

MINNESOTA NEW COUNTRY SCHOOL

All Learning Emanates from the Learner

Our mission is to produce successful adults through personalized, Project-Based Learning.

SCHOOL INFO:

Location: Henderson, MN

Type: Charter

Focus: Project-Based Learning

Network: Edvisions Schools

EdVisions, a network of 40 small schools, promotes relevant and personalized learning environments that emphasize self-directed, Project-Based Learning that empowers students, parents, and teachers in a democratic learning community.

BY THE NUMBERS:

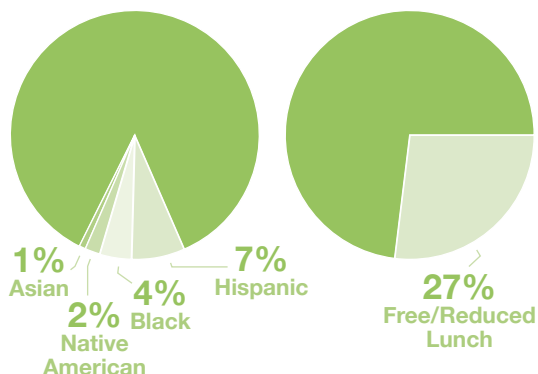
Date Opened: 1994

Grades Served: 6-12

Enrollment: 115

Teachers: 10

Students Demographics:



What is Deeper Learning?

Deeper Learning teaches students to master core academic content, think critically, solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, direct their own learning, and develop an academic mindset.

Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) is student-driven and project-based, an approach that includes regular exposure to collaboration, critical thinking and time management. “Students have opportunities to work on projects in small groups and therefore, designing and planning these projects together,” Director Dee Thomas, said.

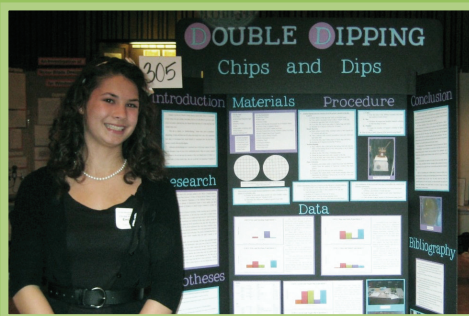
Advisory groups of about 18 students meet daily to discuss academic progress and school atmosphere, setting them up to take ownership of their education. “If they don’t take responsibility, nothing happens,” Thomas, said. “The constructivist nature of the learning environment has students learning on an as-needed basis, giving them the understanding that they can learn anything they need to learn, whenever they need to learn it.”

Students build responsibility through choice. For example, students use a highly scripted form to propose a project, and that proposal must be defended before two advisors. During the proposal process Thomas asks each student, “If you’re going to be spending between 25-100 hours on this project, how is it going to make you a better person in five years?”



In 1995, students at the then one year old MNCS discovered deformed frogs at a nearby pond and started a nationwide research project focused on finding the cause. Today, some of those former students are still doing research and the deformed frog remains the symbol of the school’s student-driven approach to education.

Student Spotlight:



Minnesota New Country student, Emily Wood, explaining her sophomore project.

During her sophomore year, Emily Wood chose to research bacteria spread through double dipping. “It sounded like a fun project, and I wanted to test it for myself.” She learned to collect and culture bacteria safely and concluded that her hypothesis was supported by the results, in which 92 percent of the double-dipped petri dishes grew more bacteria in them compared to the control.

By coming up with a hypothesis, testing it, evaluating the results, and coming to her own conclusion, Emily applied what she had learned and demonstrated mastery of the scientific method, a skill and a way of thinking that will serve her during and after her formal schooling. This project served as a stepping stone and helped prepare Emily for her upcoming senior project.

SUCCESS THROUGH A STUDENT DIRECTED, PERSONALIZED APPROACH

When talking about exposing young people to new experiences, Director Thomas’ enthusiasm is infectious. Although they’re in a small town, Thomas wants to make sure students have a global focus. “To take a bunch of farm boys to the opera for the first time is amazing. I took nine kids to Seattle. We got on the plane and I asked, ‘How many of you have ever flown before?’ Less than half.” Last year, students returned from a trip to the Mississippi delta, passionate about civil rights.

MNCS teachers help students create standards-aligned projects in areas of interest. Students demonstrate mastery of core academic content by creating a product and then defending what they have learned to a panel of teachers. Students often work with experts to develop their projects, requiring them to collaborate with adults outside of the school. This helps students learn to communicate with adults, effectively manage their time, and be responsible for their own work. Thomas said the biggest complaint from businesses is that kids are irresponsible. “They come in late, leave early, and don’t know how to manage their time. Not our kids. If you have learned to document all your time—which is an essential part of their projects—you have learned to be responsible with it.” This awareness and practice of time management, increases their chances for success in college and career.

“The mindset that leads to success is one where students can set reasonable goals for themselves, make plans to meet those goals, and then persist to achieve those goals,” said Thomas. “Students need autonomy, a sense of belongingness, and an appropriate goal orientation to make this happen.”

The other essential element is appropriate pressure from a caring adult, which Thomas said is often the difference in students succeeding or not, as well as the difference in just getting by or going in depth with learning. Closely connected to this concept is the idea that Deeper Learning is learning that touches the heart and emotions of a person and eventually affects a change of behavior. “This is the kind of learning that goes on regularly at MNCS, learning that touches the hearts of the students and becomes solidified in their minds,” Thomas stressed.



GettingSmart.com
Deeperlearning4all.org

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