



# Justin Treptow, Head of Minnesota Virtual Academy

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

October 28, 2011

## Notes of the discussion

**Present :** Verne Johnson (chair), Paul Gilje, David Broden, Janis Clay, Clarence Shallbetter, Sallie Kemper, Wayne Popham (phone), Jim Hetland (phone)

**Summary of meeting :** *Justin Treptow, Head of School for Minnesota Virtual Academy (MNVA), describes the Houston, MN, organization that provides on-line schooling for students in kindergarten through high school. A state approved public school entity available to all Minnesota K-12 students, MNVA offers families an online alternative whenever local public or private school offerings do not appear to fit students' needs. The school is the largest provider of public education delivered via the Internet in Minnesota. It offers a broad curriculum, licensed teachers, opportunities for social interaction and flexible 24-hour per day scheduling. An involved parent or "learning coach" is a key component of the program.*

**A. Welcome and introductions .** Verne and Paul welcomed Justin Treptow to the Caucus to provide background on another innovative approach to the delivery of public education. Treptow participated via a conference call to his home in Houston, MN. Treptow holds the dual MNVA titles of Head of School and High School Principal. He joined MNVA as Principal in 2008 to help launch its online high school. In 2007-08 he was a teacher of gifted/talented students for Rochester Public Schools and from 2001-07, a math and gifted/talented teacher with Oak Grove Middle School, Bloomington, MN. He holds a BS in Elementary Education and Middle School Math from Winona State University, and a Master in Educational Administration from St. Mary's University, Winona, MN. Treptow was born in Blue Earth, MN and grew up in St. Charles, MN.

## B. Discussion

**Minnesota Virtual Academy (MNVA) started by small school district .** MNVA originated ten years ago, when with the district facing declining enrollment, Kim Ross, Superintendent of Houston Public Schools, looked for ways to stem the resulting budgetary losses. Hoping to put Houston in the forefront of on-line education, Ross partnered with K12, Inc., in Fairfax County, VA, an on-line curriculum developer. The result was MNVA, one of the first on-line public schools in Minnesota. MNVA operates as a district school of the Houston (MN) Public Schools. As such, it is required to operate in compliance with all state laws regarding attendance, compulsory testing, No Child Left

Behind, etc. The school started in 2001 with kindergarten through grade 2 and has added one grade per year since. There are now three schools in the Houston Public School's organization: MNVA K-12 on-line school; Summit Learning Center, an alternative school; and traditional bricks-and-mortar elementary and high school. MNVA is the largest of the online K-12 providers in Minnesota.

### **MNVA now has 2,000 students .**

Though it remains a Houston ISD school, MNVA offers K-12 education statewide. Separate from 500 local students enrolled in regular K-12 school, the MNVA enrollment reached 2,000 this year, equally divided between grades K-8 and high school. A majority of students are from the metro Twin City area, but significant numbers as well are from Duluth and the Rochester area. Only a small number of students hail from the Houston area. All MNVA students are public school students working at home.

Enrollment tends to be somewhat fluid in that students are not always as good a fit for the school as they might have expected to be. When it becomes clear that a student is faltering, the school counsels his or her family about moving on to other educational options that might be a better fit. The goal is to help students succeed, not to grow MNVA's enrollment numbers. Treptow estimates that of MNVA's elementary and middle school enrollment, typically they will see 70% of students retained year-to-year and 30% lost. In the high school, the retention rate is about 80%, with about 20% leaving each year.

The school accepts all students who apply, resulting in a population similar to any large suburban school, with special education students, gifted students, and everything else in a normal bell curve universe. Of MNVA's 2,000 students, 89% are enrolled as full time learners and 11% are enrolled part-time for one or more individual courses to supplement their traditional school's curriculum. This part-time arrangement allows students in smaller schools to take Advanced Placement courses or foreign language classes that may not be available to them due to lack of sufficient demand and/or resources.

### **Normal state funding applies .**

MNVA is eligible for the same per-student state funding that is provided to any district or charter school in Minnesota. That funding comes to the district directly from the state's ADM (weighted pupils in average daily membership) per pupil funding to support Minnesota Virtual Academy. The district in turn provides MNVA its operating funds just it would for any other district school.

### **Parents intimately involved .**

An enrolled student works at home with the close supervision of a parent, relative, or other adult working as his or her "learning coach". This requires that a committed adult be home and available to the student from 6 to 7 hours a day, five days a week. In kindergarten and primary grades, the parent meets daily with the teacher either via Skype or via phone call to assure that students are tracking at a reasonable pace and to build an ongoing strategy to meet student needs. Often in these lower grades, especially, teachers will arrange face-to-face visits with students and parents at a local library. In answer to a participant's question Treptow commented that MNVA does not simply reinforce home schooling; rather, he says, it replaces home schooling.

