

# Questioning Conventional Wisdom About Minnesota's Public Schools

Joe Nathan & Laura Accomando

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This article goes “against the grain” of much that has been written about improving public education in the last five years. Is there something wrong with the emphasis on the “achievement gap” in studies about Minnesota education priorities? Might rural communities like Canby, Clinton, Graceville, Pierz, Lamberton, Lewiston and Lyle have things to teach affluent Minnesota suburbs, as well as inner cities? Can highly successful inner city public schools, district and charter, teach Minnesota important lessons? Are some of us misunderstanding certain lessons about the impact of high-quality early childhood education programs? For Minnesota to make significant progress, should we go beyond the constant demand for more educational funding?

This article argues that the answer to each of these questions is “yes.” Moreover, Minnesota’s leadership and success with many students may, as has happened in the past, make big changes more difficult. Yet, as Abraham Lincoln once noted, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present” (Lincoln). We need more ambitious goals, and significant institutional changes to reach those goals.

## Where should we be heading?

This article will suggest that a new model of public education should have as its central goals within the next five years:

1. Completion of some form of post-secondary education, two or four years, by at least 95% of Minnesota students within six years of the time they graduate from high school.
2. 95% of students who enter Minnesota public colleges and universities fully prepared in reading, writing and math for this work.
3. 75% of all Minnesota high school students taking at least one

college-level course prior to high school graduation, be it via AP, International Baccalaureate, College in the Schools or PSEO.

4. Completion by all students of a service learning project before they graduate from high school.
5. Increase in the replication of successful district and charter public school models.
6. Full funding of high-quality early childhood education programs for all students from low-income families

These goals are similar but not identical to those identified by the Governor's Education Council earlier in 2007. The Council, including the President of the University of Minnesota, Chancellor of the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System, Commissioner of Education, head of the Minnesota Private College Council, Minnesota Business Partnership and others, recommended among other things that:

- All students should take and master academic competencies in four areas by 2014.
- 100% of Minnesota students should "achieve a score defined as "college ready" by ACT for all four indicators (mathematics, English, biology and social sciences).
- 100% of students should graduate from high school.
- The number of students who take post-secondary remedial courses, and graduate within three to six years in post-secondary institutions, should be measured and reported to the public (Minnesota Department of Education, pp. 4-11).

These are extremely ambitious goals (i.e. 100% of students graduating from high school, 100% of students being college ready as defined by ACT).

However, the specificity of goals like these responds to recommendations from Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based research group that has studied what it calls "Post-Secondary Attainment" extensively. JFF urges states to:

- "Set a small number of realistic but ambitious goals — and then create a concise action plan delineating roles, responsibilities and a timeline.
- Disaggregate goals by population subgroups to emphasize the importance of progress that is equitable.
- Relate goals logically and clearly to the problems the state wants to address.

- Inform the public of the status of statewide higher education goals, instead of reporting solely on goals set for individual institutions.
- Use public agenda and awareness campaigns to build and sustain both public and political will and to reach out to populations that are traditionally under-represented in higher education” (Collins, p. IV).

Assuming that the reader agrees with at least some of the goals proposed above, the next question becomes: What are the key strategies to help Minnesota accomplish them? Do we need major system change, or will more money and modest changes get us there?

Evidence is presented below that the most important strategies for Minnesota’s public education system are:

- Fully fund high-quality early childhood education programs for children from low-income and limited English speaking families.
- Require that students participate in at least one research-based learning/community service project during elementary, middle and high school years.
- Replicate the most successful district and charter public schools in the state and nation.
- Expect that virtually all students will take at least one college (academic or vocation) level course prior to graduating from high school

Money can be helpful, but it is not enough. One study by a Harvard and MIT professor examined 16 elementary schools, each of which was given an extra \$1.5 million over a five-year period. Their goals were to increase achievement and academic test scores. There was little, if any progress in 14 of the 16 schools. Two showed major progress. The authors concluded that money was not enough to produce major improvements. Major changes were needed to produce significant progress (Murnane & Levy).

In this spirit, Governor Tim Pawlenty observed in his 2007 State of the State speech that:

Too many of our high school students today are engaged in academic loitering for much of their high school careers. In too many cases, our high school students are bored, checked out, coasting, not even vaguely aware of their post-high school plans,

if they have any, and they are just marking time. It's costing us a lot of money and it's costing them their future. This is a silent crisis and it has the potential to devastate our future prosperity if we don't fix it (Pawlenty).

Among other things, the Governor proposed that *all* students earn some college credits while still in high school.

In responding to the Governor's comments, a state task force convened by the Minnesota Association of Secondary Principals recommended: "The new vision for Minnesota's high schools should be to prepare every student to earn a credential or a degree at a post-secondary educational institution — whether it is a technical school, two-year college, or four-year college or university" (Future of High Schools Task Force, p. 3).

This author agrees with that vision. It is a wise, worthy and dramatically different goal for Minnesota high schools. But vision is not enough. Policies and well-developed, skillfully implemented strategies must be in place. And we have to be honest about what is and is not being accomplished.

In reacting to Governor Pawlenty and an earlier statement by Microsoft Chair Bill Gates, a Minnesota Secondary School Principals Task Force wrote:

Over the course of our discussions in early 2007, we agreed that the depiction of high schools offered by Minnesota's governor and the world's richest man fails to reflect many of the positive realities of the schools we lead. Each day we work with talented and dedicated teachers who bring literature, science, math and many other subjects to life for students — too often while managing class loads of more than 170 students at a time. Their commitment and their successes should be acknowledged and celebrated (Future of High Schools Task Force, p. 1).

The Task Force went on to list accomplishments of many Minnesota high schools, including high graduation rates and American College Testing Service scores that are among the highest in the nation (Future of High Schools Task Force, pp. 1-2).

