

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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04 Minnesota



MINNESOTA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Focusing on Full-Service Community Schools—A deeper dive into: Duluth, Deer River, Rochester and Brooklyn Center

In Minnesota, the movement to ensure that schools are the centers of their communities has been gaining ground. [Education Minnesota](#), the American Federation of Teachers state affiliate, has made advocacy for community schools a top priority in recent years, and its efforts have paid off. Today, there are 18 community schools across the state in urban, suburban and rural locations.

The community school strategy is a collaborative and effective vehicle for increasing educational equity. Community schools purposefully partner with food banks, social service agencies, businesses, higher education institutions, health clinics, and youth organizations to meet the academic and nonacademic needs of students and families. By meeting those needs, community schools make it possible for educators to do what they do best, which is to teach, and for students to have the supports they need to learn and reach their full potential.

For more than two decades, community schools have been part of the education landscape in the Land of 10,000 Lakes. Grassroots efforts in several cities, along with the support of local AFT affiliates, have led to school districts establishing community schools. Implementation of

the strategy really took off in 2015 when community school advocates successfully lobbied the state Legislature to pass a full-service community schools law and establish a one-time grant program that provided funding over two years. Thanks to the program, in 2016 four schools were awarded grants totaling \$500,000. A year later, nine schools were awarded grants totaling \$1 million. The school sites that received funding were in seven cities: Brooklyn Center, Deer River, Duluth, Faribault, Minneapolis, Rochester and St. Paul. According to a [report](#) published by Education Minnesota’s Educator Policy Innovation Center, the law enabled “more school districts to adopt the full-service community school strategy by defining the full-service community school strategy and providing funding for site coordinators and community needs assessments.”¹

The linchpin of the strategy is a site coordinator, often called a community school coordinator. They coordinate resources and partnerships and share leadership with the school’s principal, working hand in hand with teachers, students and families. The coordinator’s job typically includes meeting with students and families to discuss their needs, working with the principal to make sure after-

school programs align with instruction, and visiting leaders of nonprofit organizations and social service agencies to identify how the school can support students and families, among many other responsibilities. At the heart of a coordinator’s work, as well as the work of community schools, is building relationships. Establishing and successfully running a community school is a total team effort, where collaboration and communication are key.

Research has long shown that the community school model contributes to several positive outcomes, including student achievement, student attendance, and family and student engagement.² In establishing community schools, policymakers, educators and administrators across the country, including those in Minnesota, have relied on a [seminal work](#) from the Learning Policy Institute outlining four pillars crucial to implementation.³ These include collaborative leadership and practices, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and integrated student supports.

The strong research base undergirding the model was among the reasons that Education Minnesota initially

threw its support behind policies specifically geared toward full-service community schools. It was a “solution to some of the opportunity gaps that we were seeing in our communities, especially around the time when the federal government was talking about turnaround schools,” says Denise Specht, the president of Education Minnesota since 2013.

“We just believed that instead of closing schools or mandating things from the top that the full-service community school model was a better response.”

Since then, Education Minnesota has helped to coordinate a statewide coalition of unions, nonprofit organizations, community schools, and various other partners to support current community schools and expand the community school strategy throughout the state. That support has proved especially pivotal in the wake of the pandemic. COVID-19 showed just how vital schools are to their communities, and it also demonstrated how community schools were uniquely situated to handle not only remote teaching and learning needs, but also basic life needs, such as food and housing insecurity and mental health challenges—all of which significantly increased during the pandemic.

This report examines community schools in four Minnesota school districts: Duluth, Deer River, Rochester and Brooklyn Center. Although each district operates within vastly different

cultural, educational and geographic contexts, all have successfully implemented the community school strategy. Their accomplishments, challenges, unique experiences supporting students and families, and insights into what makes community schools effective are outlined in the pages that follow—and so are the lessons they learned.

Duluth Community School Collaborative

Bernie Burnham was president of the Duluth Federation of Teachers (DFT) when the community school model in the district was just getting off the ground. Grant Elementary, one of the district’s highest-needs schools, had been slated to close in the late 1990s due to low test scores, but the community rallied to keep the school open and transform it into a community school. Grant adopted the model in 1999 by developing relationships with outside organizations, such as postsecondary institutions and nonprofit groups interested

in providing an array of after-school and summer programming. At the time, a needs assessment the school conducted found that 78 percent of neighbors wanted high-quality activities for students—and so the school began to coordinate and offer them.

