

Toward a Logical, Equitable and Successful Learning Experience for All

Lee Warne

Driving from one corner of our state to another provides an opportunity to experience the breadth of diversity Minnesota has to offer. The diversity we see comes in the form of its citizens, housing, industry and opportunities. The incredible vistas of fields of grain, lush forests and myriad lakes are so important to us that we have made them indelible on our license plates. This great state with so many resources of people and places has much to offer and many challenges before it. Our ability to maintain what we value about where we live is under stress by our current economic conditions with little expectation of improvement in the near future.

Minnesota's education is a foundation for our way of life. We have long placed deep value in the quality educational system we have today. This system is, however, under great stress — like all aspects of our state today. It is incumbent on our future leaders to act to keep this quality educational system thriving.

This is particularly true for rural education. It is under fire by some because critics believe it is “too small,” “costs too much,” “isn't efficient,” among other comments. The difficult part for critics of small schools to overcome, though, is the success that rural districts have in educating their kids. Highest graduation rates, highest percentage moving on to post-secondary training, lowest violence rates, and strong community support for schools — the list could go on, but what is important is that small schools work. This success is evidenced by how many larger systems try to create smaller units within their buildings, or pod building styles

for grouping students, or focusing on mentors who follow students year after year – most of these efforts are designed to create the “small school atmosphere.” So if small schools are successful, what can we do in today’s environment to keep them open?

So what’s a new leader to do? I’m glad you asked.

Learners first – always

We must make sure that all children have an equal opportunity to succeed. It is obvious to anyone who looks at the course offerings that all things are not equal. It might not be necessary that they are equal, but all children should have access to the instruction that will get them to the standards the state has set. All children should have access to high quality instruction that will help them be successful and become the positive asset that our state and economy needs for the future. Each of the decisions regarding education should pass through the decision-making sieve of “Is this good for kids?” Too often we have been making decisions based upon issues other than what is best for our children.

Mandates: The bane of innovation and the guarantee of uniformity

Last legislative session, many legislators looked at the wide list of mandates that education groups wanted to have reduced. Most agreed that during a time of no money, we should be reducing the unfunded mandates and those that were simply not necessary. However, as the list began to circulate, it became obvious that the mandates were important to other folks, and they expressed the need to keep those mandates for specific reasons. As a result, there were perhaps six or seven mandates removed and another eight or nine added during the legislative session.

The stress on the educational system of continuing to require more with less is at a point of diminishing returns. There is only so much time to do all that is required, only so much time to submit all of the needed reports and only so much time for state-level folks to use the data. A great example of this happened a few years ago when the Minnesota

Department of Education required districts to complete and submit a special report, which had to be done by a particular timeline. During this process, one district superintendent had met with the individual receiving the reports in the department and found out this person liked a special Finnish coffee cake. So as part of the submission of his district's report, this superintendent included one of these fancy Finnish coffee cakes. A couple of months went by without any acknowledgement of the receipt of said cake. Then one day the superintendent happened to be in the department and stopped by the office of the official responsible for the reports. When the inquiry about how they liked the cake was made, the response was pointing to the pile of reports heaped up in the corner and saying they hadn't had the time to get to them yet. Upon finding the box and opening it up, the mold had completely covered the coffee cake!

Data is great if it has a purpose and is used, but there is no time for activities that will not make a difference in the process of teaching and learning or for collecting data that will not be used. Data-driven decision-making is only as good as the quality of the data and the utilization of the data. Many mandates were installed for good reasons, but like data, if it isn't necessary or funded by the state, it should be eliminated.

An example might be the requirement to publish minutes or announcements in a legal newspaper, generally a local newspaper, but not all districts have a local newspaper. They are forced to choose an area newspaper which might not be widely read. On the other hand, districts have the ability to post these items on their web sites, where almost everyone could access them. Another mandate provides for prevailing wage to be paid when a district does some construction or other work. Prevailing wage is set at the state average, which is usually higher than the actual prevailing wage in most rural communities. As a result, rural districts typically pay higher wages, which causes the costs of construction or remodeling to increase.

Technology and its impact on rural students

There is no doubt that the cost effectiveness of schools

is dependent upon numbers. While these numbers do not always equate with successful learning, they do play a role in being able to provide equal opportunities. By the creation and continued funding of telecom equity aid, the legislature has recognized that there isn't a fair playing field in terms of access to the Internet. In fact, in parts of our state, the costs for access to the Internet can be 10 times higher than in those areas of dense population. Educators generally believe that some great learning takes place when the right teacher is in front of a student. But when it comes to the quality and equality of teaching, technology may be the great leveler. A recent development will allow the unused portions of over-the-air TV broadcasting frequencies to be used to provide Internet service in underserved areas. This system provides for a longer-reaching high bandwidth that is not as prone to changes in topography or trees. This could provide a better opportunity, along with greater bandwidth delivery, for students to receive instruction. There will also be new gadgets and technology that can be applied in the process of teaching and learning, but we must use a systemic approach to choosing the right tool for the right job.

The ability of some software to guide students while learning and then route them back to what they have trouble with, when coupled with a classroom teacher may provide new opportunities to ensure that all students learn. This changing role for classroom teachers from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side" certainly will bring a point of discussion and perhaps contention. Nevertheless, technology is a major tool to be used to make sure that we reach our goal of all learners having the opportunity to succeed.

