesota for their chemistry and physics classes.
Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists is housed in the Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul, a publicly owned building that students refer to as “The Castle.”
If the bottom line of the Star School Project is to develop successful, small urban high schools that cooperate to do an even better job of helping students, then the project has been unquestionably successful.

As discussed earlier in this report, there is inherently little trend data about student growth because of the relative youth of the schools. But with an average of more than 90 percent of Star Students graduating, and more than 90 percent of Star School graduates planning to attend and admitted to some form of higher education, two of the original outcome goals are being achieved.

(It is too early to know how many of these students will need to take remedial courses, but this would be an important thing to check. The Star Schools Project sought not only to help more students graduate and enter some form of higher education, but also to more fully prepare them for that task.)

There also is abundant anecdotal evidence of the success of the Star Schools Project, starting with the passion and excitement that runs rampant in these schools.

“I think that these schools are genuinely breaking new ground,” says Spira. “As a result, we’re not in anybody’s comfort zone. It’s hard work. It takes a lot of sweat equity—and fire in the belly to succeed.

“But I’m really confident that we are succeeding. You can watch these students grow day by day. They are being transformed into really competent, urban adults who can handle themselves in ways that no other high school kids I know can.”

Each of the directors shares Spira’s passion and conviction. As do the teachers. You can hear it in their voices and see it in their eyes when they talk about the work they are doing.

“This is far and away the most satisfying position I’ve ever held,” says Tofte, who, if you remember, has worked in the schools for more than 30 years. “You can easily see the impact of your work. It doesn’t get washed away in the numbers like it would in larger schools.

“You can see the difference when you hire a great English teacher. The kids just eat it up.”

The kids just eat it up! The passion and excitement shows amongst the students, as well. It was there in the eyes and the voice of a young boy at GRS who explained his school’s participation in FIRST Robotics, a national program that uses robotics contests to promote and celebrate students’ interest in science and technology.

And it was there in the big smile and hello from the students in the hallway at AFA.

You can see it in the wonderful artwork that decorates the halls and the classrooms at TCA.
And you can see it in the central courtyard outside GRS, which was landscaped by students as part of the work they did in their ecology classes and features a bike rack built by GRS students.

“Our students love being here,” says Martin. “It’s almost as if they think of this as their second home.”

That passion and that excitement are turning into achievement. As small and as young as they are, the Star Schools are already beginning to make their mark on their communities and the world. Here are just a few examples:

- Two members of AFA’s first graduating class were awarded scholarships to four-year colleges.
- Four GRS students out of a class of twenty were named National Merit Scholarship “commended students” and two SPCPA students were named semi-finalists.
- MNSA’s Academic Bowl Team recently placed second in the Midwest Region and sixth nationally in the Academic Bowl—despite facing a multitude of schools with anywhere from 200 to 500 more students.
- Four graduates of SPCPA have been accepted into performing arts programs at New York University—and four at the Julliard School.
- TCA’s student body, as a whole, scored above the national average in all subjects as measured by their 2007 PLAN tests.

These and other successes don’t mitigate the fact that there are a number of challenges to be addressed going forward. First, the Star Schools must find a way to continue to make progress—especially in terms of their cooperative efforts—now that they are on their own. Being part of a formal “project” clearly helped them in their push for success.

“I think Joe has done a brilliant job with these schools,” says Tofte. “He really hammered away at the project goals and objectives.”

The Star Schools Project officially came to an end on June 30th, 2009. The directors have agreed to continue their monthly meetings as a group, however, and have already set a September meeting date, which suggests they will follow through.

Some very simple changes could open the door to even more success:

- For example, the schools have entirely independent—and different—daily schedules and school calendars. If they all had the same (or more similar) class hours and school calendars, it would automatically open the door to easier cooperation and collaboration—ranging from shared classes, to shared transportation, to easier participation in collaborative sports teams and other extracurricular activities.
- They have made no progress in using a “shared services” approach to meeting their operational and facilities management needs—as well as needs for services such as academic advisement. Clearly there is an opportunity to save money here.

While the diversity of the schools has been one of the strengths of this project, it has also been a liability. The vast differences between the schools and the populations they serve create inherent obstacles to cooperation. For example, how does a performing arts school cooperate across the board with a school for the deaf and hard-of-hearing?

The Star Schools Project has clearly demonstrated that there is merit to this model for developing successful urban high schools. It could be used to start other small clusters of schools that cooperate—and it might well be an approach that could be adopted by existing schools. However, the outcomes also suggest that the model could be even more successful if it were used with groups of small schools that have similar missions and seek to serve similar populations of students. This would eliminate some of the barriers to cooperation that arose in the Star Schools Project.

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Augsburg Fairview Academy

Augsburg Fairview Academy (AFA) is a college and career readiness high school with particular emphasis on careers in healthcare and other human services. AFA, which opened its doors to students in the 2005-06 academic year, is currently located in downtown Minneapolis at 730 Hennepin Avenue. The school originally shared space with the Great River School in St. Paul before moving to Minneapolis. For the 2009 school year, AFA will be moving to a new space in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, which it will share with Messiah Lutheran Church.

Mission Statement

Augsburg Fairview Academy invites young adults from diverse communities to prepare for college, career, and life through an intense program of rigorous study and real-world connections to healthcare, education, and other human services.