Soon after becoming a community school, the school changed its name to the Myers-Wilkins Community School. The 501(c)(3) it had established to bolster the community school effort also became the Myers-Wilkins Community School Collaborative, now called the [Duluth Community School Collaborative](#). The collaborative is run by a board of directors that includes of the DFT president, classroom teachers, the assistant superintendent and other community partners. The collaborative’s name change reflected the fact that two other district schools also became community schools.

An industrial port city that has experienced its share of economic hardship, Duluth today boasts a strong manufacturing



sector and is Minnesota's fourth-largest city. Built on the side of a hill overlooking Lake Superior, Duluth's downtown is picturesque, but the beauty belies pockets of poverty, especially in the Hillside neighborhood where Myers-Wilkins Elementary is located. More than 80 percent of students at the school qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and the rates are similarly high at Lincoln Park Middle School and Denfeld High School. Myers-Wilkins is the most ethnically diverse school in the district, with a third of its 459 students identifying as American Indian or Indigenous, mainly from the Ojibwe or Anishinaabe tribe.

Burnham, who is now vice president of Education Minnesota, recalls the collaboration necessary for adopting the community school framework and the successful effort to get buy-in from everyone in the community.

“You can't just tell a school it's going to be a community school,” she says. “People have to be on board, and you have to have an administrator who understands how it works and who wants to have a community school.”

School leaders at two other high-needs district schools saw the promise of the strategy and decided to establish their own community schools. Lincoln Park Middle School became a community school in 2016, and Denfeld High School followed

in 2017. The collaborative oversees one site coordinator at each of the three schools who also sit on site-based community school leadership teams. For instance, at Lincoln Park, the team includes the principal, Brian Kazmierczak; the site coordinator, Rachel Thapa; two classroom teachers, Katie Britton and Aaron O'Leary (who were both asked to serve on the committee by the principal); and the school social worker, Jennifer Fuchs, as well as parents/caregivers and community partners, including Men As Peacemakers, Farm to School, the Boys and Girls Club, the local American Indian Community Housing Organization (AICHO), Ecolibrium3, the University of Minnesota Duluth, and Generations Health Care Initiatives.

According to Kelsey Gantzer, the executive director of the collaborative, approximately 10 percent of Myers-Wilkins students experience homelessness each year. Partnerships with organizations like AICHO are important to serving these students and their families. The collaborative also partners with several organizations to provide academic and social emotional enrichment programming during and after school. Partners include Men As Peacemakers, the University of Minnesota Duluth Swenson College of Science and Engineering, the University of Wisconsin Superior Academic Service Learning Department, the University of Minnesota Fine Arts Department, the Minnesota Alliance With Youth, and YWCA Girl Power!

At Lincoln Park, partners such as Farm to School, Northwood Children's Services, AmeriCorps, and others help students and school staff maintain a school garden. And a variety of donations and grants support a school pantry. Nutrition education and activities have been integrated into family and consumer science and health classes, after-school programming, and family events. Teachers also participate in parent/teacher home visits, utilizing the model promoted by the national [Parent Teacher Home Visit organization](#). With this particular methodology, educators and families can build meaningful relationships, while sharing their hopes and dreams for their students.

“We focus a lot on how we can reach out to the community, whether that's by doing home visits or by inviting community members to participate,” says Katie Britton, a sixth-grade teacher at Lincoln Park. Such connections make the educational experience more holistic and more aligned to what students really need, says her colleague Aaron O'Leary, a special education reading teacher.

“Community schools create wider connections for kids and overall meet more needs for students, which is especially critical in the time of COVID.”

Throughout the pandemic, the collaborative successfully supported each of its school communities. For instance, Lincoln Park shared 2,000 pounds of food, as well as

school supplies, and toiletries. It also provided devices to students so they could access remote learning. Along with 720 care packages that school staff delivered to students and families during the pandemic, Thapa organized a caring messages campaign to help students feel less isolated. Community members wrote messages to remind students that someone cared for them, and that they weren't alone.