Yes, Minnesota ranks near the top in the U.S. on many measures (but not all, as we shall see below). However, complacency can be a problem. Failing to see the whole picture can produce partial solutions.

Minnesota's secondary school principals did acknowledge changes were needed, noting, "Anyone who has read the typical

high school course catalog knows that most high schools lack a clear vision for what students will do after graduation” (Future of High Schools Task Force).

The challenges we face are *not* just the lack of a clear vision. And the challenges are *not* just the racial and economic class achievement gap that is constantly raised in Minnesota.

One recent example illustrates the constant focus on the racial and social disparities in student achievement: *Mind the Gap*, produced by Brookings Institution, with support from some of Minnesota’s most powerful groups (including the state’s largest foundation) and a collaboration of major state businesses and the University of Minnesota. This report is often cited and is intended to help set the state’s agenda. *Mind the Gap* asserts, among other things that “The Twin Cities has a lot to be proud of. But it’s the story that these large, aggregate numbers do not tell that is of concern” (Sohmer, et. al p. 9).

The report stresses “The overall health of the region masks stark disparities. And such disparities matter to economic competitiveness.” The report concludes, “If ignored, growing race, class and place disparities will hamper the region’s future workforce and overall economic health” (Sohmer).

Yes, Minnesota has dramatic racial and economic disparities. But there are also stunning records of academic under-achievement in places of considerable wealth, with little racial diversity. While considerable attention is focused on the achievement gap, there are major issues in college preparation with a range of students of *all* races. Despite what *Mind the Gap* says, this also should be “of concern.”

### **Being Clear About where Minnesota is Now**

Where are we now in terms of college readiness, enrollment and graduation? Yes, there is an achievement gap:

- 80% of white Minnesota students graduate from high school in four years, compared with 40% of American Indian students, 68% of Asian students, 38% of African-American students and 39% of Hispanic students (Minnesota Department of Education, April, 2007).
- An examination of the scale scores of students on the third-grade mathematics Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) shows a persistent achievement gap between students of color and white Non-Hispanic students. Over the course of the six years that the exam has been given, “there

has been little to no progress in closing the achievement gap" (MMEP, p. 23).

- Disaggregated graduation rates at Minnesota four-year institutions show that 60% of white students graduated in 2003 (compared to a four-year graduation rate of 52% in 2000,) 47% of Hispanic students graduated in four years in 2003, compared to 45% in 2000, 38% of African-American students graduated in four years in 2003, the same rate as 2000, 53% of Asian-American students graduated in four years in 2003, compared with 49% in 2000, and 26% of American Indian students graduated in four years in 2003, compared with 29% in 2000 (MMEP).

Some schools in unexpected parts of Minnesota are doing a far better job of preparing students. But before discussing these students, let's examine statistics that are *not* found in reports like *Mind the Gap* or the Minnesota High School Principals Report.

For several years, the American College Testing program issued reports showing what percentage of college graduates who take their tests meet what they regard as an entry-level college benchmark in English Composition, College Algebra, Social Science and Biology. The standards reflect ACT's experience that a student has "a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in the corresponding credit-bearing college courses" (ACT, p. 3). Results for Minnesota's graduating class of 2007 are as follows:

- 31% met the benchmark in all four areas
- 38% met the benchmark in biology
- 62% met the benchmark in social science
- 86% met the benchmark in algebra, and
- 78% met the benchmark in English composition

ACT disaggregated the Minnesota data by race and found:

- 42% of white students, 63% of Hispanic students, and 84% of African-American students did not meet the math standard.
- 59% of white students, 80% of Hispanic students, and 93% of African-American students did not meet the science standard.
- 35% of white students, 55% of Hispanic students, and 74% of African-American students did not meet the reading standard.

- 19% of white students, 40% of Hispanic students, and 63% of African-American students did not meet the English standard
- Overall, only 33% of white students, 19% of Asian-American students, 17% of Hispanic students, 11% of Native American students, and 5% of African-American students met all four benchmarks (ACT).

While these data show a gap between white and students of color, they also show that substantial numbers of white students are not meeting the expected standards.

A study (Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System and University of Minnesota, 2005) showing results for *every* Minnesota public high school found:

- Overall, more than one third of students who graduated from Minnesota high schools in 2000-2003 and then entered a Minnesota public college or university took at least one remedial course in reading, writing or math (MnSCU, p. iii).
- Further analysis by the Center for School Change found that not a single Twin Cities metropolitan-area public high school (including none of the Twin Cities suburban public high schools) ranked in the top fifty of this report — the fifty public high schools with the *lowest* percentages of graduates taking remedial courses after entering Minnesota public colleges and universities (Nathan, 2005).

The Center for School Change also found that all fifty of the top high schools, using the criteria immediately above, are in greater Minnesota. Moreover, 45 of the 50 are quite small. (Some suburban superintendents correctly note a high percentage of their graduates attend private and/or out-of-state colleges and universities not covered by this study.)

Before learning more about the fifty high schools with the strongest records (using criteria cited above), it's worth reviewing a few other statistics. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education reports that:

- During the 2004-05 school year, approximately 20% of Minnesota high school seniors earned college credits before graduation.
- 65.3% of Minnesota's 2004 high school graduates were enrolled in some form of higher education the following fall.

- 36% of Minnesota students graduated from a four-year institution within four years of entering, and 57% of students graduated within six years.
- As of 2004, 35.8% of Minnesota students graduated from a two-year institution within three years of entering.
- As of 2004, 48.7% of Minnesota's young adults (ages 24-34) have either a two- or four-year degree.
- This percentage of young adults with a degree places Minnesota second in the nation (Minnesota Office of Higher Education, web-based report).

It is good to be highly ranked relative to other states. But when less than half of young adults have earned a degree, we are a long way from virtually all of our students having earned a degree.

