

Innovative Authorizing for Minnesota's Chartered Schools

The 'Single-Purpose'
Authorizer:
Its Influence and Its
Growing Role

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with contributions by Ted Kolderie

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Introduction: The Context

A less-noticed but centrally important dimension of the innovation in Minnesota's chartering program is in its arrangements for creating the new schools. The authorizing arrangements have much to do with the innovative teaching and learning appearing.

The context for everything is, of course, the *institutional* innovation that created a charter sector in Minnesota's system of public education in 1991; the nation's first. But the extent to which chartering operates in Minnesota as an R&D program for public education was, is, possible because of the unusually broad approach the Legislature has taken with authorizing.

The earliest proposal from then-Senator Ember Reichgott called for giving the authority to create new schools both to districts and to authorizers independent of the local districts.

The politics of the 1991 legislative session limited authorizing initially to districts. But quickly in subsequent sessions the Legislature added other public-education entities, Minnesota colleges and universities and, after that, large nonprofit organizations. As chartering spread across the states, Minnesota for a time had the largest set of organizations eligible to create new schools. In the early years any organization in one of the designated categories could self-declare itself an authorizer.

In revising the chartering statute in 2009 the Legislature required that each authorizer be specifically approved by the commissioner of education, expanded their duties and responsibilities and required them periodically to document to the state Department of Education (MDE) that they were living up to their responsibilities. Authorizers would have to undergo a review every five years in order to retain their authorizing authority.

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Initially, districts used their authorizing authority; did create schools. Most districts dropped out, however, after the 2009 legislation made the authorizer's oversight of its schools a more rigorous process. Today only two districts remain among Minnesota's authorizers.

By 2009 it was becoming clear also that the existing structure of authorizing, even with its broad eligibility, was at risk. All the organizations given authority to approve new schools were organizations that had something larger and more important to do. For these, chartering was a side activity which, with the added responsibilities of the new legislation, came to seem peripheral.

Minnesota's version of the single-purpose authorizer is unique in America

This problem was solved in Minnesota in a way that produced a major innovation in authorizing. The Legislature introduced the concept of 'single-purpose' authorizers; newly-created nonprofits that would have no function other than to receive, to review and to act on proposals for schools, and to oversee the schools approved.

This legislation initially provided for three, to be given their authority by approval of the state Commissioner of Education. Three were soon organized and approved, and began operating: Novation Education Opportunities, Student Achievement Minnesota and Innovative Quality Schools.

Since then these single-purpose authorizers – now five — have provided most of the growth in Minnesota's charter sector. They now account for almost half of the 179 schools chartered.

Innovative Quality Schools

<https://iqsmn.org>

651-234-0900

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Minnesota Guild of Public Charter Schools

<http://www.guildschools.org>

612-991-0017

Minnesota Office of Charter Authorizing

<https://themocha.org>

612-267-6981

Novation Educational Opportunities (NEO)

<https://www.neoauthorizer.org>

612-889-2103

Student Achievement Minnesota

<https://www.samnllc.org>

763-557-6676

In Minnesota the opportunity to 'try things' is built into the authorizing system itself. Its non-profit, single-purpose authorizer is unique in America, says David Greenberg, a Minneapolis-based staff member of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

This model of single-purpose authorizer stands in marked contrast to the 'independent chartering boards' created by legislation and now existing in twenty-some states.

The idea of drawing-in a broad range of skills and experience to oversee the schools has made basic sense to more than one of Minnesota's single-purpose authorizers; a marked contrast with the staff model found in authorizers in other states.

In Minnesota, Novation Education Opportunities is a mixed model. It has an executive director and several staff but broadens its work with its schools by assembling a group of 'NEO Advisors'. Another of the single-purpose authorizers goes about its work using no paid employees at all. This is Innovative Quality Schools (IQS); the subject of this case study.



Innovative Quality Schools

IQS' founders were interested in creating a new way to go about their work with their portfolio of charter schools.

The charter authorizer, to begin with, does not own and operate its schools, as districts do. "The whole idea behind charter schools is that in exchange for the freedom to be responsible for decisions in their own school they would be freed from many of the statutory requirements that control school districts", says Ed Dirkswager, one of IQS' initial board members. "Authorizers would monitor them according to mutually accepted contracts, but not tell them what to do."