As the school year drew to a close, Gantzer and her team were hard at work planning summer enrichment activities for students at each community school. Every summer, Lincoln Park partners with the College of St. Scholastica to offer 20 to 40 students a free weeklong STEM camp called Shoot for the Stars, which is held in person at the college campus. Lincoln teachers co-teach camp classes with college faculty, and students engage in hands-on learning. The collaborative is also offering integrated enrichment programming at Myers-Wilkins and Denfeld High School where students will participate in outdoor activities, arts programming and social

emotional learning activities. And Thapa helped connect students with other partner organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, Men As Peacemakers and YWCA, that offer free or low-cost community-based summer programming.

Thapa is available to listen, connect with, and support students and families beyond the school year. She has developed and shared a community resource guide that includes her contact information and this message: "School's out for the summer, but our community school is still here for you."

Lessons Learned

- Connect the school to the community by building relationships and trust.
- Connect to families to build meaningful relationships (e.g., via the Parent Teacher Home Visit model).
- Establish a school site leadership team, in which school staff, parents, administrators and community partners are represented in decision-making to ensure all voices are heard, and student and

family needs are met.

- Ensure that a school's educators, administrators, and community members want the school to become a community school and collaborate in making it happen.
- Communicate to community school students and families what specific resources are available to them during the summer.
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Deer River Independent School District

Roughly 90 miles from Duluth is Deer River, a rural city 100 miles from the Canadian border. The school district encompasses 500 square miles, with some students riding the bus to and from school for more than an hour. With a population of around 950 residents, the district has just two schools, King Elementary, a preK-5 school, and Deer River High School, which enrolls students in grades 6-12.

Six years ago, King became a full-service community school. Deanna Hron, a longtime educator, and former president of the local teachers union was instrumental in bringing the model to King. At the time, she



was a kindergarten teacher who realized many of her students were coming to school with their dental and vision needs unmet. When she heard that Myers-Wilkins Elementary School in Duluth was a community school that connected students to dentists and opticians, among other supports, she thought the strategy would be perfect for King. She contacted educators at Myers-Wilkins to learn more, before sharing the idea with her principal and superintendent who agreed it was the right approach. She then reached out to Education Minnesota, which gave Hron and her colleagues more information about the model and sent them to national conferences where they gained a deeper understanding of how community schools work.

Eventually, the state union helped Deer River apply for a community schools implementation grant, which it used to hire a community school coordinator for King. After the grant ran out, district officials decided to continue funding the coordinator position out of the district's general fund. In October 2020, the district applied for and won a federal, five-year full-service [community schools grant](#) for \$2.5 million. The money will enable the district to continue funding the coordinator position at King and to hire a coordinator for Deer River High School and transform it into a community school.

In 2019, Hron left the classroom to become King's community school coordinator so she could help students and families directly. "I was hopeful if I moved into this role that I could support my fellow teachers, as well," she

says. To that end, Hron spends much of her time coordinating services with at least 20 partner organizations, such as the University of Minnesota Extension, the Boys and Girls Club and Second Harvest Food Bank, so students have the resources they need to focus on learning and so that teachers, knowing that students' needs are being met outside the classroom, can focus on teaching. "I feel more comfortable knowing that some of the other things are being watched, and they don't just have to be watched by me," says Susie Loeffler, a fourth-grade teacher at King.

When students need dental care or eyeglasses and their families don't know where to go, Hron steps in. She makes appointments with a local dentist and eye doctor and helps families fill out paperwork to get insurance. She also coordinates after-school programs with the Boys and Girls Club, which has a dedicated space inside the school building, and she oversees a school food pantry (open to students, families, community members and school staff from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on school days) and the Warrior Wardrobe, a care closet stocked with shirts, underwear, sock, and all kinds of free clothing students may need. The school eventually was able to provide space for the Boys and Girls Club, the pantry and the care closet thanks to a building referendum that passed. As a result, district officials could ensure the new school building had room for such resources.

