THE INNOVATION IN MINNESOTA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION HAS BEEN LARGELY THE WORK OF ITS LEGISLATURE

1. Our state has been developing a remarkable new and different model of schooling.

A real innovation does now exist in Minnesota. It is just not clearly seen -- obscured as it is by the picture we all carry in our head of traditional school. The policy discussion about education is so focused on the model most of us have always known . . . 'real school' . . . that it has trouble seeing the innovative approach to learning and teaching that has quietly appeared.

The opportunity presented to the Legislature this session is to extend this quite different model of schooling. What will help most is to see and understand the changes enacted by the Legislature over the past 60 years. [You will find, attached, a full description of these legislative, and district, actions.]

So, to begin:

a) Public education appeared in America as the bureaucratic system Horace Mann saw on his visit to Prussia in 1843, admired in that rising north German state and brought back to this country, and which then spread into the newly-organizing western states including Minnesota.

It was a system explicitly designed to train the coming generation to serve the interests of the nation. Mann, his biographer wrote, had no interest whatever in the individual child. Down to recent years our system was a checkerboard of districts each with an exclusive to run the public schools. For almost every adult today it is this arrangement that provides 'real school'. The problem is that it is insensitive to the need for change, -- as, generally. public-utility arrangements have been.

b) Outside the institution of public education change appears everywhere. Our economy, the nature of work, has changed (with implications everyone understands for the nature of learning). Society, the family, our population have changed. A new youth

culture has emerged. Today as a result there is growing concern about the failure of traditional public education to adapt. The 'one size fits all' model of traditional schooling is not well serving the young people who come, through no fault of their own, not well prepared for what conventional school expects and requires.

Adaptation was difficult: The traditional system could not do it. Along the way there has been pressure for 'school reform'. But change did not come from the outside, either. The concepts of 'school reform' advanced by academics -- typically proposals for comprehensive, systemic change -- imposed on all, whether ready or not -- were hopeless politically.

The failure of the traditional system to change cannot properly be laid on those running it: They did not create it, they inherited it. Many would like to see it changed. But the pressure from the dominant notion of 'real school' . . . and not least from parents wanting for their children the kind of school in which they themselves did well . . . was impossible to overcome.

c) In Minnesota it was the Legislature that did it. How and why the legislature responded is important to understand.

The differences among children meant that in the standardized 'one size fits all' model of schooling some would 'do better than others' and that some young people might not 'do well' at all. For the latter a different kind of school was needed. So 'alternative' schools appeared; encouraged to do whatever would work to keep the 'non-traditional' students enrolled. Most everything about these schools was different: the sites, the facilities, sometimes the hours, opportunities to study what interested these students.

It was the beginning of personalization; of the attention to the needs, interests, aptitudes and motivations of the different students.

Today the model of schooling that successfully engaged the 'non-traditional' students is proving to be of interest also to those in traditional school. The Legislature now should help this innovation continue to spread.

d) Halfway through the transition we can see the 'split screen' picture.

Innovation, real change, spreads gradually. It follows Everett Rogers' curve. It begins with the few who are ready. Soon others, observing, decide they too will move to the new model. Over time as all move up the 's' curve the transition is completed. We're all familiar with this process. It did not take long for autos to replace horses. Today the powering of autos is changing; electric motors replacing petroleum-powered engines.

Part way through the transition we see many still with the traditional; more all the time adopting the new. Both models are present. This is the 'split screen'.

There are issues and controversies during the transition. Economic interests vested in the traditional often work against change. The sellers of ice fought mechanical refrigeration when it appeared. Today the Legislature may find those delivering traditional education working to suppress the innovative model of schooling now beginning to spread.

2. Think of the innovative model of schooling appearing as having four elements.

First: It is designed to maximize the motivation of the individual student. **Second:** Teachers have the enlarged professional autonomy needed for that personalization. **Third:** Students are making full use of the knowledge available on the internet and Web. **Fourth:** the concept of achievement, of student and school success, broadens beyond (though it continues to include) reading and math.

It truly can be called a technology of schooling; 'technology' being the way capital and labor are combined. In the innovative model of schooling 'capital' means online rather than books and classroom films; 'labor' means the student treated as the principal worker on the job of learning, teachers essentially coaching.

That fourth element, broadening and changing the concept of achievement, deserves special attention . . . central as it is in this year's debate about what is and is nor 'working' in the innovative sector.

