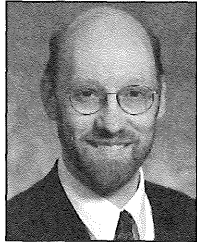


Lesson plans

Davnie turns teaching career and role as community activist into pursuit of improved education policies

By DAVID MAEDA

When Rep. Jim Davnie (DFL-Mpls) told his eighth-grade students that he was running for a seat in the Legislature they told him that they thought it was “cool.”



Rep. Jim Davnie

“They asked me if I was going to meet the governor and ‘Are you going to be on TV?’” Davnie recalls.

Davnie, a middle school teacher in the Buffalo School District, said that after years of encouraging his colleagues and students to be active in the legislative process, he decided to take the ultimate action to back his own words — to run for office.

“I tried to show what happens (at the Capitol) has an impact on what is going on in the classroom,” he said. “People are as powerful as they choose to be. It doesn’t take a whole lot of people to get an issue on the radar screen.”

Having both started his life and spent the past 20 years living in Minneapolis, Davnie has called the city’s Seward neighborhood — just south of the University of Minnesota’s west bank campus — home for the past seven years. He has been an active member of the Seward Neighborhood Group, a citizen participation group that addresses community needs such as crime, housing, and other community-building activities.

Davnie received his bachelor’s degree in psychology and social work from the University of Minnesota. Early in his studies, he took some occupational tests to determine which jobs his skills and interests might best be suited. When one of the results indicated a social studies teacher was a good fit, Davnie disagreed and decided to continue his studies.

But he would find that a second look at those test scores made him think that a social

studies teacher was exactly what he should be.

As a result, he found himself returning to the ‘U’ to get his master’s degree in education. Among the topics he has taught during the past 10 years is social studies.

Rather than teaching civics lessons via a textbook last year, Davnie taught the basics of lobbying techniques in order to help engage his class in the lawmaking process. He said it

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—Rep. Jim Davnie

was a rewarding exercise for not only his students, who wrote a petition about the Profile of Learning, but also for himself.

“It was a great way to meld my community activism with my teaching,” he said.

One of the main reasons Davnie decided to run for a House seat was to give teachers a voice in shaping the state’s education policies.

He said that many times well-intentioned education laws are passed with unrealistic deadlines. He points to last year’s modification of the state’s Profile of Learning which required, among other things, teachers to complete detailed reports just as the summer was beginning.

Davnie succeeds Rep. Lee Greenfield, who decided not to seek another term after having served 22 years in the House. Davnie said that Greenfield encouraged him in his campaign in the district, which also includes the Longfellow and Cooper neighborhoods, and part of the U of M west bank campus.

“Everybody who knows Lee has the utmost respect for him. His knowledge and experience are unmatched,” Davnie said.

Along with education issues, Davnie said he hopes to help address local government, environment, and transportation issues. He said

being an effective legislator not only means trying to put forth his own idea but also, “letting the Legislature act on me — See what issues come up, and see what I can learn from them.”

Being a freshman member of the minority party, he said he is anxious to experience how the bipartisan process works.

“Everybody cares about kids and the environment. I’m sure we’ll find some common ground,” he said.

Being a legislator isn’t the only new role Davnie recently assumed. Last summer his wife, Cara Leftofsky, gave birth to the couple’s first child. Davnie spent the last five months at home taking care of the baby.

In his spare time, Davnie said he enjoys reading and traveling. One of his past occupations was as a professional chef — with his specialty being a chocolate chip bourbon pecan pie.

Although he is excited about his new job, there are things Davnie will definitely miss about teaching.

“I’ll miss the kids and I’ll miss my fellow faculty,” he said.

DISTRICT 62A

1998 population (estimate): 31,780

Largest city: Minneapolis

County: Hennepin

Location: south Minneapolis

Top concern: “Our quality of life overall is good but clearly we have to keep working. I’m interested in the role the state plays in public education.”

—Rep. Jim Davnie