Nearly 70 percent of the school's 506 students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals,

but since the pandemic, the district has been providing free meals to all students. This past year, the school building was open for hybrid learning and students received free iPads. In September, if families couldn't pick up the devices when they were first made available, Hron drove a school vehicle to deliver them at home. She also provided much-needed tech support. "We have a lot of families that are multigenerational," she says, "and the grandpas and grandmas really struggled with technology."

About 35 percent of King's students identify as Native American; many live on the Leech Lake Reservation 25 miles from the school. Hron has built strong relationships with several families there, including one former student, who just finished third grade. Hron remembers the day this student, then in kindergarten, came to her in pain. The little girl said her teeth hurt, and as her teacher, Hron decided to drive to her house on the reservation and speak to her mother. Hron learned there were barriers to the family accessing dental care, including transportation. After Hron explained that the student needed to see a dentist and promised to take her and help fill out the paperwork for the visit, the mother agreed.

"There is a lot of generational poverty, generational trauma and historical trauma within the Native American community," Hron says. As such, mental health partnerships with organizations like North Homes Children and Family Services are especially important at King and were already in place long before it became a community

school. Hron says nearly a fourth of the students see three mental health practitioners and one therapist who work in the school, thanks to a partnership with a mental health organization in neighboring Grand Rapids. The school also employs a full-time social worker. “Deanna is someone I work with every single day,” says Jennifer Stefan, King’s principal for the past six years. She and Hron talk regularly about what the school can do to help students succeed.

“We know that when our families don’t have transportation, don’t have food security, that’s directly going to impact their and their students’ achievement.”

Part of Hron’s job then is picking up students, who live within 25 miles of the school, after they’ve missed the bus and have no other way to get to school. Her efforts have often paid off. For instance, one second-grader, who missed many school days in kindergarten, now regularly attends. “Something clicked in the family” says Hron, who estimates she has given the girl 40 rides to school.

Stefan also knows this family well and is delighted they have responded to the school’s compassion and care. “You just can’t ever give up with this work,” she says. “There’s always one more step that you can take.”

Lessons Learned

- Reach out to community schools in your state to find out how their model works and see if their approach

holds lessons for your own school or district

- Contact state affiliates for support with implementation and grant funding for your community school.
- Remember that a community school is an effective strategy in addressing the needs of rural communities and Native American students and families.
- Persevere in building relationships with students and families, and be patient in partnering with them.

Rochester Public Schools

Since Riverside Central Elementary School became a full-service community school seven years ago, the Rochester school district has embraced the model to align school and community resources for student success. Three other schools—Gage Elementary, John Marshall High School and Rochester Alternative Learning Center (ALC)—are also community schools. (Gage adopted the model at the same time as Riverside). And a fourth, Phoenix Academy, a school for students with emotional and behavioral challenges, will become one in fall 2021. “They’ve been able to really galvanize strong relationships with community partners and businesses,” says Robin Wonsley Worlobah, a community organizer with Education Minnesota.

Rochester’s deep experience with community schools stems from its years of refining and enhancing the strategy, making it a leading member of the

state’s community schools coalition. Community school coordinators in the district, called site facilitators, have provided technical assistance to many coalition partner schools across the state, especially those that are new to the model and just beginning to conduct their community needs assessment for establishing a community school.

About a one-hour drive south of the Twin Cities, Rochester boasts the state’s seventh-largest school district and is home to the acclaimed Mayo Clinic. Each community school in the district partners with at least 30 for-profit, nonprofit and volunteer organizations, such as the United Way, the YMCA, Channel One Regional Food Bank, Olmstead County Health and Human Services, the Boys and Girls Club, the Strive Together Network in Rochester known as Cradle to Career, the Mayo Clinic and the Quarry Hill Nature Center.

The Mayo Clinic even staffs a full-service health clinic inside the district’s ALC. Each school also houses family resource rooms where students and families can access basic-needs items such as food, toiletries, hygiene products, shoes and clothing, as well as interact with community partners.

Because the pandemic restricted access to these rooms and so much else when it came to in-person supports, Rochester’s community schools pivoted by connecting virtually with families. “But we also took our show on the road,” says Julie Ruzek, the district’s coordinator of family and community partnerships. This past school year, site facilitators made

thousands of visits to porches and doorsteps with deliveries for students and families. The district even purchased a fleet of minivans so site facilitators and staff members at all district schools could drive supplies out into the community. Site facilitators have long advocated for such transportation. “We have discovered we have to go to our families,” Ruzek says. “We can’t continue to expect our families to go to us.”

