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Teacher-run school wins praise

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Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

Avalon students and teachers were in a festive mood as "white elephant" gifts were opened during their recent annual holiday party. Avalon, in St. Paul, is run by teachers — with no principal — and the students. A recent study done by a researcher at Claremont Graduate University found that Avalon is largely successful.

A study found that Avalon students scored higher on state reading tests and that a large portion went on to college.

By **DAAREL BURNETTE II**¹, Star Tribune

Teachers are in charge at the Avalon School in St. Paul. There are no administrators or secretaries or librarians at the charter school.

Similarly, students have almost as much power as the teachers. They take charge of their own curriculums and can grade themselves with the help of their peers and families.

According to a recent study by an education reform scholar, Avalon is producing results. "Teacher-run schools are delightful islands, freed from many of the battles that rage around conventional public schools," wrote Charles Taylor Kerchner, a professor at Claremont Graduate University in California.

"They are unlikely to constitute the 'next' public education, and there are probably significant limits on how fast and far they will grow. Still, they exhibit changes in responsibility and job roles that would have great promise if they were artfully borrowed by district-run schools."

Kerchner spent months at Avalon for the study, "Can Teachers Run Their Own Schools?" He conducted extensive interviews

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with teachers, students and parents, and analyzed surveys and test scores.

Kerchner found that Avalon students scored higher than the state average on reading scores, the ACT and SAT and sent a large portion of its students to college. He also found an overwhelming amount of support and involvement from parents.

The school has 176 students in grades seven through 12. Of those students, 22 percent qualify for free-or-reduced lunch, 25 percent are in special education and 29 percent are students of color.

Minnesota's Legislature passed a law in 2009 that allows traditional school districts to operate teacher-run schools. Charter schools have been allowed such operations for years, and there are several scattered throughout the state.

Many rural districts, unable to afford administrators, are looking into the concept, while cities such as Milwaukee and Detroit have adopted the practice.

Avalon was chartered in 2001 by Hamline University with the idea that principals can interfere with the learning process.

"We're the ones most connected to the kids," said Avalon teacher Carrie Bakken. "The people that are most connected to the kids should be making the decisions."

Avalon is a project-based school where students meet Minnesota learning standards by completing semester-long projects and logging their hours.

"I like that we're able to work at our own pace and take control of our education," said Alex Bergersen-Davis, an 18-year-old senior at the school.

Avalon, situated on the top two floors of an old factory in the Summit-University neighborhood, is decorated with student work. Students sit in unwallied classrooms, some chatting on their phones and using their laptops while a teacher watches.

"The most obvious lesson to draw from Avalon and the other teacher-run schools is that students are capable of much more self-control than most schools expect of them," Kerchner said.

Daarel Burnette II •

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