### **All students have computers, Internet connection .**

Each student in the elementary and middle school is lent a desktop computer and printer/scanner by MNVA when first enrolled. High school students are assigned laptops. This hardware is provided without cost regardless of the family's financial status. The K12, Inc. on-line curriculum is taught and supported by MNVA's teachers, who give live weekly lessons using Elluminate. The Elluminate platform allows students to communicate verbally with their teacher through the use of the students' computer microphones and non-verbally through a chat window. Through the use of Elluminate, Skype, and email communication the teachers are able to conduct both class discussions and small group activities held in virtual "break-out rooms". A student sitting at home in Fergus Falls can interact with other students through Elluminate by the use of the whiteboard, microphone, or chat line. In Elluminate teachers can use tools such as an on-line file transfer mechanism which allows the teacher to "pass out" materials during these live sessions. And all lessons are recorded so that students may re-visit the session later or catch up with work when classes are missed due to illness. Homework assignments are passed between student and teacher via email and online drop boxes. Science labs are conducted by teachers, transmitted via web-cam and recorded for future viewing. Even group projects are possible via email and chat lines. Pacing of learning varies from student to student, with some students learning much faster and in greater depth alongside others needing more time to master the basics.

#### **Face-time with teachers, extracurricular and social activities is scheduled .**

Most of the teachers for grades K-5 are not physically located in the Houston, MN, area but rather are most often assigned to clusters of students in the geographic region where the teachers reside. As a consequence, it is often possible for teachers to have face-to-face time with students. In addition, MNVA regularly schedules group activities held in Houston to which all students are invited. These often involve some form of community service project, charity drive or social event where students have the opportunity to interact with other MNVA students and their teachers. Many MNVA students are involved in local theatre groups, choirs, bands and athletic teams. It is possible for any MNVA student to arrange an agreement with a local public school to join the local school's extracurricular activities.

#### **Special curriculum developed by Virginia firm .**

The curriculum provided by Virginia-based K12, Inc., has been developed over the years to address a variety of different learning styles and to meet the needs of students with individualized content. A wide range of abilities can be accommodated. Courses range in content from core, comprehensive, and Honors classes to Advanced Placement topics. The curriculum developer, K12, Inc., provides a curriculum product development staff person to assist with the marketing of MNVA and to arrange some school-wide events, such as an upcoming fall "homecoming dance" in the metro area for MNVA high school students. In addition K12, Inc. provides all online technical support to students and teachers via the K12 technical staff.

#### **Faculty must meet all state requirements .**

All MNVA teachers are fully licensed and members of the Houston teachers' union. By law, the school must maintain a ratio of one teacher per 40 enrolled students in grades K-5, the same ratio required of all public schools. Today MNVA has 73 K-12 teachers, two counselors, five student support aides,

three administrators, one elementary principal, one middle-school assistant principal and one 6-12 principal, Mr. Treptow, who also doubles as Head of School. MNVA recruits teachers in exactly the same manner as other district schools. Retention of teachers has been very successful to date. He pointed out that in spite of the fact that teachers are working for an online school, they actually get to know their students and their families quite well, especially since there is such great emphasis on family involvement and on efforts to bring staff and families together for special events.

### **Test scores close to state average .**

In answer to a participant's question, Treptow shared that MVA's K-8 standardized test scores are very close to the overall state average. Over the past three years the MCA scores for the high school 9-12 have been showing improvement on the MCA test.

### **Twenty per cent annual growth expected for next two years .**

In recent years, MNVA has enjoyed close to 20% annual enrollment growth. Since online enrollment is fluid it is difficult to predict accurately, but the school is hoping to see similar trends in the next two years. There are competing online schools in Minnesota, but MNVA remains one of the largest state wide online schools. He does expect that growth will be enhanced especially as districts seek to offer their enrolled students the option to take the more advanced AP or foreign language courses via an online provider. Districts vary in their enthusiasm with respect to sharing information about MNVA with their students. Some are willing to be helpful to students who do not seem to fit well with the district's traditional schools; some are less than forthcoming about the alternatives available.

Treptow contends that the virtual school will continue to find growing acceptance as educational technology advances and as families come to recognize that jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require the kind of computer-centered skill that a virtual education provides. However, he cautioned that the state must continue to work on providing the necessary bandwidth in all areas of the state in order to assure that this kind of opportunity is available beyond the larger cities. He likened DSL/dial-up access to "driving a model-T in an Indy 500 race"; it puts outstate regions at a huge educational disadvantage. He also feels that much can still be done in the near future to advance the hardware in order to provide faster computing, automatic linkage to the Internet and real time browsing.

### **When parent is absent, other approaches are possible .**

In answer to a participant question, Treptow agreed that parental involvement is key to the success of student enrolled in MNVA. In grades K-8, that kind of close parental involvement is actually crucial. However it is possible to engage a "surrogate coach". In cases of single-parent families, a relative may serve as the learning coach to help students in grades K-8. The 24-hour availability of the school works well for many parents who need to help their children after working hours. Teachers on a case by case basis may set up time after the work to meet with parents and students whenever necessary. A participant pointed out those children who do not have an adult in their lives to fill this critical coaching role would likely not benefit from the MNVA model.

### **C. Closing .**

Treptow thanked Civic Caucus for the opportunity to share information about MNVA and the Houston School District's forward thinking that led to its creation. He stressed that online public school is a very good educational option among many that the state provides. It will meet the needs of a great many students who regardless of their background, native abilities or learning style, deserve to be work-ready and socially well rounded at the end of their public schooling and capable of becoming successful, contributing citizens.

**D. Thanks.** Thanks to Justin Treptow for a very helpful discussion of the Minnesota Virtual Academy.