



Venture Academy Founder Jon Bacal and Head of School Kerry Muse

An Interview with The Civic Caucus

2104 Girard Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55405

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : Jon Bacal, David Broden, Audrey Clay (phone), Janis Clay, Diane Flynn (phone), Paul Gilje (coordinator), Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Kerry Muse, Wayne Popham (phone), Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter.

Summary of Discussion: Venture Academy, a new Minneapolis public charter school opening in 2013 that will serve sixth through 12th graders, will use a learning model that blends personalized digital learning, experiential learning and student self-direction. Venture's goal is to have students ready for college and meaningful life missions by age 16. All students will be encouraged to earn at least two years of college credit before they graduate from high school. Bacal and Muse plan to hire versatile, creative and adaptive teachers ("edupreneurs") to help lead the blended-learning program. They plan to compensate teachers 50 percent more than other charter-school teachers, on average. They are hopeful the Venture model will inspire and catalyze major systemic change in education and plan to launch additional Venture campuses after the first school demonstrates success.

Background .

Jon Bacal is the founder and chief entrepreneurship officer of Venture Academy, a new grade six-to-twelve public charter school located Minneapolis, opening in August of 2013. Bacal founded the new school in partnership with Civic Caucus chair Verne Johnson and experienced educator Denny Morrow of Renewal Associates, LLC. Previously, Bacal was the founder and start-up leader of Hiawatha Leadership Academy, a south Minneapolis charter school, and co-founder/co-start-up leader of Twin Cities Academy charter school in St. Paul. For five years, he served as the founding executive director of SchoolStart, a nonprofit that catalyzed the launch of nearly 20 Minnesota charter schools.

Prior to founding Venture, Bacal was the founding executive director of the Minneapolis Public Schools' Office of New Schools, the state's first approved school-district charter authorizer. He also

served as founding co-coordinator of the Minneapolis District-Charter Collaboration Compact, an initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Bacal served for five years as education advisor for the City of St. Paul.

Kerry Muse is chief learning officer and head of school for Venture Academy. As an innovative math teacher leader at KIPP Bridge charter school in Oakland, California, he helped propel KIPP Bridge to become one of California's highest performing, high-poverty urban middle schools. Muse initiated a pilot partnership with Khan Academy for the 2011-12 year to implement the personalized online math program for all KIPP Bridge sixth-graders.

Ninety percent of Muse's 73 sixth-grade math students attained proficiency on the state test, including 89 percent of his low-income black students and 100 percent of his low-income Hispanic students. Overall, his students made average annual math gains of 200 percent, or two years' academic progress, during each of their two years (fifth grade in 2010-11 and sixth grade in 2011-12) with Muse. His 2012 sixth-grade math proficiency results are well above the results attained that year by any Minnesota school with a similar student profile.

In 2010-11, Muse was responsible for KIPP Bridge's highest-ever fifth-grade math results, achieving 86 percent student proficiency on the 2011 state test. Over his six years of teaching at Bridge, he served as a grade-level team leader and school-wide special education leader, responsible for coaching teachers, school culture, discipline, parent meetings and special education compliance. Muse also designed and led a self-contained classroom for KIPP Bridge's lowest performing (in academics and behavior) sixth-graders, who made an average of three years' (300 percent) academic progress over a single year, most starting out at a fourth-grade level and finishing ready for seventh grade. He is an alumnus of KIPP's training program for teacher leaders. A Texas native, he began his teaching career in 2003 as a special education teacher in Texas district high schools.

Discussion .

At the beginning of the discussion, Jon Bacal noted that recently deceased Civic Caucus Chair Verne Johnson had catalyzed Venture Academy's founding as an encourager, cofounder and engaged board member. Bacal wished to pay tribute to Johnson's contribution, described more fully in [this article](#) .

Venture Academy , a new grade six-to-12 public charter school, set to open in Minneapolis in 2013, will be Minnesota's first blended learning middle-high school. Blended learning describes learning that involves at least partially personalized online delivery of content and instruction, with some student control over the pace of learning, and that takes place at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home.

Blended learning can be used to:

- **Personalize learning** to individual student interest, needs and pace;
- **Extend the reach of exceptional teaching** to serve more students;
- **Support student-directed and experiential learning** ;
- **Increase time available** for the arts, humanities and one-to-one teacher coaching.

Kerry Muse explained that blended learning combines digital content and tools with face-to-face instruction : interacting with the teacher and/or with kids working together collaborating. "It won't look like a traditional classroom," he said. "It's a space of personalized learning. Kids are working together and individually. Some kids might thrive with the teacher out of the way; some kids need one-to-one with the teacher; and some need both. Technology allows us to do that effectively and efficiently."

