

## Foreword

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The early roots of education began in the humble one-room schoolhouse where “school marms” taught children their ABCs, arithmetic and history. These small schools dotted the rural landscape all across the nation. Although unpretentious and lacking in the sophisticated educational theory and pedagogy of today, these schools educated hundreds of thousands of children who in turn built vibrant towns and cities, grew the food that fed our nation and created thousands upon thousands of small and large businesses that met the needs of ever more prosperous citizens.

Fast forward one hundred years, and we see a rural economy dramatically changed. Large corporate farms have replaced the family farm, businesses and services have moved to regional and urban centers, the local grocer and bakery have been replaced by large, multi-service “super” markets, and fiberglass cable and wireless networks are the new highway of today.

Rural Minnesota must redefine and reinvent itself, and our schools will once again be at the heart of this new challenge. One of these challenges is keeping rural schools viable as the population ages and people, especially younger adults, move to larger regional centers for jobs.

To address this decline, many school districts in the 1970s and 1980s combined and consolidated. We went from 438 school districts in 1978 to 342 in 2006. Yet we still have 230 school districts with fewer than 500 students, kindergarten through 12th grade. We probably will see more of these consolidations, but at some point this will not be an option if students must travel long distances to get to school. As schools become smaller and more isolated, they become less able to offer the breadth of curricular opportunities, which in turn results in less well-educated students.

The bright spot, however, is that many immigrant families are coming to Minnesota and going to small rural communities to work

and live. This has actually helped some school districts remain open. Of course, immigrant families bring special needs with them. They must learn English, learn about our laws and culture and be accepted and assimilated into communities who have been mainly white with western European heritage.

Aging buildings dating back to the 1900s also dot the rural landscape. Remodeling is not an option for most of these structures, and they lack the technological infrastructure that could provide educational opportunities through online learning and interactive TV.

While these challenges seem daunting, I am heartened as I travel throughout Minnesota to see the collaboration and creativity being generated as teachers, school boards and parents reinvent education in rural Minnesota.

New buildings centrally located among several old districts and outfitted with the latest technological equipment are providing educational opportunities to students miles away in another school. And even though rural schools struggle to maintain enrollment, small class sizes and more personal attention are great strengths that larger districts have a harder time offering.

As a state, however, we must assure that all regions of our state are able to have the same technological access, breadth and depth of educational coursework and safe, modern buildings for their children. We must continue to explore new funding methodologies for the building and operating of small, isolated schools and explore the ever-expanding online opportunities that will give students access to world languages like Mandarin Chinese and college-level classes.

But even as we work to assure the continued viability of our small rural schools, they will only survive if we have a reinvented, redesigned and diverse rural economy.

I am grateful that the Center for Rural Policy and Development has created the *Rural Minnesota Journal* and has chosen to focus on "Educating Rural Minnesota's Children." It is important to have a resource that assembles the best research, expertise and thinkers so that policymakers and citizens can have a broad-based look at the opportunities, challenges and potential solutions for rural schools.

As Commissioner of Education, I welcome this much-needed resource as we seek to give every child in Minnesota the best education possible.