

CENTER *for* RURAL POLICY and DEVELOPMENT

Seeking Solutions for Greater Minnesota's Future

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2007 Telecom report released soon

The Center for Rural Policy & Development will be releasing the 2007 edition of its annual Minnesota Internet Study in May. The Center has been tracking the adoption of computers, the Internet and broadband in rural Minnesota since 2001 and in the Twin Cities metro area since 2005. The results of this year's study show the continued increase in the adoption of high-speed Internet service in both Greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities.

"Doing this survey for as many years as we have, we've really been able to track the progress of Internet technology," said research manager Marnie Werner.

This year's survey shows for the first time that approximately half of all households in Greater Minnesota now have broadband service. "As last year's report pointed out, once a technology reaches a certain rate of adoption, it enters the mainstream and it takes off. We're definitely seeing that this year," said Werner.

The study also shows that as broadband use increases, dial-up is at the same time decreasing. "It's clear from looking at what people do online, those with broadband are using it much more, compared to those who are using dial-up," said Werner. Statewide, dial-up Internet users reported spending on average 7 hours a week online, while broadband Internet users reported an average of 17.4 hours a week. While email is nearly universal (92.7% of dial-up users compared to 98.6% of broadband users statewide), from there the activities are easily separated by those who use dial up and those who have broadband (see table). "This is one trend that has gotten clearer and more distinct over the years," said Werner.

Income and age are still significant factors in determining whether a household has a computer, the Internet or broadband. But while lower income and older residents are less likely to have adopted these technologies, the study showed there is steady progress for these groups.

The full report will be released in May and will be available in hard copy and on the Center's web site at www.ruralmn.org.

Percentage of dial-up and broadband Internet users by activity (statewide).

	Dial up	Broadband
Send and receive email	92.7%	98.6%
Purchase something at online	50.0%	75.4%
Access news web sites	59.9%	83.8%
Check the weather	62.5%	86.7%
Research medical info	60.6%	70.0%
Find out about community meetings	14.6%	29.5%
Communicate with school	24.9%	38.0%
Take a class online	7.3%	16.9%
Search for employment	27.6%	44.3%
Download music or video files	26.0%	57.8%

Education research project in process

The Center is launching a new research initiative in the area of K-12 education. This new project will come as two separate studies:

- A composite of best practices from Minnesota or other states that can be applied in Minnesota schools to mitigate the loss of revenue while at the same time maintaining and improving the educational performance of our children.
- A multi-variant demographic and economic profile of Minnesota rural school districts in five-year increments to 2025, including a set of policy suggestions that can help prepare school districts to successfully meet the challenges for the future.

Researchers interested in learning more about these projects can find more information on the Center's web site at www.ruralmn.org.

Taking the initiative on early childhood development

*By Lynn Haglin,
Vice President, Northland Foundation*

Children are born learning, but healthy brain growth requires developmentally appropriate stimulation so that nerve cells can connect, strengthen, and hardwire. Children who have the opportunity to grow and thrive in developmentally appropriate environments have the advantage of optimal brain growth.

With growing awareness of the critical lifelong impact of children's experiences in their early years, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations launched the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative in 2002. The six regional Initiative Foundations, serving the 80-county area of Greater Minnesota, made a joint commitment to work together on behalf of Minnesota's youngest citizens. Through the power of grassroots organizing, 66 early childhood coalitions comprised of 170 communities located in all parts of the state have developed during the past five years. Over 2,500 people from all sectors of the community have joined coalitions to rally around young children and their families. People are working together to provide all children with the quality care and educational opportunities necessary for a healthy life of learning, achieving, and succeeding.

The Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative has drawn the interest of and has engaged individuals from all sectors of the community, even those who have not typically been at the table for discussions focused on young children. Parents, grandparents, early care and education, K-12 education, human services, the medical community, faith community, elected officials and many other sectors have all been represented. With economists Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank and Dr. James Heckman at the University of Chicago providing sound evidence supporting the high public return on investments in early care and education, business people in all coalition sites are recognizing the need to help improve early care and education and ensure the future availability of a quality workforce.

