

**HONORING**

*Ernie Piccolo*



MN Association of  
Charter Schools

**2024 MINNESOTA CHARTER SCHOOL  
ADVOCATE AWARD RECIPIENT**



# HONORING

# Eugene Piccolo



*Eugene circa 2005*

Eugene Piccolo's first major act as Executive Director of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (MACS) was to sign an accountability agreement on behalf of the organization. Years of mismanagement and questionable practices had left MACS in a state of disarray. In order to salvage the non-profit, Eugene would call upon his years as an educator, his extensive administrative experience, and a fiery personality that refused to recognize defeat.

Over the next 18 years, Eugene would more than revive the organization. Blessed with a talented staff – most notably his long-time Associate Director, Tom DeGree – MACS would become the preeminent charter school organization in the state of Minnesota and a model of excellence for other aspiring associations across the nation. Based strictly on a membership model with no outside special interests, MACS would grow to nearly 120 schools strong. Once MACS recovered from its financial difficulties and established a healthy fund balance, Eugene did the unthinkable: he reduced membership fees several years in a row. Such was the value to charter school directors and boards that they gladly would have paid double, Eugene believed fervently that as many taxpayer dollars as possible should be allocated directly to the betterment of students.



*MACS Annual Meeting (2008)*



*Charter School Day at the Capitol (2009)*

**FROM FRIENDS & COLLEAGUES:**

*"We are saddened with news of the passing of Eugene Piccolo, a former Assistant Commissioner with our agency and a champion of charter school standards and accountability. His passion for education has left a positive impact on all who knew him."*

**- Willie Jett, MN  
Commissioner of Education**

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*"In 1996 I asked Eugene to join our leadership team as an assistant commissioner responsible for creating systems to bring grades 11 and 12 and post secondary education together especially at the technical college level. Minnesota's post secondary enrollment options program provided for that for students but few district or chartered schools saw this as a way to actually organize secondary education. His early competent work provided the needed impetus to what is now commonplace. He*

*was a pioneer in so many ways."*

**- Bob Wedl, former MN  
Commissioner of Education**

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*"From his candor at our very first meeting in my first days, our shared love of our Iron Range roots, to his trust in me and our larger collective partnership navigating teaching and learning amidst the pandemic, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work alongside Eugene Piccolo while I was commissioner of education. Last fall when he told me of his retirement we talked about the future and I am crestfallen at his passing."*

**- Mary Cathryn Ricker,  
former MN Commissioner of  
Education**

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*"Such sad news. Eugene was a tremendous champion for children. My condolences to his family and many friends in the*

*MN education community. He touched many lives and he will be missed."*

**- Dr. Brenda Cassellius,  
former MN Commissioner of  
Education**

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*"Eugene Piccolo was a true chartering pioneer and visionary. He worked to preserve the origins of chartering in Minnesota as they were meant to be: small, independent schools creating innovative ways to meet student needs. Our charter sector in Minnesota stayed strong for over 30 years because of his leadership at the legislature and in community. He will be greatly missed."*

**- Ember Reichgott Junge,  
former MN State Senator,  
lead author of first charter  
legislation in the US (MN)**

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**Annual Meeting (2010) with Rep. Linda Slocum**

*"I adored Eugene because of his grasp of education law and his willingness to mentor me. I loved 'fixing the world' laughs and conversations with him. He was a special person. Eugene and I spent many hours crafting the Charter School reform Bill in 2009. We also enjoyed long phone and in person times telling Catholic School stories, teaching stories and fixing the Universe."*

**- Rep. Linda Slocum, former MN State Representative, current MACS Board Member**

*"Eugene was indispensable in making the charter sector work, here in Minnesota; getting MACS straightened around and running it so sensibly for so many years after that. He had exactly the right concept of chartering and of the role of the state association."*

**- Ted Kolderie, Education Evolving**

*"Eugene was a relentless and devoted champion for positive change in education, a guy who never thought about himself and always worked to build new alliances to get the work done, no matter what conventions he broke. What a loss, but what a blessing to have known him."*

**- Jeanne Allen, Executive Director at Center for Education Reform**

*"Eugene was one of our longest serving state association leaders. He was one of the few to push me/NAPCS to think differently and more aggressively about our role as a national convener. We may not have agreed at all times but Eugene was always respectful and authentic in his approach to the work. The MN charter sector lost a key ally but the nation lost a dedicated advocate for innovation and*

*equity in public education and a dear friend!"*

**- Nina Rees, former Executive Director at National Alliance for Public Charter Schools**

*"I had the pleasure of serving as the board chair of the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools under Eugene Piccolo from 2020-2023. During that time I learned so much from Eugene about charter schools, both in Minnesota and across the nation. I always looked forward to sitting down for a cup of coffee with Eugene because I knew his passion for charter schools and choice would come pouring out and I would leave wiser, more knowledgeable and with a smile on my face."*

