

Education: Less micro-management and more local control

Over 39% of the current budget for the State of Minnesota is devoted to spending on K-12 Education ¹, the highest spending category of our budget by far. Overall, I believe most schools do a fairly good job. In my own district (Westonka), we rank very high on reading and math scores against the elementary and middle/junior high schools throughout the state.

In speaking with school district administrators, teachers, and school board members about improving education, a very clear picture begins to develop. And what's most interesting is: The answers are not just about spending more money.

Even with our limited resources, we demand a world-class education for our children. We can do better with what we have if we are smarter in our approach to education. Here are my priorities, when it comes to K-12 Education:

- ⇒ **Funding, severance packages, and paying for education.** Its time to take a serious look at how we spend our education dollars. Superintendent "golden parachute" payouts, with hundreds of thousands of dollars in severance and sick time pay-offs are must end ^{2,3}. Each time these happen, they drain money from the classrooms, which is where it belongs. The State funding formula is designed to divert money into Minneapolis and St. Paul, leaving the suburbs and exurbs to struggle. It's also time to look at the successes that Wisconsin has seen as a result of making some incredibly modest changes to their benefit packages. One school district went from a \$400,000 deficit to a \$1.5 million surplus overnight ⁴. Some reasonable changes, bringing the public schools back in line with private sector benefits, will provide for a HIGHER level of education AND cost savings.
- ⇒ **"Local Control" is not just a catch phrase.** School board members have election certificates, just like city councils and state legislators. The State should set the standards that we expect for our educational investment. Then it should measure the success of each district. Let the local school boards do what they were elected to do, and hold them accountable when they don't. Which lead to:
- ⇒ **Less micro-management from the State.** This goes for the Legislature and the Department of Education: Stop the continuous tinkering and rule changes. I've been a witness to this type of behavior at a different level. The Minnehaha Creek Watershed managers and staff have a penchant for piling new rules, on top of new rules, on top of new rules. Each time a new rule comes out; there are costs for staff evaluations, consultants, meetings, and response papers...not to mention the costs the Watershed incurs coming up with rules. I would support educational edicts and changes only be allowed biennially to sync with the state budget, with appropriate funding to match the mandates. The policy of pushing unfunded mandates upon schools must be ended. When schools aren't continuously adjusting to changes, they can be innovative...improving quality, results, and even saving money in some cases.
- ⇒ **Alternatives should be encouraged.** It's hard to believe that someone with the business experience of Bill Gates or Donald Trump wouldn't be allowed to teach those experiences to our children. Thankfully, the 2011 legislature brought an improvement in alternative licensures. Parents need to have choice in education. I am not a huge proponent of vouchers because anything the government provides, the government controls. On the other hand, I also recognize that vouchers may be the only way out for a kid in a poor neighborhood. I am an enthusiastic supporter of non-public school expenses being fully tax deductible. I also support Charter Schools, as they provide alternatives for parents who are not satisfied with their local public school options.
- ⇒ **Vocational classes are important too.** I was surprised to find that my own district has discontinued classes that are important for the trades and vocational-level careers. There are complaints that blue collar manufacturing has gone away. But the fact is that we are not producing a work force to fill those positions as we have historically. From my contacts in those fields, many skilled manufacturing jobs go unfilled due to the lack of qualified workers. We focus so much on the pathways to college that we are eliminating programs that might start children down very successful and profitable career paths, ranging from pipe-fitters to chefs.

We can do better, we can spend more wisely, and we don't need more taxes to do it. We need leadership that isn't afraid to look at things in a new way. I made it work in Mound...I can make it work in Saint Paul.

1 <http://www.mmb.state.mn.us/doc/budget/bud-op/op12/summary.pdf>

2 http://www.twincities.com/education/ci_17805711

3 <http://www.bizjournals.com/twincities/stories/2003/05/05/focus3.html?page=all>

4 <http://www.posttrecrescent.com/article/20110629/APC0101/110629072/Story-documents-Kaukauna-schools-project-1-5M-surplus-after-changes?odyssey=tab%7Ctopnews%7Cimg%7CFRONTPAGE>