A recent national report helps put Minnesota in fascinating perspective. This report notes that Minnesota ranks fifth of 50 states in high school graduation rate. But Minnesota ranks 25<sup>th</sup> in terms of "high school graduates' academic readiness for college" (Rocha and Sharkey, p. 5).

With support from the Blandin and Annenberg foundations, CSC staff visited seven of the 50 rural high schools that had the smallest percentage of graduates taking remedial courses after entering public colleges and universities. We found that these high schools had many of the characteristics researchers associated with high percentages of students attending college, regardless of family socio-economic status. This includes:

College culture in high school cultivates aspirations conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college. A strong college culture is tangible, pervasive and beneficial ... it includes academic momentum, an understanding of how college plans develop, a clear mission statement, comprehensive college services and coordinated and systemic college support ... the ideal college culture should be inclusive and accessible to all students (Zoe et. al. p. 3).

The authors recommended five key elements that would help indicate such a culture: academic momentum, an understanding of how college plans develop, a clear mission statement, comprehensive college services, and coordinated and systematic college support" (Corwin et. al, p. 3).



## Potential Models

We found many of these features present in the eight schools we visited. They included seven district schools and one charter public school. (Laura Accomando wrote seven reports. The Minnesota New Country School profile was written by Joe Nathan.) Here are brief snapshots:

### LEWISTON ALTURA HIGH SCHOOL

*“We have a whole emphasis on community learning and trying to create the curriculum that is going to best meet the needs of the students, what they’re doing and where they’re going. Our goal is to help the students become productive members and go on to do great things.”* — Lori Anderson, High School Counselor

Located in the small agricultural city of Lewiston (population 1,484), Lewiston Altura High School is the “backbone of the community,” says tenth-grader Lexi. “It’s good to know the teachers and community will support you.” The staff and community both have high expectations for students who attend the high school. “The community expectation is for students to continue to post-secondary education,” says community member Jim Ziegler. “Continuing your education garners respect, and the community keeps tabs on students who have graduated.” This strong community support for higher education is evident in the many and varied local scholarships offered to high school students. “Our focus is on having them prepared for college, not just on getting them through high school,” says Lori Anderson, high school counselor. “We really try to get the message across that having a high school diploma will not be competitive enough.” This message is not lost on the students. According to twelfth-grader Courtney Clark, “Our teachers and the community stress the importance of going to college, whether it’s a two-year or four-year. At least I know the community is behind me.

Student enrollment, grades 7–12: <b>362</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>52%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>20%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$7,247</b>

Education and college preparedness are clear priorities at Lewiston Altura High School. Personal relationships, however, are just as important. “We get to know the students and staff well because of the size of our school,” says Ann Gerth, high school math teacher. “Students seek advice from teachers, and they know we

understand them.” Chuck Penheiter, high school science teacher, says that knowing the students on a personal level has a clear effect on the courses that are offered. “We have a chance to design classes that students want, like the crime scene investigations class. The teachers here will do a lot of extra work for students.” When designing curriculum and course offerings, the staff also takes the input of former students into consideration, via an annual survey of recent graduates. “The curriculum is based on what students need,” says Penheiter.

Eleventh-grader Zane attributes student success to the small size of the high school. “We get to know the teachers, and we get a lot of help. One of the key components is a small, close environment. It goes back to that, everybody knows everybody.”

2006 Test Results: MCA-II Reading, grade 10: 76% passed (state average: 65%); MCA-II Math, grade 11: 37% passed (state average: 30%); BST Writing, grade 10: 96% passed (state average: 93%)

### CANBY HIGH SCHOOL

*“We always want students to do their best. We challenge them at a high level, and they have to work harder to get an ‘A.’ We have very high expectations.”* — Laurie Kallhoff, high school science teacher



The city of Canby (population 1,903) is very supportive of its high school. “There is a strong sense of pride in our community,” says community member Pete Schmitt. “We are proud of our community and we are proud of our high school. The students really get a sense of ownership

in their school because of it.” The school and community work together to assure that students stay involved and that community members are visible at the school. The high school makes space available for community events and occasionally hosts speakers or workshops, to which the public is invited. The community creates opportunities to keep students involved, such as service learning projects and volunteer programs. “In many ways the high school is the hub of the community,” says Craig Kaddatz, community member and vice president of the school board. “School activities are the whole social life for kids, and the community is definitely in touch

Student enrollment, grades 7–12: **329**  
Students continuing to higher education: **54%**  
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: **22%**  
Total funds spent per student: **\$8,891**

with that.”

Canby High School places a strong emphasis on caring about students. “It starts with the teachers,” says high school English teacher Gaye Winter.

“We have a good rapport

with each other, and that affects the way we work with students and the way students work with each other.” In many ways, the staff treats students as adults, rather than children. “We feel that teaching responsibility is just as important as teaching content,” says technology coordinator Dan Lutgen. Students often find themselves in leadership positions, which the staff feels builds character and reinforces many core values. These leadership roles do come with certain responsibilities, however, and the students are aware that the staff and community have high expectations for them. “The kids here have goals. They know we don’t just want them to show up, we want them to do something,” says Gary Stokes, local business owner and parent of a former student. The curriculum is rigorous, and the content of many of the courses offered at the high school is geared toward college preparation. “We’ve met with the [post-secondary] institutions and asked ‘What do you want these kids to know?’ We try to prepare the students for what happens beyond standardized testing, so they know the expectations colleges will have for them,” says Perry Fink, high school math teacher.

2006 Test Results: BST Writing, grade 10: 97% passed (state average: 93%)

## MINNESOTA NEW COUNTRY SCHOOL

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has given Minnesota New Country School (MNCS) more than \$7 million to help other communities replicate the school. It’s one more sign of confidence in a unique school that is attracting national attention.

MNCS serves about 120 students, grades 7-12. Students come from rural communities approximately 50-80 miles southwest of Minneapolis. Teachers in the school have organized themselves as a worker’s coop under Minnesota’s charter school legislation. MNCS literally is owned by the people who work there.