"Through personalized and experiential learning, students will take charge of their learning in ways rarely seen or imagined in traditional schools," Muse continued. "Regardless of background, all kids want to learn and are capable of much more than they are credited for by the current system. Some of the best ideas I've heard have been from 11- and 12-year-olds. At Venture Academy, we'll create a space where students' interests, ideas and engagement drive the learning."

"When you enable students to discover and pursue what interests them and shape their own learning pathway, they are likelier to reach their peak learning potential," Bacal added, noting the 300 percent learning gains Muse achieved in his previous school using personalized blended learning. "When a school can ignite their passion and help them find a sense of purpose, students will put in the intensive practice required to develop expertise and even greatness."

Venture's mission is to inspire passionate civic innovators and entrepreneurial leaders who imagine opportunities, take initiative and create solutions. Its vision is that through practice, anyone can become great at anything. Venture aims to transform learning to prepare all young people, but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for college learning and purposeful life pathways by the age of 16, and it aims to do so at a sustainable cost. Venture Academy recently was awarded one of 20 Next Generation Learning grants in a national competition funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Important features of Venture's learning program include:

- Learning goals set by the students;
- Real-time data allows teachers and students to track individual learning;
- Real-time data shows how many students in the class are mastering detailed learning-unit breakdowns, e.g., adding negative numbers.

Venture's model is designed to motivate young people, most entering the school far behind academically, to achieve dramatic gains by letting them take charge of learning. Venture aims for its students to attain annual literacy and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts/design and math) learning gains of at least twice the national average and to be ready for college-credit coursework by age 16. Venture empowers every student and teacher to personalize, own, track and accomplish these goals.

Venture Academy has three model elements:

1. Inspiring innovators and leaders.

Inspiring passionate, purposeful innovators and entrepreneurial leaders is not only an aspirational goal after graduation. While at Venture, students and staff will engage in "the passionate, deep practice of innovative, entrepreneurial leadership by taking charge of their learning and taking responsibility for school-wide improvement. Blending the best digital content and tools and hands-on experiential learning to extend the reach of exceptional teacher-edupreneurs and personalized coaching, Venture will cultivate the knowledge, skills and mindsets of imaginative and courageous 21st century trailblazers."

2. Try-measure-learn-iterate.

Venture's educators and students will seek constant improvement by tracking learning progress and adapting programs, methods and tools with the support of personalized digital learning plans, data dashboards and real-time feedback. Students, educators and leaders will always be encouraged to try new approaches, take risks, admit mistakes and share lessons. "Failing fast is essential to learning."

3. Growing great people.

Like the *Talent Code*'s Daniel Coyle, Venture believes that great learning, leadership and character are neither innate nor mysterious. "Venture is designed to ignite the passions of young people and educators to relentlessly practice becoming great learners, educators, leaders and human beings."

Venture Academy's leaders believe replicating and scaling Kerry Muse's California learning results in Minnesota could make Minnesota, in former Gov. Rudy Perpich's words, the "Brainpower State" by:

- Achieving 200 percent to 300 percent annual learning growth for students;
- Freeing up time for arts, sciences, civic leadership and other student passions;
- Ensuring that virtually all students would be ready for college by age 16;
- Dramatically expanding the pool of young people ready to thrive in the 21st century;
- Wiping out learning gaps and learning ceilings.

Students in grades six to 12, the grades targeted by Venture Academy, make up about half of the total school enrollment both in Minnesota and in Minneapolis. Jon Bacal noted that Minnesota has about one million K-12 kids in public and private schools and more than half of them are in grades six through 12. Similarly, Minneapolis has approximately 50,000 K-12 public- and private-school students, half in grades six through 12.

Innovative Quality Schools (IQS) has approved sponsorship of Venture Academy. IQS is a new, single-purpose authorizer of charter schools. Its authorization of Venture is awaiting approval by state Commissioner of Education Brenda Cassellius.

Venture's operations and results will be open and public. Bacal said Venture is part of a national RAND Corporation study, so everything about the school will be public, including its learning results. "It's hard to explain the blended-learning concept," added Muse. "It's hard to contextualize it if you

haven't seen it. We want to get as many people as possible to see this first school. We need an open-door, fishbowl environment, so people can see it and tell us what they think," he said.

Decades of small-scale innovations have not fundamentally changed the nature of schooling.

