

# MANKATO WILSON SCHOOL:

## A PLEA FOR COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

by Don Glines

### Envisioning Transitions

The majority of existing non-traditional learning environments enroll only 50, 100, 150, 200 students. These programs may well serve those who attend, but they are insignificant nationally for they do not provide **comprehensive** opportunities for a cross-section of students. They do not have football teams, bands, cheerleaders, or first-year gardening, and therefore cater only to the few, not everyone! Thus, the experiences from the Mankato Wilson School can serve as catalysts for increasing the number of larger comprehensive settings that offer something for everyone, while still retaining the desired small personalized and individualized environments.

It is obvious that existing learning alternatives and such “changes” as year-round education desperately need innovations and new directions. More sophisticated designs are required for these early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But creating different options and eliminating “bugs” in current efforts will not dramatically improve opportunities for most youth unless there is a rapid transition toward entirely different learning systems. The Minnesota Experimental City (MXC), a community planned for 250,000 people—with no schools—illustrates the potential future.

Transitional **starting points** can be very simple, already practiced and researched concepts which can help create improved environments for learners. The community may offer—on a voluntary basis—multiple choices. Options may include a non-graded environment (no more grades 1, 7, 10); teaming rather than self-contained classrooms; daily flexible or hidden scheduling; self-directed student responsibility rather than rigid teacher control; all day food service; interdependent futures-oriented curriculum; altered facilities to create centers and suites; schools-without-walls opportunities; focus on strengths, not weaknesses, in seeking achievement; inclusion of the affective and psychomotor domains; and elimination of report cards, honors, and discriminatory class rankings. These reflect some of the 70 or more practices, which, though not new, when combined with creative continuous twelve-month alternatives, can lead toward significantly better futures.

In considering the practicality of successfully adopting **massive change all at once**, one should reflect on the comments of Jonathan Swift through our precious Gulliver: **“I have seen what others can only dream...; I know these descriptions are true...for I have been there.”** The program at the Wilson Campus School of Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU)—was labeled **the most innovative PUBLIC year-round alternatives offering yet created in the United States.** The story is reality—for it existed. In traditional terms, parenting, pre-K through grade twelve, university degree, and senior citizen personalized continuous year offerings were under one roof. The experience is documented in *Creating Educational Futures: Continuous Mankato Wilson Alternatives*.

In this current era of accountability standards by testing, many of the changes may seem radical or impossible. However, Gulliver was correct, as the portraits are true. The design was first

implemented four decades past—by those who did what others have only dreamed. Futurists believe that it is now time **to do the impossible, for the possible is no longer working**. Ancient 20<sup>th</sup> Century **schooling** will not provide for 21<sup>st</sup> Century **learning**. The Wilson program can help schools and districts to formulate ideas which will move them away **from what exists toward what COULD AND SHOULD BE for many youth**. New Wright brothers (and sisters) are desperately required to lead the transition toward very different educational opportunities.

### The Wilson Program

**Wilson was unique among year-round SCHOOLS OF CHOICE in that it was one of the few to maintain a “total” program.** Though small in size (600), and funded at no additional cost to the Mankato District, Wilson offered more available curriculum experiences than any other school in Minnesota—regardless of size or budget. One student in nine years studied the History of Ireland without ever worrying whether a teacher could be assigned or the class would be canceled if 25 did not register. It housed the Minnesota State University, Mankato undergraduate teacher education alternatives option (SEA—the Studios for Educational Alternatives) and the open-ended master and education specialist degrees in **Experiential Education**. These programs yielded North Central Accreditation and provided the required graduate credits, but they allowed future and continuing teachers to avoid conventional education classes. Wilson students could begin at **pre-birth** and complete an Education Specialist degree under one roof—and then continue there as a teacher/facilitator, community volunteer, or learner—and eventually become involved as a participant in a program for **golden-agers**. **Wilson was the beginning of turning life-long learning from theory to reality.**