According to MNCS co-founder Dee Thomas, all students are required to put together a three-, five- and 20-year plan. This helps students decide what they are planning to explore for their careers,

post secondary education and other life. All students are strongly encouraged to take at least one PSEO course prior to graduation, and approximately 75% of students do this. MNCS has, in some cases, developed a contract between itself and a post-secondary institution to allow a student to enter a PSEO program when the student's test scores are not high enough for admission for PSEO but MNCS staff believe that the student can be successful (Thomas, 2007). One result of this is that more than half of MNCS students enter a Minnesota public college or university on graduation, and less than 15% of them take a remedial course. (This puts MNCS in the top 10% of all Minnesota public schools in terms of small percentages of graduates in public colleges and universities who took remedial courses.)

Minnesota New Country students must demonstrate various skills and knowledge in order to graduate. The school's program, however, is totally individualized. The school year starts in August with a family/student/advisor conference to plan out the student's program.

The school has no required courses, no grades and no bells, but it does have approximately one computer for each student. Students each have their own workspace, which includes a desk, computer and personal storage space, which can be decorated with pictures of the students' friends, family and other items of personal interest.

Students' programs consist of independent and small group study, internships and apprenticeships. Students are expected to make public presentations three times a year, describing some of the things they are learning. Some of the students have become so sophisticated with computers that area businesses have hired them to develop and maintain the businesses' web sites.

The head of the Gates Foundation's Education Program has called this school "one of the most exciting high schools in the country," because it carries out so much emerging research about school size, thoughtful use of technology, and appropriate programs for secondary students.

Minnesota New Country School began in 1994. For the first four years, the school operated from three store fronts on Main Street in LeSueur, MN (known to some as "the Valley of the Jolly Green Giant"). In 1998 the school moved several miles to its new home in Henderson, MN.

MNCS faculty, parents and students designed the new home together. It is primarily a large, open space with several rooms along the sides to house small groups of people who need a quiet space for meeting. In the center of the large open main room is a stage, behind which stands a large silo. The silo represents the architectural

heritage common to many of the school's students.

MNCS is among the top ten Minnesota public high schools in terms of *low* percentages of graduates entering a Minnesota public college or university and taking a remedial course. MNCS students have shown consistent improvement on standardized tests required by the state of Minnesota. The school also has developed ways to measure student writing and public speaking skills, along with student persistence on various tasks. MNCS has research showing that its students compare well on this assessment to other students from similar backgrounds.

### **CLINTON GRACEVILLE BEARDSLEY MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL**

*"The school has always had a kid-first focus. We're here to educate the kids the best possible way. We've always wanted the kids to leave here knowing they're getting the best education they possibly can get."* — Luann Kleindl, parent and former board member



The high school is located in the town of Graceville (population 605) and also serves the towns of Clinton (population 453) and Beardsley (population 262). The Clinton and Graceville school districts were consolidated in 1990, and the Beardsley school district was consolidated in 1998 to form the

Clinton-Graceville-Beardsley School District. The consolidation has served to strengthen the sense of community among residents of the three towns. Deb Stueve, Business Education teacher, says, "We have great community support, straight across the board, regardless of whether they have kids in school or not."

According to Julie Hendrix, a para-professional at the high school, it's not unusual for high school sports teams to "go to away games that are

50 miles away and have more people there than the home crowd."

This level of community support does not go unnoticed by the students, either. "Knowing the community is involved helps us out because we know we can go to a community member and have them

Student enrollment, grades 7–12: <b>209</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>56%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>13%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$9,543</b>

help us, we know that they'll be there for us," says Maggy, a ninth-grade student. As twelfth-grader Matt puts it, "We're from small towns so everyone knows everybody else. We're just family and friends, so everyone gets along."

The relationships that develop between staff and students as a result of being part of a close-knit community play an important role in the school's learning environment. "As a whole staff, we have very high expectations for our students. It's very important that the teachers here have held students accountable and the academic rigor of the courses is not compromised," says school counselor Melissa Lundquist. These expectations extend beyond what the students might accomplish in high school.

"One of the things we've done is set some criteria for our kids. A lot of us spend time talking about what they can look forward to in the future, what they have to do to achieve their goals," says Ronald Kaess, activities director and teacher. "They're looking to the future that way, and our students have always looked to the future."

The curriculum at CGB High School assures that students will not only have a plan for life after high school, but will also be able to execute that plan. Luann Kleindl, parent and former board member, says, "There has always been a push to come up with new programs and not lose existing programs ... so the kids go into college prepared and ready, not needing to play catch-up with all the other students going to those colleges. Academics have always been first, and that shows in the programs that are offered."

2006 Test Results: BST Writing, grade 10: 96% passed (state average: 93%)

## **LYLE HIGH SCHOOL**

*"We have a huge percentage of students who go to college. We're always asking them, 'What are you doing, where are you going?' There is definitely the expectation that they won't stop going to school after they graduate."*  
— Amy Thuesen, Language Arts teacher

Lyle, MN, (population 576) is situated within one mile of the Minnesota/Iowa border. The high school serves Lyle and the surrounding area, and also enrolls some students from the nearby city of Austin. In 2005, the community passed a referendum for a new school building, which was completed in time for the 2006-2007 school year. "It was a great feeling when the referendum passed," says 11<sup>th</sup>-grader Ryan. "We knew [the community] cared about us when that happened." In a town this size, everybody knows each

other, and that makes staying involved easier. “We have a very active parent and teacher organization,” says Language Arts teacher Amy Thuesen. “When the kids see the people involved in the community, they feel a sense of gratitude. There’s a feeling that the community believes in them.” Even after students graduate, they still feel a tie to the community where they went to high school. “Students come back from college to tell us what it’s like, and some of them even come to their old high school teachers for help with college classes,” says Lindsey, an 11<sup>th</sup>-grader.