Over 400 projects and programs have grown from the information gathering, public discussions, visioning and action planning sessions that are part of the building block approach undertaken by each coalition. As communities have learned more about the programs and services already available, they have been able to make more informed decisions, enhance their local assets, and identify the most effective strategies and action steps

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Grow Minnesota!: Its business is to grow jobs

*By William Blazar,
Senior Vice President, Minnesota Chamber of Commerce*

Businesses throughout Minnesota are increasingly challenged by the dynamics of a global marketplace, and competition has become more difficult in the midst of the weak economy.

Then consider the everyday tasks inherent in growing a business – from securing a building permit to finding a supplier of raw materials for a manufacturing process to searching for sites for expansion and, perhaps most challenging, finding people to staff the operation.

Minnesota has an abundance of public and private organizations that could likely steer businesses in the right direction to solve the numerous commonplace business problems. However, the matrix is often so confusing and disconnected that companies are stymied in identifying their first step.

Grow Minnesota!, a private-sector business retention and expansion program spearheaded by the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, stands ready to assist. In its

fifth year, the program has a great record.

At its foundation, Grow Minnesota! has two purposes: to thank businesses for investing in Minnesota, and to address their challenges to growing in Minnesota. What we learn in visiting with and assisting companies also helps to build the Minnesota Chamber's public policy agenda at the Capitol.

The newest part of our initiative, scheduled to be launched later this year, is a statewide business assistance and referral network that brings together existing resources, is well publicized, and easy to access.

Grow Minnesota!, a partnership with nearly 50 local chambers of commerce, is the nation's most extensive private-sector state business retention program.

In addition to retention, the program provides an inside look at business. Chamber staff, accompanied

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Early Childhood

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that will result in the greatest impact on the lives of young children and their families.

Working with Wilder Research, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations have categorized the strategies implemented by coalitions into five components necessary for a nurturing community: strong families; engaged community members; effective and coordinated early care and education; early learning opportunities to gain literacy skills and to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and/or physically; and ready schools. The results have been home visiting programs for new parents, literacy projects, partnerships resulting in increased dental access, and parent education opportunities. Other efforts focus on the development of kindergarten transition programs; quality care initiatives; partnerships between Head Start, Early Childhood Family Education and childcare providers; relationships with family, friend and neighbor care givers; and the Getting School Ready Guide in Minnesota. These projects and programs represent only a small number of the many initiatives being implemented.

Another development and outgrowth of the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative is the Minnesota Thrive Initiative. As a result of numerous interviews and local forums during the organizing process in communities, a common concern emerged throughout the state relating to the social and emotional well being of young children as evidenced by the increase in troubling behaviors among children observed by parents, caregivers, and educators. In relation to this, the lack of early childhood mental health support services in the more rural communities was identified as a consistent challenge in all parts of the state. During the past year, the Minnesota Thrive Initiative was launched in six pilot sites to address these concerns by building Action Teams, comprised of many sectors that will implement community-designed strategic plans that not only promote the healthy social and emotional development of a community's youngest and most vulnerable citizens, but also help provide for the appropriate interventions required by children and families.

Numerous partnerships have developed throughout the state as a result of the Minnesota Early Childhood and Thrive Initiatives. Foundations, statewide organizations, colleges, and others have stepped forward to work together and share resources to improve the lives of Minnesota's youngest children and their families. Foundation financial support has been provided by The McKnight Foundation, Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation, Bush Foundation, Sheltering Arms Foundation, Mardag Foundation, Medica Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, Buuck Family Foundation, and Robins, Miller, & Ciresi L.L.P. Foundation for Education, Public Health and Social Justice. There has also been an array of local community contributions to these efforts.