IQS' initial board, in addition to Dirkswager, a former commissioner of Minnesota's Department of Human Services who later helped organize physician practices, included Kristen Anderson, earlier a district superintendent; Dan Mott, legislative aide to the chairman of the Minnesota Senate Education Finance Committee while in law school, now practicing cooperative law; Elaine Salinas, with MIGIZI, a Native American communications organization; Robert Brown, a longtime professor of educational administration at the University of St. Thomas, and Ember Reichgott Junge, who as state senator had authored Minnesota's, and the nation's first, chartering law. Anderson served as board chair.

Getting approved; getting financed

The first challenge IQS faced was that the state Department of Education (MDE) was slow and inconsistent in developing guidelines for applicants wanting to become single-purpose authorizers. As a result, IQS had to apply twice before it was approved. It was a pattern that would repeat itself with MDE

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changing its requirements and expectations for authorizers from time to time.

The next obstacle was startup funding. No money was provided by the state for authorizers: Authorizers had to wait until schools had enrolled students, had received their state payments and then had begun making the required payments to their authorizers. That meant that at the beginning IQS had no money coming in.

Leading the initial organization was Robert Wedl, earlier Minnesota's Commissioner of Education; later policy and planning director for the Minneapolis public schools, and an early supporter of chartering in Minnesota and around the nation. Bob Wedl initially worked *pro bono*. Board members also contributed. "We (board members) all put money in at first to get us going," recalls Kristen Anderson. A small loan from a private donor that later was converted to a grant supplemented the work of IQS the first year.

IQS began contracting with what would become a series of professional partnerships for its administration

Fortunately for IQS, after the 2009 changes in authorizer responsibilities several school districts that had previously authorized schools moved to cease authorizing and several schools applied to transfer to IQS, providing some fees during IQS's first year.

Revising the management

When Wedl wanted to move on, the board began contracting with what would become a series of professional partnerships for its administration.

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The first, Interim Leadership Partners, was followed years later by Innovative Leadership Partners LLP and then in 2012 by StrategicTREC LLC, a limited partnership headed by Tom Tapper, formerly a career Minnesota public-schools superinten-

*The cadre
arrangements lets
IQS simultaneously
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dent; Steve O'Connor, a former district school-improvement specialist, and Milo Cutter, who had founded the first chartered school to open in Minnesota. Cutter left the leadership team when her school, City Academy, transferred to IQS as its authorizer. She was replaced by Laurie Schroeder, a former teacher and student support services director, who now serves as lead partner.

Supervising and assisting the schools

The fundamental conception of this new authorizer was Wedl's: the focus on innovation, the idea of soliciting proposals (world-wide, at the start), the interest also in replicating here models proven successful elsewhere – project-based learning, for example, or professional roles for teachers – and the insistence on having a research component to follow what was being done. And the 'cadre' idea for IQS itself.

IQS was to have no paid employees. The idea was to contract with professionals in education and other fields to administer the work of IQS and to work directly with schools. The hope was that the IQS model would prove more effective than the staff model found in other states; that it would let IQS simultaneously broaden its competence and reduce its costs.

"The cadre structure was part of the original plan," says Dirkswager, "but getting the correct formula for the leadership team took a great deal of time."

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Early work also entailed coming up with contract language for administration and cadre work. Contract language also had to be developed that fulfilled the IQS mission of creating schools that were doing something innovative.

Part of the new charter sector in Minnesota, as in other states, consists of schools aimed at doing conventional schooling better. But in Minnesota's program innovation is conspicuous. "Liberating Education from Convention" is the motto of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools.

A framework was developed that called for applicant schools to have an innovative approach in at least one of five areas: governance, curriculum/educational model, finance, operations including staff configuration and/or responsibilities, or evaluation. Innovation was defined to mean a revision of a traditional method or an entirely new approach, an effort that has turned out to be ongoing.

It went so far as to suggest some innovative models to potential applicants for authorizing, such as teacher-led, language immersion or use of a particular instructional model. "We have struggled to define what we mean by innovative," says Schroeder.

The IQS website (<https://iqsmn.org>) describes its mission as:

... to authorize schools that are innovative and successful in preparing students to achieve their full potential by providing experience, expertise, and support to our schools..."