The expectations for students who attend Lyle High School are high, but the small class sizes mean that students get more one-on-one interaction with their teachers. “Teachers here are our friends. They have very high expectations, and there is the definite expectation that you’ll go to college, but it’s easy to get the help you need from any of the teachers,” says Lindsey.

Tutoring is offered both before and after school hours, and Saturday classes are available on a case-by-case basis. The high school uses a block schedule, and according to 11<sup>th</sup>-grader Josh, this allows the students to focus on more specific subjects. “We have more time for each class, so we can really get into some in-depth topics.” Eight different Advanced Placement courses are offered, rotating four each year, and most students take

Student enrollment, grades 6–12: <b>134</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>61%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>21%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$8,091</b>

at least one of these courses. “For a school our size, that’s a lot of college-level courses,” says Principal Royce Helmbrecht. “We really encourage students to take AP classes because it allows them to get a more challenging curriculum while still being in the small, safe high school environment.”

2006 Test Results: MCA-II Reading, grade 10: 69% passed (state average: 65%); Writing BST, grade 10: 96% passed (state average: 93%)

## LAKE OF THE WOODS HIGH SCHOOL

*“The pride you see in students is part of the success. They’re ready to learn, they’re eager to learn, they want to learn. They’re able to sustain that. Somehow there’s the mentality in the student body to challenge themselves. And it’s not just academically. They have a lot of really excellent athletes, musicians and artists. The overall mentality is to succeed.”* — Joyce Palm, parent and volunteer



Lake of the Woods School is located in the small resort community of Baudette, MN (population 1,104), just miles from the Canadian border. The community works hard to ensure that students recognize themselves as an integral part of the remote city. “We have a skate park because we wanted something positive for the kids

to do. That shows value to the youth, that they’re valued. The kids were involved in that, and actually designed the skate park.

“They see themselves as valued members of the community and feel respected,” says Cathy Christensen, a parent.

John Oren, community member, adds, “These kids are involved and they want to be involved. There is an absolute excess of enthusiasm. Without pride there is no incentive

to develop, improve, to expand your horizons.” And the students at Lake of the Woods School do, in fact, have that incentive. They appreciate and even seek challenges, regardless of the context. “If you do something well here, it doesn’t go unnoticed. The students challenge one another,” says 12<sup>th</sup>-grader Kari.

There is a clear expectation at Lake of the Woods School that students will continue to college. “Our teachers say ‘when you go to college,’ not ‘if you go to college,’” says 12<sup>th</sup>-grader Sam. “Every class at our school prepares you for college.” The teachers, as well as the community, are perpetually supportive and encouraging of students setting and reaching goals.

Laura Jo Pieper, who is in her 25<sup>th</sup> year of teaching at the

Student enrollment, grades 7–12: <b>323</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>52%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>21%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$8,519</b>



school, says, "You just know, you expect, that they're going to go out and make something of themselves, be successful, and add to the community." Staff members place a great deal of emphasis on making sure the students are well prepared for what they will face after high school. "We have spent a considerable amount of time aligning our curriculum to the standards. In doing that, you're looking at every grade level — what are they doing and how is it overlapping to what we're doing and connecting," continues Pieper. Don Krause, high school social studies teacher, adds, "The students know they're getting an education that's worth something."

2006 Test Results: MCA-II Math, grade 11: 45% passed (state average: 30%)

### **PIERZ HEALY HIGH SCHOOL**

*"We have fun at school, but we also definitely still have a learning environment. Our school has a reputation for being really good, and it's important to us to keep that up."* — Kelsey, 11<sup>th</sup>-grade student



The central Minnesota city of Pierz takes pride in its German heritage. The 1,277 residents also take great pride in their high school and the high school students. The community newspaper features two "students of the month" each month during the school year, and community volunteers

are very active within the school. "The administration really allows us to feel we own the school and are a part of it," says parent and Chief of Police Steven Boser. "The district promotes a healthy, positive atmosphere, and our community is really proud of that."

Denny Rothstein volunteers regularly at the high school and says "the positive attitude from the community has a top-down effect. The more the community participates in the school, the more ownership they feel." Volunteering is not the only way community members show support

Student enrollment, grades 7–12: <b>526</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>61%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>16%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$6,970</b>

for students. Extra-curricular events are very well attended, and many opportunities have been created for students to be involved outside of school hours. "There is a direct link between community involvement and student success," says community education director and parent Mary Tschida. "We have the 'it takes a village' mentality."

Planning for the future, whether it is a career or college, is a key part of being a student at Pierz Healy High School. The staff maintains high expectations for the students, both while they are in school and after they graduate, and these expectations start early. Jonathan McCollum, science teacher, says, "By the time they reach high school I see students that are prepared. They have a good basis of knowledge. This wouldn't happen if expectations weren't high in middle school and elementary as well." The students are expected to maintain a strong work ethic and continue their education after they graduate from high school. The school has established a career center to help students with the college search and application process, career planning, and financial aid information. Judy Maierhofer, who runs the program, meets individually with every 12<sup>th</sup>-grade student and their families each fall. "There is a lot of parent support," she says. "We make sure parents are aware of all the things that are coming up and know how important these things are. We're all invested in making sure the students succeed."