**- Peter Wiczorek, Director at Northwest Passage High School, former MACS Board Chair**



**Annual Meeting (2018)  
with Darius Husain (left)  
& Ted Kolderie (middle)**

*"During the greatest education crisis in a generation, Eugene was able to evolve the organization to meet the needs of leaders and provide them a network of connection and support during the pandemic.*

*Eugene inherited an organization that was in disarray and through his guidance developed MACS into one of the most respected Charter entities in the nation.*

*While a champion for Charter Schools, his advocacy did not come without expectation. Eugene challenged leaders to effectively govern and implement the best version of their schools.*

*In a movement fiercely protective of its independence and autonomy, Eugene was the unifying and go to voice of the 180+ Charter schools in Minnesota."*

**- Darius Husain, Executive Director at Face to Face Academy, former MACS Board Chair**

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*"Eugene was a champion for racial equity and so supportive of diverse voices being in the room to shape education policy."*

**- Jennifer Godinez, former Deputy Director at MN Education Equity Partnership**

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*"Eugene was not just a pioneer in the charter school movement in Minnesota; to me, he was a mentor and an embodiment of what it means to advocate for educational choice and innovation. His passion for empowering charter leaders and students alike touched many lives, including mine, leaving a legacy of inspired individuals*

*committed to continuing his work. Remembering Eugene, I am profoundly grateful for his mentorship and his lasting impact on the charter movement, encouraging us to always strive for innovation, equity, and what's best for kids."*

**- Brandon Wait, Director at Paladin Career & Technical High School**

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*"I think what was most remarkable about Eugene is that he was a behind the scenes advocate for families seeking equitable public school options. A gracious, inclusive, and witty leader who organized people with diverse agendas in the pursuit of what is best for children."*

**- Joan Arbisi Little, former Executive Director at Career Pathways**

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**Public Policy Forum (2010)**

*"Eugene Piccolo was a strong and effective leader during tough times for charter schools. He gave professional advice to us all and well-deserved smart-ass reactions to detractors. I have an understanding of Gene's challenges as Director of MACS having been the Director for a year during our early days."*

**- Dr. Wayne Jennings, MN chartered public school founder**

*"Eugene served as the executive director of the [Minnesota Association of Charter Schools](#) for nearly two decades and was among the most effective state charter leaders nationally. He successfully navigated Minnesota's mercurial politics and courageously eschewed conventional thinking when it went off course. Thanks to the hard work of Eugene and his colleagues, Minnesota's charter sector remains the [nation's most vibrant](#), with robust and sustained growth, [high levels of innovation](#) in instructional and school leadership*

*practices, [innovative teacher leadership models](#), innovative and robust [authorizing](#) practices, and bipartisan political support."*

**- Eric Premack, Founder & Executive Director at Charter Schools Development Center California**

*"Eugene Piccolo was a trailblazer in charter school advocacy, both in terms of what he contributed in Minnesota over his decades of service, and in terms of the example that he created for advocates in other states. His breadth of knowledge about all things charter, and his ability to acquaint the next generation of charter school leaders with a deep understanding of past policy breakthroughs constantly positioned Minnesota's charter school community to be well prepared for the next chapter of advocacy challenge and opportunity. His legacy is tens of thousands of Minnesota students having received better educations than they otherwise would have and a community of*

*schools in Minnesota poised to have even greater impact in the years to come."*

**- Jed Wallace, former Executive Director at Charter School Association, Director at Charter Folk**



**Awards Luncheon (2018) with Tracy Quarnstrom**

*"I worked with Eugene on many different committees and always appreciated his expertise and knowledge on those committees. I find it amazing that he was still able to be the first person you could call if you had a question or a need as a director for so many of us."*

**- Tracy Quarnstrom, Executive Director at MN Online High School**

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*"When I first met Eugene, his knowledge of education in general and charters in particular was evident (and at first was a bit overwhelming). As I had opportunities to seek guidance on tough situations and to work with him on the MACS board, his passion for furthering chartered public schools was evident in every conversation. He continued to champion integrity, equity, transparency, and changes that would provide for strong charter schools for future generations. And tucked into the work were so many great stories from his days with the Catholic Schools, working at the state, and all of the efforts that went into setting MACS on the right track. We are fortunate to have received the benefits of his labor of love and he will be missed dearly."*

**- Shelly Pierson Evans,  
Executive Director at North  
Shore Community School,  
MACS Board Chair**

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*"He was an incredibly passionate charter school advocate! And*

*underneath his seriousness he truly had a contagious laugh! I am grateful for all I have learned from him during the years and wish I could have more years to continue to learn from him!"*

**- Katie Groh de Avina,  
Executive Director at El  
Colegio High School, MACS  
Board Member**

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*"I appreciated that he demonstrated his care for the work of charter schools by working so hard to hold charter schools to a high standard with respect to our board governance practices and financial accountability."*