Bacal noted that there have been "wonderful innovations" in education, but the system and the nature of schooling remain unchanged. Many innovations have relied on soft money, Bacal said, but a school like Venture Academy "could start in a church basement. It can be done with the resources we provide schools in Minnesota." Venture Academy has not yet settled on a location, but Bacal expects that the school will be located in either downtown Minneapolis or south Minneapolis.

Muse urged that there be a policy shift away from a culture of compliance in education to one of more flexibility. "There is a lot of fear among the adults, and therefore also among the kids, of the system, because of its top-down nature." Bacal said the culture of compliance consumes lots of time and psychic energy of teachers and of kids and we must move away from it.

"The rubber band snaps back," Bacal said of the education system's reaction to pockets of innovation. "That's part of the culture of compliance. That's a challenge even when people inside the school have a different model."

According to Muse, Venture will blend character development, experiential learning and academic rigor, including teaching kids how to think, how to see problems and come up with solutions. The school will allow kids to fail and then learn from it, by putting into practice what they've learned through failure and moving forward.

Minnesota's policy for welcoming talented educators from other states could be improved.

Bacal noted that Muse has three subject-area teacher's licenses (math, special education, and art) in each of the two largest states in the country (California and Texas), with more than nine years of total public-school teaching experience. But currently he couldn't get a standard teacher's license in Minnesota without going back to graduate school, because Muse is alternatively certified. Venture needs the flexibility, Bacal said, to be able to bring people in both from outside Minnesota and from outside the teaching profession. "People who are second-career teachers bring different experiences to the table for teaching 21st century skills."

"There must be a mindset change," Muse said. "The American way of growing teachers is already archaic. Kids don't access knowledge in the same way they always did." There must be a policy shift to allow talented people who want to teach and whom schools want to hire to have the opportunity to teach, regardless of what their degree is.

Venture is looking for teachers who are versatile, creative and adaptive. A questioner asked about the school's plan for hiring teachers. Muse replied that they are relying on their personal networks to find teachers with a similar mindset. They also plan to work with Teach For America. "We're looking for the '**MacGyvers'** of education: versatile, creative and adaptive," Muse said. "We must open the doors to teaching to creative people from all sectors," Bacal added. "We need to find ways to grow teachers like this."

Venture Academy will primarily serve Minneapolis and has 130 students signed up for pre-enrollment into sixth grade. Although as a public charter school Venture is open to any student in

Minnesota, the school is primarily serving students in Minneapolis. Of the 130 students who have pre-enrolled in the school, most are from south Minneapolis. Bacal said the school's leaders want a cross-section of kids from all backgrounds.

Venture will start by admitting 120 sixth graders next fall and will grow by adding a new class of 80 sixth graders each year, aiming eventually for a total enrollment of over 400. The first-year goal is to have five teachers, in addition to Muse as the chief learning officer and head of school. Muse said the ratio of kids to adults would be 20 to 25 in the first year. As the school grows and the kids learn to be self-directed learners, that ratio will increase and there will be more kids per adult.

Venture teachers will be paid 50 percent more than other charter-school teachers are paid, on average. Responding to a question about the compensation level for the caliber of teachers Venture seeks to hire, Bacal said the school will pay 50 percent more than other charter-school teachers are paid. "We want our teachers to earn in the upper five figures. We want their work to be deeply fulfilling, enable them to grow professionally and as leaders, and let them have a life outside of school."

Venture has much to learn from Montessori, Walden, project-based models and homeschooling. In response to a question, Muse said Venture has a lot to learn from the Montessori and Waldorf models, and from project-based schools like Minnesota New Country School, which they recently visited. There are also a lot of elements from homeschooling that exist in Venture; the difference is the learning community at the school.

Venture's program aims to have kids college-ready by age 16. Bacal asserted that when the school has students college-ready by age 16, they can take advantage of various Minnesota educational options, such as Postsecondary Options (PSEO), college in the schools and taking career-tech courses starting as sophomores. "Our ideal is that kids will have at least two years of college credit by the time they graduate," he said.

Venture will help students develop a scientific mindset. In response to a question about how to interest students in science, Muse said, "It'd be great if we could get a real scientist to come and collaborate." The school must help kids develop a real-life scientific mindset by conducting experiments and dissections and having them observe and collect data in situations that have real meaning.

Conclusion .

Muse concluded by stating that Venture hopes to serve more students in the future at additional campuses, but only after demonstrating success with students. Bacal added, "There is a rich tradition of civic innovation in Minnesota, creating opportunities for creativity. It's the perfect environment for this small innovation to blossom."