2006 Test Results: BST Writing, grade 10: 95% passed (state average: 93%)

### **RED ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL**

*"There's a high level of expectation from parents and the community. Everything we do here is relevant, and the kids sense that early on."*

— Bob Van Maasdam, high school music teacher

Red Rock Central High School is located in the city of Lamberton, MN (population 859). The district is the result of the 1997 consolidation of the Lamberton and Sanborn districts. The high school has since established a definite connection with both communities. For over a decade, the school has been providing Internet services to residents of the surrounding community. Forest Benz, former high school principal, says that the "emphasis on technology has been very successful at bringing the community together. The Internet is one of the biggest ambassadors for the



school.” The program also actively involves students in the community. Students conduct service calls within the community, sometimes even going to residents’ homes. This connection is beneficial not only to the students, but to the residents they interact with. According to Ronald Kelsey, community member, “People in the community know what’s going on, and it’s important to them to know what’s going on in the school. It ties the community together. It’s a strength for the school.” This interconnectedness

helps build relationships between teachers and students, as well. “You’re never not a teacher,” says social studies teacher Jason Kedl. “Everyone knows everyone here, and staff and students interact outside of school on a regular basis.”

Participation in extra-curricular activities is an important part of student life at Red Rock High School. A large percentage of the students participate in multiple activities throughout the year.

Student enrollment, grades 6–12: <b>265</b>
Students continuing to higher education: <b>61%</b>
Students taking post-secondary remedial courses: <b>23%</b>
Total funds spent per student: <b>\$9,432</b>

“Because of the high level of activity participation,” says Paula Derickson, school board chair and parent, “the students develop a real concept of time management. The kids want to do well to reflect well on their teachers, and the high standards teachers have for themselves translate to high standards for the kids.” The students are proud to be involved — and their families are proud of them. Often there is a family history of school involvement and success, as families have been in the community for several generations. “The parents certainly have a sense of ownership in the school and in their kids’ education. As teachers, we’re accountable to the parents,” says high school math teacher Beverly Larson. The staff strives to meet high parent and community expectations by delivering a rigorous and cohesive curriculum. “We try to hit all levels of ability and interest,” continues Larson. “There is a flexibility in our course offering, and kids don’t fall through the cracks.”

2006 Test Results: BST Writing, grade 10: 100% passed (state average: 93%)

### **Making Youth-Community Learning a High Priority**

Completing some form of post-secondary education does not guarantee that students will be active, involved citizens. Fortunately, growing research shows that youth/community service can help accomplish both academic and citizenship goals. Recent studies of service learning programs show students engaged in service learning

- Gain enhanced citizenship and social responsibility and enhance their awareness and understanding of social issues.
- Acquire positive effects on key personal development areas, such as self-esteem, empowerment, self-efficacy, and engagement in pro-social behaviors.
- Can enhance students' engagement in community and civic affairs (Furco, p. 11).

The same literature review finds that these benefits do *not* come at the expense of academic achievement: "Several studies of service learning in K-12 education have revealed a number of positive academic outcomes for students. Specifically, service learning has been found to increase scores on standardized tests, foster content knowledge and skills, improve attendance and improve grade point averages" (Furco, p. 10-11).

Two major research reviews of effective programs for youth found that service learning was one of the six key components of effective youth development. The first, a review of 69 major studies noted:

Increasingly, the interventions and their evaluations are also telling us that young people respond positively when they are regarded by adults as resources, as contributors to their own growth and development, not merely passive receptacles requiring services. ... Young people can participate in the solution of many of their own problems and act as solid contributors to the welfare of others in their communities (American Youth Policy Forum 1997, p. xi).

The second review of 49 studies pointed out,

Seeing youth as resources, particularly through community service and service learning, was cited as important in five

Volume 1 and 13 Volume II evaluations. ... In both (reports), data on participant academic achievement, employment and earnings were quite positive for service related programs (AYPF, 1999, p. xv).

One well-developed youth service/civic education initiative, based at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, is called Public Achievement ([www.publicachievement.org](http://www.publicachievement.org)). A recent outside study involving more than 500 students found that:

- Participation in Public Achievement gave students wider perspectives on the world and better skills in working with others.
- Elementary school students who had sustained participation in Public Achievement were more likely than their peers to acquire civic skills and to believe that young people can make a difference in the world.
- Middle school students who participated in Public Achievement gained multiple civic skills and were more likely to take responsibility for helping their schools become positive learning environments.
- High school students who reported a high level of interest in the Public Achievement projects acquired multiple communication skills, including oral persuasion and listening skills (RMC).

Minnesota might look at what Maine legislators are considering. According to an official at the National Youth Leadership Council, in Fall 2007, "the Maine legislature is expected to enact revised state performance indicators for social studies that require students in each grade span (PK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-diploma) to complete a service-learning project or civic action."

The projects culminate in high school when students are expected to "select, plan and implement a civic action or service-learning project based on a community, state, national, or international asset or need using appropriate and relevant knowledge and skills, including research and ethical reasoning skills, and reflect on the project's effectiveness and civic contribution" (Nate Schultz).

### *College Level courses for high school students*

Why should most students take at least one college-level

course before graduating from high school? Researchers from the American Youth Policy Forum found that students who took such courses (PSEO, AP, IB, or College in the Schools) were more likely to attend college. Moreover, one study disaggregated data and found that participating in such courses increased college attending rates for groups traditionally under-represented in post-secondary education (Lerner and Brand, p. 115). They conclude that such courses “result in positive outcomes for youth, especially with regard to performance in high school, earning college credit while in high school, and better grades in college” (Lerner and Brand, p. 124).

Governor Pawlenty has urged that *every* Minnesota high school student take at least some college level course prior to graduation. The research cited above suggests the value of doing this — and the array of programs, from STEP to PSEO at Minnesota New Country, to AP and College in the Schools at a number of the rural high schools cited above, shows how this might be done.

Cincinnati’s Withrow University offers another model. Started with assistance from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this school is open to all, with no admissions tests. Withrow’s ninth-graders participate in a “Bridge program” on the campus of a nearby college. Principal Sharon Johnson reports, “Many of our students have never been on a college campus, even though most live within five minutes of a campus” (Johnson).

Such college experiences early in a student’s high school years are one of several things suggested in a book about producing college students from young people who would be the first in their family to enter or graduate from a higher education institution. As one student wrote, “Stepping foot on a college campus as a high school student puts you much closer. You can only go after things that you know about. ... It makes it more tangible, something that you can grasp and build on” (Cushman, p. 2).