The change suggested by Alan Page, former justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, deserves more attention than it has received. The goal, Page was saying (toward the end of his effort for a constitutional amendment establishing a civil right to quality education) is "to realize the potential of each individual child". This is revolutionary: It personalizes the notion of achievement and of 'the achievement gap'. The gap becomes *the difference between the performance and the potential of the individual student.*

Again: *The personalized learning created for and successful with 'those not doing well' is now proving attractive to 'mainline' students.* The challenge for the Legislature in 2025 is to arrange public education so as to enlarge this innovative sector, making the personalized approach available to the growing number of young people in mainline districts who want it.

3. The new technology of schooling and learning has come, like all innovation, through an unplanned process of *people trying things*.

A few comments might be useful to clarify the concepts of innovation involved.

Minnesota's creation of an alternative sector within public education was **a**n ***institutional* innovation**. With this second sector public education was no longer the regulated-public-utility. The state now had also a research-and-development (R&D) sector; the alternative schools initially and then the program of chartering offer teachers and others the opportunity to innovate, to 'try things'.

Within this institutional innovation has appeared an ***organizational* innovation,** represented by the application of the professional partnership (or, workers cooperative) arrangement to a public school. This began in the LeSueur/Henderson district, early in chartering, with Minnesota New Country School.

Finding a way for teaching to become a more professional job and career is of major national significance. Minnesota now has schools in which teachers have full responsibility for 'professional issues'. By enhancing the work-life of teachers this helps with the difficulty public education has in retaining quality teachers. The Minnesota nonprofit Education Evolving has been moving this innovation nationally.

Within this organizational innovation important **pedagogical innovations** developed (as described above) in the new technology of schooling and learning.

It is useful of course to try, here, things shown to have 'worked' elsewhere. But innovation, real innovation, is not copying things done elsewhere. *It is trying things never done before*. That of course means its proponents will not know whether what they try will 'work'. But the big gains come from trying ideas not tried elsewhere. That idea of organizing a school to be run by a workers-cooperative of teachers is a perfect example. The adaptation to education of an arrangement never used in education was, in John Lienhard's terms, *an invention*. It did not need official permission: The teachers and school just worked it out. And it was successful. *This professionalization of teaching is a major step ahead in American public education.*

Asking officialdom to give its permission suppresses innovation. It is OK for educators just to try things. It is important to learn what works and what does not. Failure is a learning activity. Trials will be small; failures can be quickly corrected.

4. Two legislative actions are needed now to make this 'new technology of schooling' available to students in the mainline district sector.

o *The first* legislative action should be to remove the last 'condition' included in the 1991 legislation creating chartering.

One 'condition' limited the number of schools to eight. This was quickly removed by the Legislature; the cap first raised, then removed.

The second came in subsequent sessions as the Legislature broadened the authority to sponsor (authorize) new schools -- initially limited to districts -- adding colleges and universities and large nonprofits; then in 2009 adding the newly-created 'single-purpose' authorizers which now oversee roughly half the schools in the sector -- which today might be the best authorizing arrangement in the nation.

The third 'condition' in 1991 required proposed schools approved by the authorizer to be approved also by the state department of education. This was done politically; not on the merits. It has proved a major problem to have the oversight of

innovation placed with the organization overseeing, adopting and enforcing rules for the standard plan of district organization.

It is time . . . past time . . . for the Legislature to have the innovation sector overseen by an entity committed to continuing change; focused on helping education become a self-improving system. (Note: The 'innovation sector' will include the innovative schools in the district sector as well as those in the charter sector of public education.) It is not a job for the bureaucracy. In years past the Legislature would likely have turned to the state planning agency. To find an entity sympathetic to innovation today the Legislature might have to look outside, perhaps for some nonprofit organization; perhaps to a university that has a school of entrepreneurship.

o *The second needed legislative action is one* to help *the districts* open to the new technology of learning by providing them effective political leadership. It makes no sense to leave change the obligation of the superintendent, whose job and career are at risk in the controversies bound to accompany any effort at serious change.

This can be done by copying the 'optional forms' statute (412.541) enacted years back for municipalities. That legislation produced Minnesota's competent, successful, city administrator and city manager governments, with mayors directly elected, that we have today. *The legislation needed now would give residents of the school district the option to have the chair of the school board directly elected.* Giving residents of the school district the option to move to a directly-elected board chair can be critical in providing the school district the capacity to adapt.