The concepts were not unlike those in similar corresponding experiments. The difference was in the implementation of a more comprehensive program catering to a broader cross-section of students. **The “new” Wilson was created overnight.** Prior to the change, the “old” Wilson operated as a good conventional campus laboratory school with the usual waiting list—catering primarily to the demands of the college of education faculty; it was used through a cooperative agreement between the University and Mankato District #77 as a neighborhood public school. There was little choice for the students, except for high schoolers who requested the big conventional site to participate at a higher level of sports competition, or to enroll in a special curriculum program. Within one month of the decision to create the most experimental, year-round **alternatives** program in America, the total **“revolution”** was under way. **Completely dismantling tradition with an existing staff**, Wilson became a “model” illustrating the tremendous potential for changing outmoded schooling at a rapid, dramatic pace, while additionally challenging conventional thinking, and offering visions of continuing innovation. It caused discussion on the future of learning, while providing a significantly different environment for those who volunteered to participate in the search for a transformation.

**Wilson staff made 69 “changes” immediately.** The most important was the aspect of human relations. Students selected their own facilitators and advisors; later surveys and interviews determined that consciously and subconsciously, the advisors and teachers were chosen on the basis of six factors: **personality, perception, age, gender, interest, and skill**. The students found the adult they most loved and asked that person to serve as their confidante. **No one was ever assigned to a teacher or advisor; no teacher was ever assigned to a student.** As a result, **all courses and requirements** were eliminated. Curriculum became what the students wanted to study at the moment in time, with the persons they most wanted to share their learning. The **affective domain** was the key, followed by the psychomotor. The cognitive came third. Confluence was sought and generally

achieved, but the priority was almost always the affective. **Creativity** was addressed, as the greatest number of dropouts in many schools are those who score highest on “creativity tests.” Learning styles were a prime consideration. Students selected staff who were more rigid or more flexible depending upon their relationships and current perceived needs in given areas. **Kindergartners had the same choices as seniors**; they were offered more assistance by advisors, teachers, older students, aides, and parents, but otherwise were relatively self-directing.

**Curriculum was personalized and then individualized.** Some four-year-olds were reading at the “2<sup>nd</sup> grade” level; some “2<sup>nd</sup> graders” were not reading and were not in remedial classes. Both maturation and motivation needed the right blends. Five phase learning opportunities were stressed: (1) individual instruction/discussion, (2) independent study, (3) open labs, (4) small groups (with and without staff), and (5) voluntary common thread large groups. Continuous progress was featured. **Youth paced at their own rate.** Some completed two or three years of college level “math” while in high school, while others selected minimal experiences. Curriculum was interdependent for the majority of the student learning activities.

**To facilitate such a program, Wilson was open year-round.** Families of construction workers in the states like Minnesota need to vacation in January, not July; Florida families wanting to snow ski find June-July-August not the best period in the Rockies. Homelessness and low incomes occur all twelve months. **Attendance was optional for each day**; every individual, K-12, had the privilege of open campus. Food was served all day in the student center; lunch periods are unacceptable for the best models. The student mix in all areas was non-graded. “Kindergartners” and “seniors” had the same/similar programs, philosophies, facilities, instructors, climates, and environments; they were separated only when desired or appropriate. They often shared activities and helped each other learn.

One of the attractions to visitors was how Wilson went from a **traditional schedule to a non-scheduled environment**—a daily smorgasbord of choices where all students and teachers created different time allotments every day. **Personalizing the day/year was not hard to accomplish in a school of 600—or as a school-within-a-school on a large campus—once the curriculum and instruction were individualized and students learned to be self-directing.** A major key to the success of Wilson was responsibility; the concept is not taught, but must be given and accepted. The climate belief stated: **“WITH FREEDOM GOES RESPONSIBILITY AND COURTESY.”** *In larger school-within-school plans, one choice can allow for the same non-schedule philosophy.* There were no ABC report cards, no class rank lists, and no traditional transcripts. Students completed goal sheets with their selected staff. Some worked with only 2-3-4 faculty at one time, while others were engaged with 12-14. **There were no graduation requirements**; students left when ready with approval of their advisors, parents, and a review committee, though a great majority received their diplomas after the conventional twelve years. They stayed because they liked it, for financial or home reasons, their age, or involvement with sports and friends; but they could, and many did, graduate early—or later than their norm.