Taking courses on a campus and meeting with college officials changes the way many students think about themselves and their college options. Withrow produced higher test scores and graduation rates with inner city, predominantly African-American students than many suburban schools. Withrow consistently ranks 10-20 points above the state average in percentage of students achieving proficiency on the state’s required tenth-grade graduation test. In this school 92.2% of African-American students have achieved proficiency in reading and 83.7% have achieved proficiency in math. This has been achieved in a school that is 92.9% African-American and 4.4% white and 44.5% economically disadvantaged. Students with disabilities make up 14.4% of Withrow University High School.

### **Yes Prep**

*Newsweek Magazine* named YES Prep in Houston, Texas, one of the nation's top 100 high schools in May 2007. Children at Risk, a non-profit group, recently ranked YES Prep as the second best high school in the area, based on graduation rates, college entrance test scores, Advanced Placement Test scores and other factors. The school ranked above a number of schools that use admissions tests, which YES Prep does not (Barbic).

The grades 6-12 school, serving approximately 720 students, is the first of four Houston-area YES Prep campuses started by Chris Barbic. The four schools serve a total of approximately 1,500 students. YES Prep explains that its "ultimate goal is to create a critical mass of college-educated students who can then return to Houston and bring real change to our city's disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities"(YES Prep).

"YES" stands for "youth engaged in service." Students are required to provide community service one Saturday per month. The community service projects are designed to help students learn that they can make a real difference and that part of their lives should be devoted to "giving back."

The school features a longer day, mandatory Saturday classes and three-week summer school in July. Its theme is "whatever it takes!"

Eighty percent of the approximately 700 students at the original YES Prep campus, YES Prep Southeast, are from low-income families, and 95% are either Hispanic or African-American. Most students enter the school at least one year behind in math and English, but 85% of YES Prep students are also the first in their family to be college bound.

Founded in 1998, YES Prep is a charter, open to all students, no admissions tests. The school requires each student to take at least one college-level class in order to graduate. The school also requires each student to apply to, and be accepted by, at least one four-year college or university. The campuses have four alumni who have graduated from YES Prep and returned as instructors, two from Stanford, one from Columbia, and one from the University of Houston.

Seventy-eight percent of YES Prep alumni have graduated or are still enrolled in a four-year college, compared to the national retention average of 50% for all ethnic groups and 22% for low-income students. YES Prep students have been accepted in 216 colleges and universities around the country, including schools such as Yale, Georgetown, Brown, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Stanford, Rice and University of Texas at Austin, and collectively,

YES students have earned over \$17.5 million in scholarships and financial aid.

Barbic and many other YES staff have been involved in the “Teach for America” program. In 1995, Chris earned Houston Independent School District’s Outstanding Young Educator Award, an award given to the district’s best teacher under the age of 29. “These are mission-driven folks who believe in what we’re trying to do in getting low-income kids through college,” Barbic said of his staff.

### ***STEP Program in Anoka***

Anoka-area teenagers like Samantha, Luke, Matt and Jessica help explain why Governor Pawlenty has a terrific idea: every Minnesota student should complete a year’s worth of college before graduating from high school. “Now wait,” some say, “many students are not ready or eager for traditional colleges and universities.”

Absolutely agreed. But Anoka’s STEP program is a marvelous model for youngsters not inclined toward traditional college work.

Ginny Karbowski, STEP director, explained that the program began five years ago when the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system recommended closing Anoka Technical College (Karbowski). Local leaders and educators argued that ATC was very valuable, but they knew the school must attract more students.

Anoka-Hennepin School District, ATC, and the county joined together: The college provided land, the county provided \$8 million for a new building on the college campus, and the school district provided faculty.

These details don’t matter much to Samantha, 18. Like many people her age, Samantha, “wanted more freedom, more hands-on learning.” She is full time at STEP and earning college credits as she takes courses like law enforcement and emergency medical careers. Samantha has earned a first responder certificate and is working on an emergency medical technician certificate. Both will allow her to enter fields that pay well above minimum wage. She calls STEP, “an awesome program.”

Luke, 17, is a senior who was looking for a “change of pace and a chance to learn much more about music.” He praises a freshman career class at Anoka High School that visited STEP. Luke knew STEP was for him. He’s learning much more about both the performing and business sides of the music industry. He is in a band and plans to use STEP’s lessons after high school graduation.

Jessica, 17, is intrigued by machining. She praises her STEP teacher, who helped her get a job at Digital Tool and Automation,



where she's learning much more than "if I were flipping hamburgers." Jessica loves the "hands-on learning and the college environment" at STEP.

Matt, 18, is another student who has already benefited from STEP. He's intrigued by printing and graphic design, so his STEP teacher helped him land a paid internship at General Litho Services. "Before I came here, I was just sitting in high school classes, not sure why I was there or where I was heading." Now Matt is earning money, picking up valuable skills, and planning his future. He intends to work at a graphics firm and perhaps start a company of his own.

Programs like Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, College in the Schools and Post Secondary Options are terrific for some youngsters, but STEP serves hundreds of high school juniors and seniors "in the middle," as Karbowski puts it. They can attend STEP full or half day. Governor Pawlenty has urged more "Rigor, Relevance and Relationships" for high school students (Pawlenty). STEP is a great illustration of his vision.

Schools described earlier in this article, including those immediately above, offer models on which we could build. As the Minnesota Principals task force noted, "We know from the experience of following the progress of our graduates that too many students start postsecondary careers but do not finish them. This is why our eyes must be on the prize of postsecondary *completion* for all" (sic, Future of High Schools Task Force, p. 3).