District administrators brought the idea of community schools to the city several years ago, according to Dan Kuhlman, president of the Rochester Education Association. After touring community schools elsewhere, they saw their potential for ensuring students had access to what “they felt were barriers for these kids.”

After community school grant funding from the state ran out in 2018, the district absorbed the cost of maintaining site facilitators.

“And then we leaned heavily on our local United Way for partnership and backbone support,” Ruzek says.

The job of a site facilitator, she explains, is really to play air traffic controller for a school’s myriad programs and partnerships. “It can’t fall on the building principal.” To that end, the site facilitator is a key member of each school’s community school leadership team, made up of students, staff, families and community partners. Teams meet regularly to make decisions about funding, to review data, and ultimately to provide leadership and direction for the building. Lida Casper has been Riverside’s site facilitator since 2016. She says the school’s downtown location has particularly lent itself to partnering with nearby organizations. “We’re right where all the action is.” Walking trails and city parks are nearby, and the Mayo Clinic is just down the street as is the University of Minnesota extension campus,

where Riverside students and teachers often take tours.

The Title I school is also a newcomer center for children moving to the United States from all over the world, with many coming straight from refugee camps. Once they reach a certain level of proficiency in English at Riverside, these students then leave to attend their neighborhood school.

Perhaps the biggest—and most beautiful—display of the school’s rich diversity and sense of community is a mural painted by students on the side of the school. The mural, which was completed in 2019, stemmed from a collaboration between the school and the Turnaround Arts program of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The national program supports schools in engaging students in rigorous arts education. A community needs assessment was the catalyst for gearing the school toward the program, after it found that many students and families of color wanted greater access to the arts.

“The Riverside Identity Project: A Community Mural” grew from this program. Thanks to donations and grants totaling \$60,000, students worked with Greta McLain, a professional artist and one of the creators of the famous sunflower mural of George Floyd in Minneapolis. With McLain’s guidance, students painted vibrant scenes of children from diverse cultures and backgrounds learning and playing together. The school also took pieces of the mural to the local farmers market so community members could paint



Photo Credit: D. Marie Ferguson
www.dm-create.com

it as well. Julie Ruzek says that when the project began, one of the school's goals "was really to get to know their neighbors, celebrate the arts, and embed themselves within the community, and it did just that."

Lessons Learned

- Partner with institutions and organizations right in your school's neighborhood to maximize community resources and ensure students and school staff feel connected to the larger community.
- Reach out to families directly and meet them at their homes.
- Don't underestimate the power of the arts and arts education to foster a sense of community and identity.
- Seek funding from local community partners if state funding streams run out.

Brooklyn Center Community Schools

About 10 miles from Minneapolis is Brooklyn Center, a suburban metro area whose school district has fully implemented community schools. In 2009, Brooklyn Center became Minnesota's first full-service community school district. The superintendent at the time was known for out-of-the-box thinking and implemented the model with the support of educators and community partners.

Today, the district enrolls around 1,800 students who attend its three schools—an elementary school, a middle and high school

on a shared campus, and an early college academy—that are all full-service community schools. From the start of their implementation, two classrooms within the middle and high school campus were converted into a health resource center thanks to a \$250,000 donation from the Park Nicollet Foundation. The center offers dental, vision, sexual health and primary care to anyone in the district. More than 50 organizations, such as the Annex Teen Clinic, Crow River Family Services, the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth, Timber Bay Youth Outreach Organization, and the City of Brooklyn Center Parks and Recreation, partner with Brooklyn Center's full-service community schools to offer a variety of supports. For instance, many of the expanded learning opportunities, such as after-school programming and tutoring, are the result of the federal 21st Century Learning Center grant.

More than 85 percent of students in the district qualify for free and reduced-price meals, more than 90 percent are students of color, and around 30 percent are English language learners. "It is a low-income community," says Renee Starr, the district's community schools manager. "And because of the racial and cultural makeup, it's a community that is facing systemic racism."