As the number of schools authorized grew, the effort necessary to oversee multiple schools exceeded the time available and abilities of the original administrative group and cadre members. So Tom Tapper, who joined IQS in 2014 and served as lead partner, began a recruiting process to expand the number of cadre members beyond the dozen or so that existed at the time.

"It turned out not to be that difficult. Lots of educators were interested in sharing their skills and learning new things," says

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Tapper. “And not just retirees. Most applicants were still working but were attracted to an effort that could be done on the side. Flexibility was an attraction, and still is when it comes to attracting new cadre members.”

As the number grew IQS created a cadre team-leader position. Cadre team leaders work with up to six schools and are the first point of contact for school leaders seeking assistance and for cadre members assigned to the school. Cadre members are paid \$90 an hour plus mileage for their work, team leaders \$1,000 per month.

“Authorizers do not operate schools”

Schroeder says that one innovative practice undertaken by IQS that has shown very positive results is its virtual organization model. “The cadre model has allowed us to attract many professionals with a wide range of skills and knowledge that we can then match to what individual schools need. We could never hire enough people to do that with a staff employee model.”

This is especially valuable because unlike some authorizers, IQS authorizes many different types of schools. Its focus is on innovation, not a particular curriculum or staffing model.

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The IQS school portfolio today

Language Immersion	Core Knowledge
College Prep	Elementary Foreign Language Infusion
Blended Learning	Personalized Instruction
Project-Based Learning	Response to Intervention
Teacher-Led Schools	Gaming
Technology-Driven/Infused Instruction	International Baccalaureate
Multi-Age Grouping	Restorative Justice
STEM/STEAM	Experiential Learning
Classical Russian	Trauma-Centered Instruction
Community Collaboration	Culturally Responsive Teaching
Sports Leadership	Oracy (Oral Language Skills)
Reggio Emilia	Montessori
Relationships, Education, Accountability, Character, Hard Work (REACH)	Environmental Education

In a short time the number of schools authorized grew, and currently there are 34 schools operating, with one more approved and in a preoperational stage of development. Two or three more new schools are expected to be added per year in the coming years. IQS is now approved by the MDE to oversee up to 50 schools.

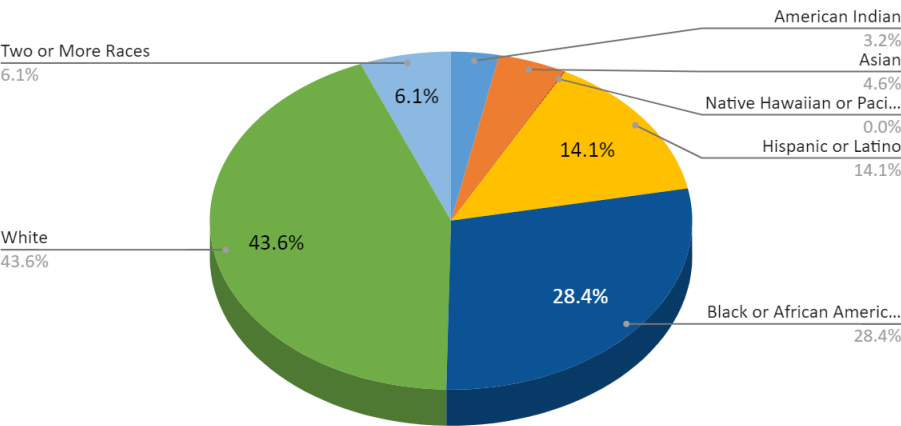
Today it is essentially the ‘portfolio’ model recommended to the Education Commission of the States by Paul Hill, but seldom if ever implemented across the nation, where schools are traditionally owned and run by their district. “Authorizers do not operate schools”, Ed Dirkswager says.

