

Minnesota's Promise: Still Unfulfilled

The 2007 legislature took baby steps towards implementing the strategies of *Minnesota's Promise*. Governor Pawlenty's line item vetoes were minimal. Let's look at each strategy:

1. *Ensure that all academic roads are rigorous and lead to higher education.* The Commissioner now has funds to issue grants to schools creating or expanding International Baccalaureate programs (in addition to existing funding for Advanced Placement courses), and for 'pre-advanced placement' programs preparing students to take these rigorous courses. This is an important step in secondary education, but not enough to assure all students are prepared by high school, nor have access to these courses.
2. *Invest early in educational success.* The small increase in kindergarten funding, with permission to spend in on extended kindergarten days and pre-kindergarten programs is again a step in the right direction, but is neither comprehensive enough nor focused enough on the students who need it most. Two other programs do target children with greater needs, but will only reach a very limited number. A pilot project provides allowances to parents fitting certain specifications to pay for pre-kindergarten services promoting school readiness. A new Early Childhood Literacy initiative is limited to Head Start programs. Head Start programs are directed to move to full day programs, but with a guideline of 50% of the programs reaching full day by FY 2013. The legislature also restored funding for Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) from the 2003 cuts, a good move but not an expansion.
3. *Recruit, prepare, support and retain great educators.* Q-comp (alternative teacher compensation aid) was extended for another two years. This is good news for the 52 (and growing) districts and charter schools participating in the program, but far from covering the entire state. The governor vetoed a plan to support and reward teachers trying to obtain certification by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, citing research raising questions about its effectiveness. \$3 million will help teacher development in math and science curriculums.

Indeed the Minnesota Principals' Academy, which provides the only comprehensive executive professional development for Minnesota principals, and focuses on the instructional leadership needed to be successful in our 21st century globally competitive world, was cut from the bill. Authorized by the 2005 legislature with bipartisan support, the state invested over \$800,000 and took 48 principals and experienced school administrators out of their buildings for 30 days to prepare them to train principals across the state. Yet now, when they are ready to go and there is a high demand from Minnesota principals, the requested funding of only \$400,000, which was discussed during the original authorization, was denied. Short-sighted politics triumphed over the changes needed to prepare our schools and educate our children.

4. *Embrace our multicultural future – locally and globally.* On the local front, Minnesota’s academic standards must now include the contributions of Minnesota American Indian tribes and communities. A Task Force will study the impact of the academic standards for Minnesota students, especially American Indians. . \$1 million will go to train and recruit teachers for urban and diverse student bodies through three Collaborative Urban Educator programs.

Any global focus was limited to world languages – although there is still no state requirement for students to learn a second language. One new provision directs that world language instruction should acknowledge and reinforce the language proficiency and cultural awareness of non-English speakers, including American Indian languages and culture. Most world language and ELL teachers would tell you they already emphasize these values. Five grants were funded, to be awarded by the commissioner, for language programs that simultaneously support both native English speakers learning a world language, and English language learners master English while maintaining their native language. A new fulltime state coordinator for world languages may provide some needed support for districts, however, especially for those beginning less-commonly taught language programs.

5. *Engage families and communities as full partners in education.* The best news here is funding for grants for “After-School Community Learning Programs” operated by community or non-profit organizations, local government, child care centers, or schools. Goals are school connectedness, improved academic achievement, increased capacity to become a productive adult, and preventing truancy and juvenile crime. \$5.3 million over two years is a good start.

In addition, districts are now ‘encouraged’ to adopt a Parent and Family Involvement Policy and create advisory boards, a suggestion which may not have much impact since the Minnesota School Boards Association already recommends that districts adopt such a policy.

6. *Use data and research to improve teaching and learning everyday.* Not much here. The bill extends the deadline for the commissioner to add a growth model and design a value-added assessment to statewide testing, and removes the three year limit for using limited English proficiency version in standardized testing, but these are accountability changes that have little effect on the classroom day.
7. *Shape time to meet the needs of learning, rather than shaping learning to meet the constraints of time.* Other than the bills being shaped to meet the constraints of time and politics rather than the needs of learning, nothing to report here.
8. *Provide services for students with special needs are proactive, effective, efficient and adequately funded.* A Task Force to compare federal and state special education requirements was created and is directed to report back by February 15, 2008. The Task Force is to identify which state provisions exceed the minimum federal requirements, and recommend which state provisions should be changed to match the federal requirement. An alternative optional design for early intervention services is authorized, too. Neither addresses the fundamental need to redesign special education to remove constraints and increase its effectiveness.

The legislature did provide an overdue funding increase, which makes up for recent reductions but still remains well below the actual costs of providing special education services.

9. *Provide schools with funding that is predictable and sufficient to produce world-class performance.* For the next biennium, a 2% formula increase for the first year, with only 1% for the second year, is effectively a cut to school budgets in the face of inflationary increases. One time technology aid will help, but all forms of media need constant updating in today's world.

The future may be more hopeful, however, as a new School Finance Reform Task Force is directed to create a standard and index to ensure the funding formula remains adequate. They are to analyze the formula, explore simplifying funding, and examine regional service delivery structures, with a report to the legislature by January 15, 2008. The idea is to complete the P.S. Minnesota study, which followed a task force the governor created several years ago, although he vetoed an appropriation for a consultant to support the new task force and called the need for another task force "questionable." We can hope that the third time is a charm.

10. *Ensure that students come to school physically and mentally ready to learn.* The E-12 bill contains a \$3 per pupil (roughly) increase in the Safe Schools levy, and added an authority for schools to spend the money on counselors, social workers, psychologists, and chemical dependency counselors. Since Minnesota has the worst student to counselor ratio in the United States, this is a good step, but a drop in the bucket of needs. And, the funding is through local levies, so it involves no state money.