Momentum is building and the recognized need to support our youngest children is growing quickly in all sectors. What started as a ripple has grown to a tidal wave across the state. By working together, everyone can help ensure that Minnesota's youngest children have the necessary quality care and educational opportunities to thrive.

For more information about the Minnesota Early Childhood Initiative and/or Minnesota Thrive Initiative, please contact the Minnesota Initiative Foundation in your area by visiting www.mcknight.org/greatermn.

Legislative update

by Rep. Kathy Brynaert,
CRPD board member

With the 2008 Legislative session past its midpoint, several bills have been passed by the Minnesota House and Senate that will provide significant benefits for Greater Minnesota.

Transportation Bill

To begin with, the transportation bill is expected to infuse \$6.6 billion into roads and bridges over the next 10 years, create over 30,000 jobs every year for the next five years and ease some of the pressure on local property owners who are currently paying a large share of the cost of local transportation projects.

The legislation is an equal split between metro and outstate projects. As a result, unsafe country roads and bridges will be improved or replaced much sooner than previously anticipated.

Capital Investment Bill

The Capital Investment Bill appropriates over \$700 million for work projects across the state. This bill provides for priorities such as higher education, clean water, improved infrastructure and the environment. It has the potential for creating as many as 10,000 jobs for Minnesotans. Projects in Greater Minnesota actually received a slight edge in this bill.

Budget Bill

The House budget bill addresses the state budget deficit while at the same time providing a one-time funding boost for schools and nursing homes. In this bill, every school in the state would get an additional \$51 per pupil in 2009, and every nursing home would get an additional 2% cost of living adjustment. As of publication, this bill was in conference committee.

Health Care Bill

The House Health Care Reform Bill outlines a plan to transform Minnesota's health care system by lowering costs, making health care more affordable for Minnesotans with insurance, extending coverage to the uninsured, and changing the health care system so that it meets the needs of patients. This plan will also make progress on the goal of restoring MinnesotaCare eligibility for families, especially farmers, and also directs the state to study the reasons behind the low number of nursing home employees who have health insurance. In direct response to the growing shortage of physicians in rural parts of the state, the bill invests more money in primary care doctors. This bill is also in conference committee as of publication time.

Local and regional examples of early childhood initiatives

- The West Central Initiative, in cooperation with the 10 early childhood coalitions, has implemented the *Early Childhood Dental Network*, a nine-county, multi-disciplinary collaborative project engaging 40 partners to increase oral health awareness and education and improve dental access in west central Minnesota. This effort is designed to develop strategies to address oral health issues of children ages 0-5, especially young children most in need. Over 1,000 young children have been served.
- The Northland Foundation and the 10 Northeastern Minnesota Early Childhood Coalitions are implementing a regional *Early Childhood Screening* project. Two key components being distributed are the *Getting School Ready in Minnesota Guide* and the *Learning Toolkit Backpack*, which includes a book, math and language tip cards, school supplies, toothbrush, and toothpaste. The *Guide* is a resource for parents, caregivers, and teachers to assist young learners. Over 200,000 English- and Spanish-language copies have been disseminated throughout the state.
- *Ready – Set – Go* is an Initiative Foundation project to foster collaborations between early care providers and elementary school professionals to build professional relationships and create discussion of how to improve kindergarten transition for children, their families, child care providers, and teachers. Over 200 early care providers and kindergarten teachers have participated in four events so far and many more are excited about the possibility of attending future events.
- The Northwest Minnesota Foundation's Thief River Falls Early Childhood Coalition has implemented the Building Language Together (BLT) Project. The purpose of this project is to teach home-based child care providers, Head Start teachers, ECFE staff, and parents to use higher level thinking skills, language, vocabulary, and total literacy when reading with young children. Each participant is provided with books, scripts and prompts to use while reading to children. The goal is to have every child who enters kindergarten in Thief River Falls cared for by someone who knows the BLT method.
- The Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation's Northfield Early Childhood Coalition identified accessing home visiting services as difficult for many families and so implemented the Babies and Blankets Home Visiting Program. Parents with newborns who are experiencing multiple challenges receive up to six home visits focusing on parenting needs, child development questions, the importance of early literacy, and connecting families with existing programs and resources. A related Teen Parent Program has resulted, giving teen parents the ability to turn to each other for advice.
- The Southwest Initiative Foundation's Worthington Early Childhood Coalition serves an extremely culturally diverse community. Early educators are trained in the PIQE/PASS program, a parent engagement model designed for Latino families. Classes in Spanish attempt to create a bridge in early childhood that improves parent engagement into elementary school. The elementary school reports that families who complete the program have much higher attendance for parent-teacher conferences, registration, screening, and better overall interaction. The school has seen such positive impact that they have incorporated the costs to run the program into their general budget for the coming year.