Vision Statement

The Augsburg Fairview Academy supports, motivates, and challenges high school students to achieve not only academic success but the habits of mind and body that will give them happiness, satisfaction, and wellness for the rest of their lives.

2008-09 Enrollment Demographics

- 140 students, grades 9-12
- 77% Black, 14% American Indian, 4% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 2% white
- 55% Free and Reduced Price Lunch, 13% Limited English Proficient, 11% Special Education
- 78% AYP Attendance Rate

Lead Teacher and Executive Director

William M. Spira

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Great River School

Great River School (GRS) is a Montessori Junior-Senior High School located at 1326 Energy Park Drive in St. Paul, Minnesota. GRS opened its doors to students for the 2004-05 academic year.

Mission Statement

Great River School, an urban Montessori learning environment, prepares students for their unique roles as responsible and engaged citizens of the world.

Founded on leadership, service, and peace formation and shaped by the study of humanity and the environment, Great River School aims to meet the developmental needs and characteristics of adolescents. Great River School fosters independence, critical thinking, respect, and responsibility to self, to others, and to the earth.

2008-09 Enrollment Demographics

- 231 students, grades 7-12
- 85% white, 8% Black, 4% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 0% American Indian
- 16% Special Education, 14% Free and Reduced Price Lunch, 0% Limited English Proficient
- 95% AYP Attendance Rate (from 2007-2008 school year)

Director

Christina Beck

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Minnesota North Star Academy

Minnesota North Star Academy (MNSA) is a charter high school serving primarily deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing students. Located at 1669 Arcade Street in St. Paul, MNSA opened its doors to students in 2004-05. MNSA is merging with Minnesota Deaf School and will be moving to a new building in the Energy Park area of St. Paul, close to GRS.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Minnesota North Star Academy is to prepare students who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL) and English, primarily those who are deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing, to become successful and valued citizens of the world community.

Vision Statement

Minnesota North Star Academy, a charter high school, provides a bilingual and interdisciplinary curriculum using American Sign Language (ASL) and English for students who are primarily deaf, deaf-blind, and hard-of-hearing.

2008-09 Enrollment Demographics

- 32 students, grades 9 – 12
- 88% white, 6% Asian, 3% Black, 3% Hispanic
- 34% Free and Reduced Price Lunch, 100% Special Education, 0% Limited English Proficient

Director

Kimberly Kause

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Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists

Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists (SPCPA) is a high school for young performing artists located in the Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul. SPCPA opened its doors to students in the 2005-06 academic year.

Mission Statement

The Saint Paul Conservatory for Performing Artists provides a world-class professionally guided academic and artistic environment to train aspiring pre-professional performing artists in the areas of instrumental and vocal music, theater, and dance.

2008-09 Enrollment Demographics

- 401 students, grades 9-12
- 75% White, 15% Black, 6% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 0% American Indian
- 5% Special Education 2% Free and Reduced Price Lunch, 0% Limited English Proficient
- AYP Attendance Rate: 91%

Executive Director

Terry G. Tofte

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Twin Cities Academy High School

Twin Cities Academy (TCA) is a college preparatory high school that emphasizes academic rigor and requires school uniforms for teachers and students. TCA—which is an expansion of the Twin Cities Academy Middle School—is located at 426 Osceola Avenue South in St. Paul. The school opened its doors to students during the 2006-07 academic year. The school will be moving to an existing school building at 835 East Fifth Street, St. Paul, during the summer of 2009.

Mission Statement

Twin Cities Academy High School is committed to enhancing the capacity of young adults in developing one’s ability to lead in an every-changing world through:

- Academic Rigor
- Leadership Development
- Character Building.

Vision Statement

To empower young adults to become tomorrow’s leaders, thereby making a difference in the world in which they live.

2008-09 Enrollment Demographics

- 102 students, grades 9-12
- 57% white, 17% Black, 13% Hispanic, 11% Asian, 3% American Indian
- 21% Free and Reduced Price Lunch, 10% Special Education, 2% Limited English Proficient
- AYP Attendance Rate 95%

Principal

Liz Wynne

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Chuck Benda is a freelance writer, editor, and communications consultant from Hastings, Minnesota. His work—which ranges from non-fiction magazine articles, to business and grant proposals, to print and radio advertising copy—has received several awards and honors. These include: First Place in the Blue Pencil Competition of the National Association of Government Communicators for a history of the Metropolitan Waste Control Commission; two Silver Medals from the Council for the Support and Advancement of Education for Magazine Publishing Improvement; and entry into the Congressional Record of an article on the social, political, and economic issues associated with organ transplantation.

Tiffany Green is an Atlanta-based Consultant, Entrepreneur & Change Agent with expertise in the design of innovative learning environments, marketing, chartered schools, economic/community, policy and organizational development, as well as community engagement. Tiffany attended Vanderbilt University and holds a B.S. in Economics and a M.ED in Education and Technology.

Passion for design and her advocacy in the school choice movement lead Ms. Green into the architecture industry as she sought to work with those who were designing the best schools in the world. Expertise in community engagement and community development complements her broad understanding of educational literature, particularly related to innovations in education and how architecture can be better utilized to create 21st century learning environments and communities. These innovative learning environments result in academic achievers who are critical thinkers with the life skills that make them ready for the global workplace, as well as transform local economies. For additional information, go to www.tiffanygreen.com.