Minnesota might well learn from the New Schools Venture Fund, a national group that has identified and helped replicate outstanding public schools around the nation. While the fund has invested tens of millions of dollars with encouraging results (see NewSchools.org), it does not currently operate in Minnesota. Conversations with one of the leaders of this fund suggest that the fund sees other states as a higher priority in which to operate (Peyser). However, that does not prevent Minnesota from establishing such a fund. After all, venture funds exist in the private sector. Why not the public sector?

### **Priorities in Early Childhood Education**

Finally, a brief comment about changes in the system of early childhood. For more than two decades, researchers have been pointing out the benefits of high quality early childhood programs, especially for students from low-income, limited English-speaking families, and students who have some form of disability. However, *advocates* of various early childhood programs have promoted the idea that every dollar spent on early childhood education has a

multiplying benefit. This is *not* necessarily true.

For example, in August 2007, University of Minnesota researchers released a major report on 20 years of follow-up for participants in a high-quality program geared toward children from low-income families in Chicago. The researchers concluded that by the time they reached adulthood, graduates of an intensive early childhood education program for poor children showed higher educational attainment, lower rates of serious crime and incarceration, and lower rates of depressive symptoms than did non-participants in the program (Reynolds, Temple, et. al 2007). "This study provides evidence that established early educational interventions can positively influence the adult life course in several domains of functioning" (Reynolds, Temple, p. 9).

The researchers asked a key question: "Why does the CPC intervention promote enduring effects on health and well-being?" They concluded:

Four program elements seem paramount. First, a system of intervention is in place beginning at age 3 years that continues to the early grades. ... A second key feature is that as a public-school program, all teachers have bachelor's degrees and certification in early childhood education. Well-trained and well-compensated staff are common for programs demonstrating long-term effects. Third, instructional activities address all of the learning needs of children, but special emphasis is given to literacy and school readiness through diverse activities. Finally, comprehensive family services provide many opportunities for positive learning experiences in school and at home (Reynolds, et. al p.9).

They also concluded "...the intervention effects are most likely to be reproduced in urban contexts serving relatively high concentrations of low income children" (Reynolds et. al p. 9). One can argue with these conclusions, but they do *not* constitute a blanket endorsement of all early childhood programs.

Here's how others presented the information. The Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network issued a press release with the headline "Study shows pre-school pays for itself." The press release text asserted, "The findings, which appear in this month's issue of the *Archive of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the American Medical Association, are the first to affirm the long-term value of a large public early-childhood enrichment program."

The study does *not* say, "Pre-school pays for itself." It does

*not* affirm the long-term value of a large public early-childhood enrichment program. The study *does* affirm the value of, as the quotations above indicate, programs with certain key features, operating in “urban contexts serving relatively high concentrations of low income children.” .

In a *TC Daily Planet* article, John Fitzgerald of Minnesota 2020 (a self-described progressive, non-partisan think tank) described the Reynolds research. Fitzgerald wrote that “The study shows that children involved in pre-school programs ... had higher rates of school completion and four-year college attendance ... significantly lower rates of felony arrest and incarceration, etc. etc.”

Fitzgerald concluded, “As this study demonstrates, early childhood development is crucial to the future of our society ... It’s time for Minnesota state policy to follow the data. Early investments pay off” (Fitzgerald).

As careful readers note, Reynolds et. al. did *not* make such blanket assertions. They cited a particular high-quality program for a certain group of students.

Professor Susan Neuman of the University of Michigan has tried to insert some critical nuance into the debate about early childhood education programs. She wrote recently:

Far too often preschool programs for low income children have provided too little instruction, at too slow a pace, for too short a time to create any demonstrable effects in the long term. This situation stands in stark contrast to the instructional models of highly effective demonstration programs frequently cited as the rationale for pre-kindergarten initiatives (Neuman, pp. 288).

She continued, “To get the best return on this investment (in high quality pre-kindergarten programs), we need to think more strategically about the components. ... High quality compensatory programs should include the following features: Sufficient time ... precise targeting, thoughtful focus, accountability for results” (Neuman, pp. 289-290).

Early childhood advocates often cite the work of economist Art Rolnick. But a careful reading of Rolnick shows he recognizes all early childhood programs do not have the same impact: Referring to the variety of early childhood programs offered in Minnesota, he writes, “It is unlikely that participation of high-needs children in a lower cost, less comprehensive program demonstrated the results available in a part- to full-day, long-term program ... . We contend that funding for ECDPs (Early Childhood Development Programs)

should reach the level of model program status, such as the Perry School Program, since this is the level at which high returns have been demonstrated” (Rolnick and Grunewald, p. 7).

As Minnesota considers investments, it needs to be careful to follow the data and experience. All early childhood programs are *not* equally effective. All programs do not have the same impact. *Some* early investments pay off.

## **Concluding Observations & Recommendations**

A new public education system is needed in Minnesota — one based on:

- Higher expectations of public education in Minnesota;
- Recognition that too many children of all races are not succeeding in the current system;
- Greater use of readily available models to adapt and adopt, that have been considerably more successful than many current schools.

This paper suggests that among the key steps Minnesota should take are:

- Fully funding high-quality early childhood education programs for all students from low-income and limited English-speaking families.
- Use of multiple measures to help Minnesotans assess progress in achievement, graduation rates, and readiness for some form of post-secondary education.
- Adoption of state-wide requirements for all students to participate in some form of youth community service at least once during their elementary, middle and high school years.
- Expectation that 95% of Minnesota students will enter and graduate from some form of post-secondary education program, either two- or four-year, within six years of graduation from high school.
- Creation of an “Education Venture Capital Fund ” to help school districts and charters adapt and adopt proven models from around the country.
- Expectation that virtually all students will take some form of post-secondary level course prior to high school graduation.

We should seek more than higher test scores, graduation rates and college completion rates. As members of a democracy, we need

schools that will work harder to help more young people learn why they should help work for a better world, and how they can succeed in doing this.

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