I recently took a trip to China. It's an amazing country with a rich history. I was taken with its beauty and splendor. It has a significant amount of natural resources, an industrious work force, and an emerging entrepreneurial class. But as you peel back the layers of its façade, you realize the significant challenges China faces. I recently read that one doesn't go to China to learn but to see it and participate in its lifestyle.

The trip really helped me put things into perspective. With all of America's challenges, we have a relatively large segment of our population that enjoys the fruits of their labor. Yes, we have poverty, but it is clearly a minority (5%) of the general public. Even if we count those on the verge of poverty, we reach just about 20 percent. China, on the other hand, has its very rich and a small middle class, but over 45 percent of its population is either on the verge of or living in poverty. That's about 600 million people. Another 3% or so (about 40 million, mostly very rural) are destitute. Then for a full picture, add the fact that China does not have anywhere near the social service or welfare resources or health care options the U.S. does. Its rural people bear the major brunt of pain and suffering.

The cities are bustling. Beijing, a city of 14 million, had the feeling and pace of New York. Medium-sized and smaller cities are comparable in the range and type of amenities to Chicago and Minneapolis. But this apparent affluence immediately changed when one left the city's limits. There are two Chinas: one, the large urban complexes concentrating wealth and amenities, the other, a China of rural areas that are poor and underdeveloped. Millions of people still live in caves carved into sandstone and limestone.

The Chinese people are wonderful individuals. They are helpful, delightful, and sharing. However, they are careful to monitor what they say in specific situations, what could be censored, and what could terminate their prospects for a successful life. Every time I brought up difficult topics like poverty, the result of the Cultural Revolution after Mao, or the extent of government intervention in personal and public affairs, I was met with blank stares and responses like "I don't know."

During my last week in China I was fortunate enough to deliver a lecture at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Tsinghua is China's premier graduate school of public policy and management. It produces most of China's Ph.D.s and professional social workers, planners, sociologists and managers. To some extent the Chinese leadership understands the difficulties it will face in the future if it is not able to develop socially, expand economically and address the needs of rural people. Its leaders know that they must learn from other cultures and give their intellectual leaders more flexibility to develop new theories, approaches, and tools. Consequently, the professors and students at Tsinghua are given much

A Visit to China

Louis G. Hohlfeld, Ph.D.
Interim President

more latitude to dialogue with foreigners, discuss and research topics that may fall outside traditional boundaries. While this flexibility is not sanctioned formally, party officials simply look the other way. But of course there are limits.

The first observation I offered was the idea of volunteerism. Their idea of volunteering is when local community political committees ask people to get involved to solve a problem. So, in essence people are assigned to volunteer jobs. I stressed that those individuals who truly volunteer choose for themselves and not be sanctioned one way or the other by the government. They simply organize in community partnerships and work for their communities. I referred to these groups of people as volunteer partnerships. I added that for even broader impact community volunteer partnerships could be organized into networks

of communities, not unlike Minnesota's early childhood initiative, which you can read about elsewhere in this newsletter. It's a prime example of community partnerships working together as a network to make policy changes at the state level.