**The physical environment was changed**; walls were cut with arches or removed or constructed. The interior was painted interesting colors and part of the facility was carpeted. The two gymnasiums and hallways were in constant use, as students followed their own schedules. The Beginning Life Center focused on 3-4-5-6-year olds who could stay there all or part of the day, but who could also participate throughout the building—which almost all did. Parents returned some evenings as part of **the lighted school**. Both “special education” and “gifted” students were completely mainstreamed as early as 1968. **Community service and volunteering were critical components.** Wilson people were “everywhere,” but were especially involved in the senior citizens

home and the state mental health hospital—as aides, friends, and learners. A highlight experience for most students was the **Mexican exchange with Centro Escolar in Puebla**. Participating Wilson youth spent eight weeks in Mexico, increasing their fluency in Spanish and learning the culture. The Mexican youth reciprocated by coming to Mankato four weeks each year. Lasting relationships were common, as many students and parents continued to exchange visits 20 years after leaving Wilson.

**There were no eligibility rules for sports, no sets of textbooks, no rows of desks facing the chalkboard, no bells, no notes from home, no hall passes or study halls—all common in the Midwest in the Wilson era—and certainly no self-contained classrooms.** Student teachers and master degree interns learned to “teach”—facilitate learning—at Wilson; they **could be exempted from all traditional college of education classes and still receive their degrees and credentials.**

**Two of the significant Mankato factors were its size, and its holistic—or “comprehensive”—offerings.** Wilson wanted to enroll enough students to reach a critical mass—to be large enough to provide most programs to meet the needs of each individual. Its 600 K-12 youth (200 elementary, 200 middle, and 200 high school), when mixed in a non-graded format, created the staffing to include pre-birth and pre-school programs and master degree and senior citizen components—and to be open continuously twelve months through the Personalized Continuous Year Calendar—all on the same public school budget.

**Unlike most alternatives, Wilson maintained—here using traditional vocabulary—competitive sports** (reaching the state finals in basketball), cheerleaders, dances, drama, music, art, industrial technology, home economics, advanced foreign language/science/math, special education, early childhood, and **all-day food service**. Its facilities were adequate to accommodate such offerings year-round, and were supplemented by the **school-in-the-community concept**, utilizing many sites in Mankato, in Minnesota, in the other states, and internationally. Limited traditional options generally do not offer such comprehensiveness. During the emerging essential learning transitions, there should be more Wilson-style programs available throughout the United States. Most current non-traditional patterns lose many students who would prefer to transfer from the conventional nine-month school, but do not, for they still **want football, advanced Spanish**, college mathematics, auto shop, band, early childhood centers, **or conventional playgrounds**—but in alternatives environments. Even worse, when similar Wilson programs do exist, most have a waiting list or lottery for admission.

### Personalized Year Calendar

The pre/K-12 and university calendar at Wilson was simple, **though the most advanced yet practiced in public year-round alternatives.** In theory, the site was open 365 days a year, 24 hours each day. In facility and staff reality, it was 240 days, the result of the usual budget restraints. The mechanics followed a basic formula. Students “owed” the school 170 days. They could attend any 170 of the 240 the facility was open—or all 240—or gain “credit” through off-campus ventures: volunteering in the community, mountain climbing in Colorado, French in Quebec, Spanish in Puebla, Sioux cultures at Pine Ridge, helping grandparents in senior homes, assisting the homeless—**any of the 365 calendar days**, including Christmas. With the curriculum completely personalized and individualized, students and staff had the advantage of almost complete flexibility.