Recent years have been particularly hard on rural districts, which have had little room to cut as a result of limited funding. The importance of rural teachers having the ability to access content and provide a wider range of programming for their classroom is especially needed today. The state of Minnesota has to take a focused approach to what technologies will do the best job. When it comes to driving around the state, you will see every model of car offered for sale today. We all have different preferences. The same is true

for technology coordinators and teachers. We all want to use what we know and are comfortable with, but it may not be the best option for the job. The state must provide leadership by training and providing for the shared purchase of proven technologies that will help students learn. This kind of focused approach will be a change from the way we do business today, but will result in a more uniform and cost-effective system that will provide learning opportunities for kids.

Special Education : The impact of cross-subsidy costs on education

Educators will try to help every child succeed. It is what we have chosen to do with our lives and what motivates us to teach. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act law is supported by educators because it provides for that equal opportunity for children. The problem is that what has been required by law and what has been funded are two entirely different things. The requirements outweigh the revenue, and districts have had no choice but to transfer money from the general fund to pay for special education costs that are not reimbursed by the state or federal authorities. This “cross-subsidy” if paid in full would eliminate much of the financial burden for many districts. Districts in the state want all children to succeed regardless of how they arrive at the schoolhouse door. This issue is important to all schools and is a pivotal point of correction needed in state funding. Future leaders must demand that mandated expectations of schools need to be paid in full. Holding Congress accountable for financing the law they put in place and providing the state’s share of the difference would have a major impact on the financing of education in Minnesota.

Shared Services: The art of survival in rural Minnesota

Most rural educators were surprised when it was suggested that we need to mandate cooperation. Cooperating through sharing is what has kept most rural districts in business. In addition, district officials have figured out the delicate balance of local business relationships and cooperative purchasing some years ago. Districts understand the need

to purchase locally and yet need to find the best potential prices for goods and services. The shift of financing schools to dependence on local levy referendums has heightened this balance to an art form. Without the support of local business leaders, no district will pass a referendum needed to fund schools. With over 90 percent of districts using this electoral process to fund schools, they definitely understand how it works.

At the same time, we might also be moving to a new era of shared services in terms of the people we share. Many districts have become used to having their own business manager, superintendent, head custodian, or other experts in their buildings. Some years ago, the state provided incentives for districts to cooperate, for example, providing \$100 per pupil in year one and \$200 per pupil in year two to encourage cooperation. If the districts did cooperate, the funding would be extended. The state of New York goes even further, providing a dollar-for-dollar incentive to districts that cooperate with each other. As declining enrollment and financial pressures continue to squeeze down on school districts, these bastions of local schools are coming under new scrutiny. Never before have we had so many shared superintendents or part-time leadership in rural districts. School boards are looking for any way they can to ensure that they don't cut programs for kids, and the back-office functioning of a district is getting a deep review. Now is the time to provide for leadership in this change by offering incentives. These incentives could lead districts toward the savings they desire and maintain the high quality equal opportunities we all seek for kids.

A state investment in education that works for rural students

School districts cannot continue to find out what their funding for the next school year is after they are committed to staff contracts. There was a reason why many years ago the legislature told schools what kind of money they were going to be receiving over two years. That reason was because it allowed schools to adequately plan and adjust so that the system didn't suffer. There are only two variables to schools

budgets: revenue and expenditures. Since schools are not like businesses where they can just sell more stuff, there is little they can do to effect immediate change to their bottom line. Referendums cannot be done at any time they are needed. This lack of information about what revenue is going to be results in districts having to cut teachers or programs to balance what schools think will be their budget. Many times teachers don't know if they have a job for the coming year, and districts have an impossible time preparing for the upcoming year. Minnesota leaders need to find a way to deliver a stable funding stream that districts can see well in advance.

We know that the first few years of a child's educational experience can determine their success or failure. Because we know that, we should provide the funding necessary to ensure their success, including early childhood programs and all-day, every-day kindergarten. This one event might have a huge impact on closing the achievement gap and ensure that we have successful learners in Minnesota.

All districts are not the same and neither are their needs. A "one size fits all" funding might not be in the best interests of kids when it comes to issues of facility maintenance, health, safety and energy costs. Since local school boards stand for elections the same as city, county and state officials, they ought to have much the same authority when it comes to decision-making. School boards should have some form of levy authority to pay for these items. This system might need oversight or guidelines of some kind, but for children to have equal opportunities to learn, some of these issues can get in the way financially. The place to start would be to provide levy authority for districts to deal with their health and safety issues, since these are funded with almost 100-percent local money. And rural school boards could benefit by having levy authority for facility maintenance to keep buildings functional in the long run.

Vision for the future – not always as clear as we would like

No one expected that being elected to a state-level office would be easy nor would it provide a simple process once you got there. A legislator once told me that the process of

legislating is a lot like making sausage: it isn't that nice to watch, but end product is usually OK to eat. Right now we need leaders who are focused on the end product. Bold vision is needed to make sure that the most precious commodity our state has to offer succeeds. The choices made today will not come to fruition for a number of years, but without them our future is sure to be less than rosy. This vision must include all parts of our state being successful. This vision must include all children having the opportunity to succeed. This vision must be one that we can all believe in.