My second key suggestion was the idea of making policy change even when policymakers are opposed to those changes. I could see them getting a little anxious as I got close to the edge. In the past when lecturers went over the line, the audience simply stood up and left. I didn't want to run that risk, so I talked to them about how to structure a policy framework to talk about values that all people share. I suggested that local communities could educate policy makers about what the communities wanted. As an example, I pointed out that all Chinese love their families and want everyone to be healthy and happy, but that the quality of the drinking water was a primary cause of illness, and in very rural areas, even death. We talked about how communities could organize (wow, was that an incorrect word to use) and address issues of water quality locally without even involving the government. We talked about the possibility that many villages working on water projects could perhaps start — I almost said "a movement" but caught myself — getting public officials thinking about the good work of rural areas and rewarding them for their efforts.

The more I talked about local partnerships the more the audience seemed to be perplexed. Finally one of them said, "You mean nongovernmental organizations, don't you?" While in the U.S. we don't think twice about organizing outside the government purview, it was difficult for them to understand that citizens would organize separately from the party or government or even nongovernmental organizations, which in China are, of course, created by the government. But we discussed the difference, and I believe they left with the kernel of this key idea. Have I changed the course of history in China? Probably not. But maybe I helped one person think in better and different ways about their vast rural population. Then it was time well spent.



Grow Minnesota

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by local business volunteers, have an hour-long conversation with the owner or top-level manager of the company. The visits produce a wealth of information about each company, its specific challenges, and insight regarding our state's business environment. Ours is not a scientific sample, but no one can dismiss the impressions of hundreds of top-level executives from throughout Minnesota.

Grow Minnesota! reflects the trademark of the Minnesota Chamber as a problem-solver for everyday business concerns. One in seven visits results in requests for assistance where volunteers either solve the problem or put the company in touch with the appropriate local or state officials. We help guide companies through the jigsaw puzzle of business assistance.

Our visits also have underscored the need for coordination between the private and public sectors. Minnesota has more than 100,000 companies, and yet we have the pulse of but a fraction. Only about 3,000 are being contacted every year through separate efforts of Grow Minnesota!, the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and other economic development organizations.

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Grow Minnesota

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Thousands of companies, even by conservative estimates, may need assistance but are not likely to receive it. They might not be an active member of the business community. Maybe no one has made a direct personal offer for help. Or the current system is not easy to navigate.

No matter the reason, no one is formally thanking these companies for their investment in Minnesota, and no one is asking to see if they need assistance.

Grow Minnesota! has recognized this challenge and has compiled an impressive scorecard of results. For example:

- In Cambridge, we linked the local community college president with business leaders to address workforce needs; a Small Business Development Center was eventually created.
- In Willmar, visits identified a large number of business owners with retirement plans but no succession plans. A workshop was arranged with 35 local business attendees.
- In Park Rapids, a manufacturer was experiencing high costs related to repeated interruptions in electric service. The problem was relayed to

the two local utilities, and both are working on solutions to eliminate the unscheduled outages.

Grow Minnesota! also has made initial steps in helping to match businesses looking to expand with communities that can accommodate their needs. We helped convince a west-central Minnesota manufacturer to grow there instead of in Wisconsin. With state and local assistance, we kept a Twin Cities manufacturer's headquarters in Minnesota instead of moving to California.

Still, many businesses remain alone and challenged in addressing everyday issues.

Our new network – offering a single entry point to connect businesses with private and public resources – will enhance and better utilize existing assistance programs. We will help far more companies than we do today, and that will go a long way toward keeping them in Minnesota.

For information on Grow Minnesota!, visit the Web at www.growminnesota.com. If you'd like to schedule your company for a visit, contact M.E. Head at (651) 292-4674 or mhead@mnchamber.com.

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Seeking Solutions for Greater Minnesota's Future

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