There were no coverage problems, **as faculty worked in teams of teachers with whatever combinations of aides**, volunteers, community resources, and student interns were available at a given moment. If 600 students were enrolled, it was assumed that perhaps 500 would attend each day,

allowing three to five or more teachers to be absent; balance was not a problem. Families, students, and staff could vacation whenever they desired year-round—for a day, week, month, months—even furlough for a year. They did not have to ask permission, but notification was requested for long periods (as furloughs). Most students informed their facilitators and advisors, but if Dad could take two days off during hunting season, or had an opportunity to take the family on a business trip, or if Mom was ill and needed care, or wanted them to visit grandparents, that was great. Staff had the same options; the year-round calendar schedules were completely *voluntary*. Wilson did not believe in rigid *mandated* “vacation days” as in the different single or multiple track designs—such as 60-20. Waivers were granted by the State Department to provide flexible attendance reporting, until the law was changed to provide for Average Daily Membership.

**Small schools can achieve the same program**, modified by such realities as transportation, family employment patterns, availability of staff, and community facilities. **Larger schools as in 3000**, can create the model through five “house units” of 600 each, or optional school-within-school designs, with understanding and cooperation of shared staff/facilities (as in one swimming pool).

For schools overcrowded—where they must relieve *space* and perhaps be more “accountable” to parents/community/state—the Personalized Continuous Year is implemented as a Mandatory with Options plan. Assuming again the 600-student model in a school built for 450, families and staff request by 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> choice the weeks they prefer their vacation days. They are told that most must take time off in the fall, winter, and/or spring periods, and be in school sometime during the summer. The scheduling process enrolls individuals according to their selections to ensure that 450 students and appropriate staff are in the building, and 150 youth and perhaps five faculty are on vacation for that week/month. **Individual variations are permissible**, as it does not actually matter whether the count is 140 or 160 youth, or 4 or 7 teachers out of the building, as long as an approximate balance is maintained. Subject/grade level” matches are not a problem, for **all staff teach pre K-12 and college students**, (or whatever “grade level” combinations in the specific building), function in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> “subjects” as part of **interrelated curriculum**, and work as members of teams. The only need is to ensure that at least one teacher is in the building who knows “science” well, and at least one who can “hug” kindergarten children. The Mandatory with Options system is not theory—it works—and is not time-consuming after the first year when the mechanical “bugs” are eliminated. The personalized continuous calendar is an exciting transition toward the future.

## Reflections

From the lessons of the past, the **MESSAGE FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE AGENTS IS CLEAR**. If educators are to overcome the barriers to change in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they must provide the availability of holistic, comprehensive year-round settings that cater to a broad segment of families. **The often-perceived negative connotations of alternatives will not vanish until a cross-section of students is enrolled**. Matriculating the football, chemist, low achieving, and band populations not only provides options for them, but illustrates that **year-round, innovative, experimental choices are valid for all youth** who would make the selection.

In addition to the book *Creating Educational Futures*, this pioneer program has been documented through two video tapes, a dissertation (Long) on teacher reflections, three studies on student outcomes 20 years later, and over 60 master degree theses and papers. These are all archived in Memorial Library at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

## Glossary

Totally new learning systems are truly needed for the coming decades. **Wilson adaptations can serve as transition patterns.** To make a Wilson “work,” the philosophy regarding youth and learning is the key. However, the “mechanics” must be implemented correctly, for a crumbling structure can defeat the concept. Therefore, in general, the program must embrace with understanding the following components: (1) non-gradedness, (2) teaming, (3) personalized and individualized curriculum, (4) self-selected requirements, (5) selection of advisors and teachers, (6) self-directed assessment, (7) responsibility and courtesy, (8) continuous programs, (9) volunteering, (10) beginning life centers, (11) stimulus centers, (12) year-round, (13) interdependent learning, (14) program-without-walls, (15) allergy free environment, (16) family designed conferences, (17) optional attendance, (18), open facilities, (19) non-textbook approaches, (20) everyone eligible, and (21) flexible scheduling. **There are 69 or more such “changes,” but when welded as one, they comprise a humane transition toward new learning systems.**