**- Jodi Dansingburg, Director  
at Ridgeway Learning  
Community, former MACS  
Board Member**

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*"Beyond his role in getting MACS to the position it now has on behalf of chartering in Minnesota -- with the media, policy leaders and the general public -- I will remember Eugene as the one*

*who put 'Innovation' into the organization's mission and on its letterhead and office door."*

**- Jon Schroeder, former  
MACS Board Member**

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***Awards Luncheon (2023)  
with Rep. Linda Slocum  
(left) & Joe Nathan (right)***

*"Eugene was a model of modesty, effectiveness, and integrity. He brought out the best in many of us. He showed how to navigate complex challenging situations. He did what great educators do - helping us - his students - accomplish more than we thought possible. We - educators, families, students - are far better off because he was here, preparing us for what's next."*

**- Joe Nathan, Center for  
School Change**

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*"Our hearts broke when we learned that Eugene had passed, two short months after he retired. A flood of memories ensued, and it seems almost inept to attempt to encapsulate more than twenty years of knowing someone like Eugene, from the professional to the personal.*

*Professionally, Eugene was a passionate advocate for the industry and the charter schools his organization represented – and which he felt he personally represented. He and I testified for and against each other’s positions at*

*the legislature more times than I can count – more for than against – but we always left respecting each other’s viewpoint. When the Minnesota Department of Education invited stakeholders to a working session on developing its High-Quality charter school framework, the MDE assigned Eugene and me to the same breakout table, along with other stakeholders, including Darius Husain, the extraordinary leader of Face to Face Academy. During the various discussion items, Eugene and I were robustly advocating our positions – some might say spitting tacks at each other – but at the break, Eugene asked about my children, I asked about his niece at the prestigious Berklee College of Music, an obvious point of pride with Gene. Darius was surprised and said, 'That was pretty intense in there. I thought you two hated each other.' We laughed, and Eugene said, 'No – that’s work. We’re good friends.' This memory epitomizes Eugene for me: a passionate advocate who never held anything back but who always respected others.*



*Personally, we frequently talked and periodically met for dinner. When he learned that one of my children had cancer, he seemed almost as devastated as I was and always asked about her. While Gene was an intensely private person, he regularly and unabashedly shared stories of his family and heritage. We most recently met just two weeks before he passed. He had purchased a new computer and was excited to thoroughly catalog and document his ancestry for his relatives and was planning a heritage trip to Italy. In a rare moment of personal reveal, Gene shared his faith, his belief in the afterlife and what comes next. I’ve reflected on that conversation many times in the past week, as so many people have remarked that it is such a shame that he passed so soon after retirement, that he didn’t really get to enjoy retirement. Our hearts break for what we have lost, but I hold on to what he said he believed: that he is enjoying the best retirement of all."*

**- Beth Topoluk, Executive Director at Friends of Education**





***MACS Annual Meeting (2015)***

One arena where Eugene demonstrated his talents was at the Capital. He loved the legislative body and personally connecting with his colleagues on the Hill. Eugene would work with anyone across the political spectrum to support the issues most dear to the charter school community. In this regard, there was no one like him or with his tenacity. Nearly every positive change in Minnesota's charter school law since its inception can be linked to a MACS initiative.

In a movement protective of its independence and autonomy, Eugene's greatest marvel was becoming the unifying and unquestioned voice of the many charter schools incorporated throughout the state. While a champion for charters, his advocacy did not come without expectation. Eugene challenged school leaders to effectively govern and implement the best version of their schools possible. These impassioned conversations were often delivered with no room for error if you were on the wrong side of the right answer. However, within his feisty temperament was a tender, compassionate, and joyful spirit whose laughter could carry you into tomorrow.

Eugene's generosity was most evident in his close connections and friendships with a host of education leaders, both statewide and nationally. Brandon Wait, long-time Executive Director of Paladin Career & Technical Charter School, adeptly summarized these critical relationships: "Eugene was not just a pioneer in the charter school movement in Minnesota; to me, he was a mentor... I am profoundly grateful for his mentorship and his lasting impact on the charter movement, encouraging us to always strive for innovation, equity, and what's best for kids."

Eugene persevered through numerous medical scares the past few years, and those close to him urged him to take a step back from his considerable duties at MACS. Accordingly, Eugene recently retired from his position this past December and, after years of distinguished service, the hope was he would be able to enjoy the fruits of his labors. In his sunset, Eugene had more travel in mind and he believed he was not done making a difference in the lives of others. This final chapter wasn't meant to be. Fittingly, he encouraged all charter school leaders to have a plan in place in case one day they could no longer serve. While his loss is wide reaching, Eugene's legacy will remain through the continued work of MACS and in the hearts of each charter school that endeavors to provide the best possible education and unconditional regard for every student and family that walks through it's doors.



***Annual Meeting (2022); Eugene circa 2018; Eugene circa 2022***



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[mncharterschools.org](http://mncharterschools.org)