The partnership’s annual report to the IQS board carries a description of, and the cadre’s analysis of, the full portfolio of schools. [Here is the most recent report.](#)

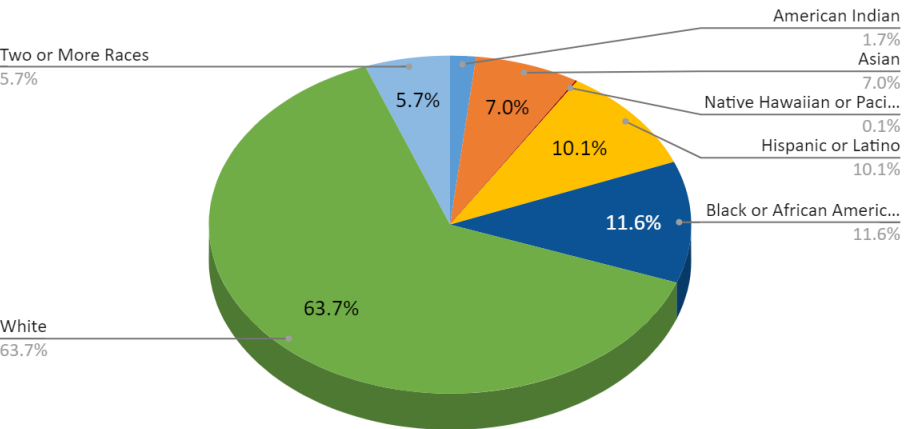
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Ongoing challenges

IQS Demographics



State Demographics



IQS board members and administrators agree a big challenge remaining is that getting a new chartered school up and running successfully is hard work. Startup money is scarce. “If there were more startup money there would be many more schools,” says Dirkswager.

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For the school, finding an adequate and affordable facility can prove challenging. Having to change facilities in the early years is not uncommon.

The schools must arrange assignments and working relationships for staffs and board members. Most chartered schools start small so staff members must fulfill multiple roles that in larger schools would be handled by specialists.

The schools' new students have often not been successful in their previous school and arrive with varying levels of knowledge and skills. (State law specifies that chartered schools must accept any new student application as long as it has room. If a school has more applicants than it has room, a lottery must be used to determine who is admitted.)

Schools that try to do too much too fast can be overwhelmed by the many challenges, and find families leaving the school rather than be part of the messy startup process. Chaotic operations in the startup phase can create a poor reputation that plagues a school for years, slowing growth and deterring potential employees.

To increase the chances for success, many schools now start with a small number of classes and/or grades, and add students and grade levels in subsequent years.

IQS assistance to its authorized schools

To help startups IQS began contracting with a cadre member who specializes in helping new schools through the early years

IQS found that requiring schools to conduct research while operating a school startup was too ambitious. Staffs were just too busy getting the school started to devote much time to researching the area where they had agreed to try something new. And

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school staffs often lacked the skills needed to conduct reliable research.

“We continue to wrestle with what our definition of innovative should be and how we can help schools document the effectiveness of their innovative practices,” says Laurie Schroeder.

IQS has also added cadre members with experience in board governance and program evaluation, two of the most challenging aspects of the charter school model.

IQS focuses on innovation, and innovative ideas often build on the work of others. It partnered with Groves Learning Organization to bring the Groves evidence-based literacy support to schools with grades pre-K to grade three.

According to Groves, “Teachers working in schools that establish literacy partnerships are trained in proven, evi-

dence-based methods for sparking reading and spelling skills. In addition, teachers receive weekly face-to-face classroom coaching for an entire school year along with ongoing professional development to develop fidelity of instruction.” IQS provides a \$10,000 grant to help a school pay for the program.

***IQS added cadre with
experience in board
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for schools***

Until the Covid pandemic, IQS would host gatherings, trainings, for IQS schools, school board members and cadre members. The pandemic forced these conferences to shift into ‘virtual’ mode. It also curtailed cadre member visits to schools, further contributing to the surplus. Schroeder says IQS will reinstitute the in-person events over the next year.

The superior efficiency of the IQS contract model has permitted IQS over the years to build up a fund balance of about

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\$300,000; budgeting annually to provide training for school staffs, school board and IQS cadre members, to provide grants to schools to cover services such as the Groves literacy program, to help schools further develop their innovative practices, and to establish new approaches to measuring student learning.

The surplus rises and falls because the amount of support schools request in any given year tends to vary. The two-year pandemic contributed also to a decrease in requests. Sometimes schools need a lot of help to deal with an issue and sometimes less. (Under the current state budget the maximum annual fee that can be assessed a school is \$27,452; the minimum \$6,863.)

Discussions about how to best use the surplus come up at IQS board meetings periodically.

IQS' own research—on measures of school 'success'

Some of the funds have been used to help IQS develop what it calls “alternative measures” of school performance that schools can use to show progress, even excellence, in areas not addressed by the state’s standardized tests that currently are the measure of school ‘performance’.