## Future Visions

Beyond the Mankato program, a look ahead is essential, for when considering the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century probabilities and possibilities, Wilson is immediately obsolescent. It, though, is valuable as **one accepted, documented, and researched design for envisioning the next steps.** The future must bring learning to the student, and not continue to rely primarily on the student arriving at a designated site. Schooling must be eliminated; education must be year-round.

**The design for the Minnesota Experimental City (MXC), where in the early 70s a community of 250,000 was planned with no schools,** illustrates what lies ahead. Though it was never constructed, the concepts for the MXC learning system are valid and can be adapted as part of continuous innovation. The components were based upon the following assumptions developed by Dr. Ronald Barnes and the education design team for the MXC: (1) **Learning** is life (2) **Learning** occurs everywhere (3) **People** can learn on their own (4) **Everyone** is important regardless of how much the person knows (5) **Authority** is shared by all (6) **Education** is a lifelong process of learning and should be tailored to meet the needs of the individual, and (7) **People** will form positive social networks on their own without formal schooling. The delivery of learning opportunities was to have been through a variety of avenues, none of which were a school or site where students were transported each day.

**The design included a variety of forms:** (1) *Existing Facilities*: use of homes, businesses, public housing—a new version of schools-without-walls concepts, (2) *Beginning Life Centers*: offering an environment promoting creative experiences for young children, and for parents and older students the opportunity to learn of the needs of the young, (3) *Stimulus Centers*: providing films, tapes, sounds, smells—a constantly changing array of stimuli to bombard, provoke, and extend learners, (4) *Gaming Centers*: for learning occurring through educational games, simulated design, and techniques to address the complex realities in a simpler fashion, (5) *Project Centers*: working on activities as in making a movie, building a boat, designing a new vehicle, (6) *Learner Banks*: storing tools, materials, and equipment needed by the learners, and (7) *Family Life Centers*: for families learning together, for seminars, meetings, tutoring, community discussions, and social/health services. The entire system was linked through the LORIN model—a sophisticated computer information storage, retrieval, and networking plan to connect learners with facilitators. **Everyone was a teacher; everyone was a learner. The city was the lifelong learning laboratory.**

## Research and Development

**It is time to resurrect new versions of Wilson and the MXC. Experimentation is essential,** while expanding the breadth, depth, and acceptance of the **philosophy of learning choices for everyone.** Lessons from Wilson, as one style of option, can provide a springboard for imagining life-long living-learning systems for the future. **Educational astronaut volunteers are needed**—those who will fly the “learning” Endeavor.

Volunteers can create “concept” and “design” educational automobiles—those that are blueprinted, constructed, and tested two to ten years before sales to the public. In the coming two decades, educators need to create MXC style learning patterns and calendars that are more appropriate for the emerging future. **There are few valid reasons for continuing the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and nine-month schools for everyone.**

**What research (not tradition, preference, or uniformity) is there to support the existing schooling conventions?** What research is there to support the grade level concept, self-contained rooms, standardized schedules, classroom sets of textbooks, math as more important than art as a requirement for all, ABC report cards, national assessments, nine-month calendars, segregated subject matter, lunch at 11:30, and dozens of other rituals? The answer is clear: *NONE*. More research exists to support Wilson styles. Students enter kindergarten one year apart chronologically, and 24 months apart developmentally; *there is nothing so unequal as to treat unequals as equals.* **LEARNING ALTERNATIVES SHOULD BE THE VEHICLES FOR DESIGNING NEW LEARNING SYSTEMS FOR THE FUTURE.**