In April 2021, the fatal police shooting of Daunte Wright, an unarmed Black man, shook the entire city. It also directly affected Brooklyn Center Middle and High School since the campus sits directly across from

the police department. When protests broke out in front of the department, "we definitely as a district went into crisis response," Starr says. After neighborhood stores closed their doors in response to the unrest (some businesses were too damaged to open), local community organizers asked the school district to operate a distribution center for essential items. School officials allocated space in "the Blue Barn," a detached gym on the middle and high school campus. Starr was among several district employees and educators who helped staff the barn, along with 100 volunteers, including high school students.

"We saw civics and math in action," said Sizi Goyah, a math teacher at Brooklyn Center Middle and High School, in a recent article published in Minnesota Educator.⁴ "Students helped sort and pack and load vehicles. They had an action learning in what it means to be a human, learning social justice which is social studies, being a part of history. We also were doing math, by fulfilling orders and calculating what was going to run out."

Starr estimates that for two weeks after the shooting, about 1,500 people came each day for free food, diapers, paper products, toiletries and other basic needs items, which were donated by the school district's long-standing community partners.

During this time, the school buildings, which had just reopened for hybrid learning in the wake of the pandemic, closed for three days so the district could ensure everyone's safety. "It was kind of like a war zone at night," says Education Minnesota President Denise Specht, who went to Brooklyn Center in the middle of the protests. "There was a military presence." She recalls how the day she visited, the school parking lot was a nonstop drive-through with teachers wearing reflective gear and directing traffic so cars could move in and out to pick up necessities at the Blue Barn.

"Every single night, there was tear gas and rubber bullets," Starr says. "It was loud and scary for the young ones." The events were especially traumatic for families living in apartment buildings located right across the street from the police station. Starr remembers being on FaceTime with one mother in a first-floor garden apartment who showed Starr the crowd assembled on her patio. Protesters would try to find relief by huddling onto people's property, and the woman and her children were frightened. When Starr told the mother the district was paying for community members who felt unsafe to seek shelter at hotels, she accepted the offer.

To pay for lodging, the district had launched a GoFundMe account, which raised more than \$140,000. "We were able to use those funds to put roughly 20 to 30 families into temporary housing," Starr says. The district is now working with one of its

longtime partners, the [Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth](#), to establish a youth advisory committee that will decide how to use the remaining funds to continue supporting the Brooklyn Center community.

Starr says the district was poised to respond to this crisis not only because of its authentic partnerships with people and organizations who share the same vision but also because of a specific mindset. "It's the mindset that we respond to needs outside of academics, and work together on behalf of our students and families."



Lessons Learned

- Leverage long-standing partnerships to effectively respond to any community crisis.
- Engage students in the school's work of supporting the larger community so they can learn the value of collaboration, volunteerism and community partnerships.
- Mobilize the school community to fight against systemic racism and advocate for racial justice.
- Implement the community school model districtwide to align strategic partnerships and ensure that all district schools share the same vision for responding to student and family needs.

Conclusion

In Minnesota, the full-service community school model has succeeded in a variety of settings. Whether they are in urban, suburban or rural locations, community schools share a coordinated vision around meeting the needs of the whole child. Although that vision is implemented in different ways, the goal remains the same: to ensure students and families are surrounded by support.

It is easy to take for granted how much of a hub a school really is. In the wake of the pandemic, many people finally began to see just how much community schools provide their communities—from food and information to technological devices and internet access for education. Community schools thus are uniquely situated to meet the needs of students and families because they take nothing—and no one—for granted.

Education Minnesota Community School Coalition Partners

- City of Minneapolis
- Isaiah
- Minnesota Coalition of Full-Service Community Schools
- Minnesota Department of Education
- Minneapolis Parks and Recreation
- Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation
- Unidos MN

Endnotes

- 1 https://www.educationminnesota.org/EDMN/media/edmn-files/advocacy/EPIC/EPIC-community-schools-report_3.pdf
- 2 See for example “Research Reveals the Benefits of Community Schools” in <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin>.
- 3 <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>
- 4 <https://www.educationminnesota.org/news/minnesota-educator/2020-21/05-21/Brooklyn-Center-educators-go-above,-beyond-for-com>

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Item number: 39-0721001

7/21