Its Next Generation Assessment Portfolio System (NGAP) effort aims “to expand assessment options to include additional measures that align with various and unique profiles of IQS schools”, and to “support IQS schools in identifying and developing assessments that directly correlate their mission and vision.”

The work, which slowed during the first two years of the covid pandemic, is gearing up again in 2022-23. A number of schools have agreed to participate in developing measures that demonstrate the effectiveness of a particular aspect of innovation.

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IQS board chair Steve Kelley, a former chair of Minnesota's Senate Education Committee, now an instructor at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs, says a new issue likely to impact schools and authorizers in coming years comes under the umbrella term of "sustainability" in such things

IQS is working to develop alternative, better, measures of school performance

as school energy use, food waste, transportation, student and staff diversity, equity and inclusion. He says the ability to show that a school is particularly skilled at delivering higher levels of effectiveness in these areas could be used to attract new students and financial support.

Conclusion

One of the results of IQS adopting a mission that prioritizes innovation is that it has ended up overseeing a wide variety of schools. It has a school that provides a Spanish immersion experience; another specializing in online education; still another focuses on the needs of Native American students; another on environmental studies; one on digital literacy; one on the International Baccalaureate program; another on sports leadership. The list goes on. Each school contributes a unique learning environment to the IQS portfolio of schools.

Schroeder sees great strength in the IQS contract model. "We would never be able to offer the wide range of expertise the cadre model provides to schools with an employee model. We simply couldn't afford to hire that many employees."

She also stressed the benefits of the contract model to cadre members. It allows them to enjoy employment elsewhere and earn extra money by working for IQS episodically; it allows them to interact with a large number of professionals engaged in similar

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work; it provides training and opportunities to attend professional collaborations.

“This model of contracted cadre has created space for them to do their work how they feel is best,” she says. They are not supervised, directed or evaluated the way an employee might be. Instead IQS had developed a cadre self-evaluation tool by which cadre professionals might judge their work.

The model has proven popular: IQS attracts new cadre members primarily through word of mouth. “We’ve never struggled to get members,” Schroeder says. “If anything, we have too many at times! The times we’ve been ‘skinny’ in one category or another, we put the word out to the rest of the cadre members and folks show up to fill those roles.”

The ‘cadre’ arrangement would not be possible everywhere, Tom Tapper has said, but ought to be possible in any urban area with universities, schools of education, multiple districts and related education organizational infrastructure, in which good ‘cadre members’ can be found.



For more information on IQS consult the IQS website at
<https://iqsmn.org>

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Board

Steve Kelley, Chair

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Steve Kelley is a Senior Fellow at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. He teaches classes related to science and technology policy, public budgeting and education law and policy. Before joining the Humphrey School, he served in the Minnesota House of Representatives and then in the Minnesota Senate where he was chair of the Senate Education Committee. Steve also practiced commercial litigation in Minneapolis for many years and has served on the boards of several civic organizations

Dan Mott, Esq, Vice Chair

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Mr. Mott is an attorney with the law firm of Fredrikson and Byron where he counsels cooperatives and other businesses in meeting their legal and business objectives. Mr. Mott has worked with charter schools for almost 25 years and previously served as a member of the MDE Charter School Advisory Council. He also was a staff person for the Minnesota Senate Education Finance Subcommittee as Minnesota was creating the nation's leading school choice policies. Mr. Mott has served on the IQS board since its inception.

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Ms. Dayton focuses on pension policy for the State of Minnesota and lives and works in the Twin Cities. She attended Avalon

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Sarah Tucher, Treasurer

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Sarah Tucher is an attorney with the law firm of Fredrikson & Byron and a Certified Public Accountant (Inactive) who helps public and private companies buy and sell products and services nationally and internationally, communicate with investors and comply with complex disclosure regulations and regulatory requirements for U.S. government contracts and grants.

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Mary Otto is a citizen of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe and the Tribal Liaison for MN Department of Commerce. Prior to her current role Mary worked for the White Earth Band of Ojibwe's Education Department for seven years in varying capacities from elementary teacher to Director of Education, during this time Mary was also part of the Tribal Nations Education Committee which is an appointed seat to serve between MN Department of Education and the 11 federally recognized tribes to engage in Tribal consultation, policy and all things related to Indian Education in the State of Minnesota.