## References

### Books by Glines on Wilson, Learning Alternatives, YRE

1. **Glines, Don.** *Creating Educational Futures: Continuous Mankato Wilson Alternatives.* 1995.
2. Glines, Don. *Year-Round Education: History, Philosophy, Future.* 1995.
3. Glines, Don, and William Wirt. *The Great Lockout in America's Citizenship Plants.* 1995.
4. Glines, Don. (Monograph) *Year-Round Calendar and Enrollment Plans.* 1994.
5. Glines, Don. *YRE: Traditions and Innovations.* 2000.
6. Glines, Don, and James Bingle. *NAYRE: Historical Perspective.* 2002.
7. Glines, Don, and David Mussatti. *YRE: Paths to Resources.* 2002.

The above publications are available from the **National Association for Year-Round Education (NAYRE)**, P.O. Box 711386, San Diego CA 92111, (619) 276-5296.

8. **Glines, Don.** *Educational Alternatives for Everyone.* International Association for Learning Alternatives, 449 Desnoyer, St. Paul MN 55104. (651) 644-2805.

### Related Videos and Studies

1. Archives of Wilson Campus School, Memorial Library, Minnesota State University, Mankato MN.
2. **Long, Kathleen.** *Teacher Reflections on School Restructuring: Alternatives in Public Education.* (Dissertation) University of Oregon Library, Eugene OR (The story of Mankato Wilson School.)

3. *Mankato Wilson Campus School Remembered*. (55-minute video) International Association for Learning Alternatives (IALA) 449 Desnoyer, St. Paul MN 55102. (651) 644-2805.
4. *The Wilson Experience*. (15-minute video) Performance Learning Systems, 224 Church Street, Nevada City CA 95959. (916) 265-9066.

### **Additional Recommended Reading**

1. Appleton, Matthew. *A Free Range Childhood*. Foundation for Educational Renewal, Brandon VT: 2000.
2. Anderson, Robert, and Barbara Pavan. *Nongradedness: Making it Happen*. Rowan and Littlefield, Lanham MD: 1999.
3. *Eight-Year Study Revisited: Lessons from the Past for the Present*. National Middle School Association. Westerville OH: 1998.
4. Farenga, Patrick, and John Holt, *Teach Your Own*. Perseus Publishing, Cambridge MA: 2003.
5. Jennings, Wayne, and Joan Caulfield. *Inciting Learning: Brain-Compatible Instruction*. National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston VA: 2002.
6. Keefe, James, and Eugene Howard. *Redesigning School for the New Century*. National Association of Secondary School Principals, Reston VA: 1997.
7. Meighan, Roland. *John Holt: Personalized Learning, Not Uninvited Teaching*. Education Heretics Press, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham England, HG93FQ: 2000.
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10. Miller, Ron. *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy After 1960* (2002) and *What Are Schools For?* (1998) Foundation for Educational Renewal, Brandon VT: 2000.
11. Miller, Ron, ed. *Creating Learning Communities*. Foundation for Educational Renewal, Brandon VT: 1998.
12. Moffett, James. *The Universal Schoolhouse*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco: 1994.
13. Rocha, Doralice. *Schools Where Children Matter*. Foundation for Educational Renewal, Brandon VT: 2003.
14. Van Til, William. *My Way of Looking At It*. Caddo Gap Press, San Francisco: 1996.

### **Important Resources** (All have excellent books and materials related to school improvement.)

1. **EDUCATIONAL HERETICS PRESS**, 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham England, HG 93FQ. 0-115-925-7261.
2. **FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATIONAL RENEWAL**, P.O. Box 328, Brandon VT 05733, (800) 639-4122. [www.pathsoflearning.net](http://www.pathsoflearning.net)
3. **INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LEARNING ALTERNATIVES**, 449 Desnoyer, St. Paul MN, 55104. (651) 644-2805. [www.learningalternatives.net](http://www.learningalternatives.net)

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