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Mr. Dirkswager is a retired health care executive and has held positions as: Chief Administrative Officer of Group Health (now Health Partners); Chair of the Board of the National Cooperative

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Haben Ghebregergish is the Lead Math Facilitator at the High School for Recording Arts. Haben is an alum of the University of Chicago and a current student at the Hamline University Graduate School of Education. Haben has the pleasure of facilitating social justice mathematics courses at HSRA. She also coaches for Bridgemakers, a nonprofit, youth-led organization that works on issues such as education reform and economic justice for marginalized Minnesotans ages 14-25. One of Bridgemakers' most recent victories was passing a law that made high school students in Minnesota eligible for unemployment benefits.

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About the Authors

John Kostouros is a Senior Fellow at Education Evolving, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on improving American public education. He has been involved in the ongoing discussion about how to improve America's public school system as a teacher, journalist, communications consultant to business leaders, school district superintendents and teacher union leaders, and as a community volunteer for more than 40 years. He lives in Minneapolis. He wrote *A Guide to the Charter Sector of Minnesota Public Education* for the Center for Policy Design in 2017.

Ted Kolderie began working with the issues in public education about 1980. He is associated mainly with two initiatives: with chartering as an R&D sector within public education, and with the effort to create professional opportunities for teachers. His first book, in 2004, *Creating the Capacity for Change—How and Why Governors and Legislatures Are Opening a New-Schools Sector in Public Education*, was followed in 2015 by *The Split-Screen Strategy—How To Turn Education into a Self-Improving System*. He began as a reporter and editorial writer for what was then the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*; later was executive director of the Citizens League; after that a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's school of public affairs. He lives in Saint Paul.



Center for Policy Design Press

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The mission of the Center for Policy Design Press is to advance the field of large system analysis and redesign by publishing selected high-quality work on the theory and practice, and to serve as a resource center through development of educational and curricular content for students, researchers, policy makers and other concerned citizens.

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Center for Policy Design

The Center for Policy Design was founded in 1981 as the Center for Policy Studies when Walt McClure left the Minneapolis-based Interstudy, a health policy think tank where he had worked under the leadership of Paul Ellwood since 1969. At the Center McClure developed Large System Architecture, both a general theory of why organizations do what they do and a set of methods to design and carry out system redesign strategies to correct flawed incentives a system places on the organizations within it; to align these with the society's goals for that system and its organizations.

With these methods he and his colleagues at the Center developed a health care system reform strategy to get better quality care for less cost, and developed a National Health Insurance proposal consonant with this strategy. McClure assisted Medicare, Pennsylvania and Cleveland to implement the first step of the strategy, severity-adjusted outcomes assessment of providers, before his retirement in 1990 for medical reasons. That work was chronicled by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2009.

Around the time of McClure's retirement Ted Kolderie joined the Center as a senior fellow and the Center became active in public education redesign; working with states and national policy makers on the architecture of the K-12 system

In 2014 the Center, under the leadership of Board Chair Walt McClure and Dan Loritz, senior fellow and president, changed its name to the Center for Policy Design to better reflect its actual focus on the development of actionable policy strategy at the system level.



Good Authorizing

Good ‘authorizing’ is essential in for the success of the chartered sector of public education. In Minnesota, where the schools have a strong bent toward innovation, its authorizing is innovative as well.

- Minnesota’s first-in-the-nation chartering law (in 1991) empowered districts to approve proposals (from teachers and citizens) to try new and different forms of public schools. Quickly legislative amendments added other organizations able to approve proposals if the districts did not: Minnesota universities and colleges, and large social-service nonprofits.
- In 2009 the Legislature made it possible for newly-created nonprofits approved by the commissioner of education also to serve as authorizers. This created an authorizer that could devote its full energy to receiving, considering and acting on proposals, and overseeing the schools it approved. Today Minnesota’s five single-purpose authorizers oversee almost half the state’s 179 chartered schools.
- An exceptionally efficient model has appeared for these authorizers’ oversight and assistance to their portfolio of schools. Assembling a cadre of advisors, specialists in the many needs of the schools, authorizers using this model are able simultaneously to enlarge their capacity and to reduce their costs. This case study profiles one such: Innovative Quality Schools.