5. Happily, action to facilitate innovation makes both practical and political sense for legislators.

A few key points will help in building the understanding of the innovation sector:

o The public wants to see its children interested, motivated, engaged in learning. Polling by The Kappan found that eight in 10 Americans care more about this than about test scores. Eighty per cent support normally attracts legislative attention.

o Legislators will find support with extending to students in district schools the personalized new technology of learning developed originally in the schools enrolling

'those not doing well'. Some district leadership will want to use the opportunity provided. Foundations are already helping with grants.

o There are significant educational and substantial economic advantages in making the student the principal worker on the job of learning.

The conventional discussion still talks in terms of adults 'delivering education'. Adults do control what is taught, and tested. *Students, however, control what's learned*. (If you have doubts about this, talk to educators.) This reality led the late Jack Frymier to highlight its implications: "If young people want to learn, they will. If they don't want to, you probably can't make 'em. *Any improvement in student learning will begin by improving student motivation.*" The innovative model of schooling and learning now appearing is precisely about maximizing student motivation.

o The new, innovative, model will strengthen teaching; addressing what causes half the new teachers even in Minnesota to leave within five years. That turnover, the inability to retain good teachers, testifies to the dreadfully inefficient system of personnel-management in public education.

o Real change, significant change, comes gradually; people accepting the different as they find they are ready. Innovation, being voluntary, works. Efforts to mandate change do not.

o In considering different approaches to schooling and learning the legislative session might usefully consider the apprenticeship system in the building trades. First: because more and more young people today seem interested in proceeding directly from high school to a career rather than going to conventional college. Second: because the apprenticeship system might be useful for the training of people interested in 'the trade of teaching'. The union takes young people right out of high school and in four years certifies them for practice. The student *earns as well as learns* while working the four years in the apprenticeship. There are these two very different systems of education in Minnesota. Why they are seldom if ever compared is a mystery.

o Of surpassing importance: ***Without the 'somebody else' able to make the changes that the districts cannot or will not make the Legislature has no real influence over Minnesota public education.*** It will go on forever being told there cannot be change because "the Legislature does not give us enough".

6. With a system structured to change Minnesota public education will become *self-improving*.

Our society needs its major systems to be self-improving. Most *are*: transportation, finance, computers, medicine, on and on. Public education is not. It needs to be.

Innovation is the route to the self-improving system. We are not serious about improving public education if we do not help it become a self-improving system.

If public education does not become self-improving, those advocating private education, and its public financing, will win in the policy debate now under way.

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Rev 1-20-25

The 'memo attached' referred-to on Page One begins on the next sheet.

How a 60-year-long 'R&D project' has created in Minnesota's public education a New Technology of Learning

1. How did so fundamental a 'school reform' emerge in Minnesota?

a. In an effort to serve the young people who in one way or another 'didn't fit' conventional public education educators were allowed to try new and different -- non-conventional -- approaches.

b. Radically different things were tried. Gradually an 'innovation sector' appeared, in which developed a non-traditional, un-conventional approach to teaching and learning.

c. This 'new technology of learning' now looks to represent the redesign of public education it has not been possible to get through conventional policy action. It works, for the students and teachers involved. And a sense that it can be useful for *all* students is now appearing in the mainline district sector.

2. There was no master plan for this transformation of what had been essentially a public utility into a broad range of public options. It simply 'happened', in a series of independent actions over the past 60 years by the state, by districts and by teachers.

Here -- in desperate brevity -- are its elements:

O Minnesota enacted mandatory **special education** for the handicapped in 1957; years before Congress acted. The national legislation in 1975 did, importantly, add the IEP; the individual education plan).

O In the mid-'60s, in Minneapolis, young people who had quit school were re-enrolled with the district, which contracted with neighborhood social-service nonprofits that wanted to do 'school' differently. Quickly a **Minneapolis Federation of Alternative Schools** appeared, with about 12 learning programs. It still exists.

O In 1971, on a federal grant, John Davis superintendent, Minneapolis created the **Southeast Alternatives program**. The elementary schools could convert to any of four types: Free school, Open school, Continuous Progress school, Traditional school. Parents could choose.

O In 1971 in Saint Paul, Wayne Jennings and Joe Nathan got an **'open school'** created, responsive to an articulate group of parents seeking an unconventional program. It continues today as the Open World Learning Community.

O In the early '80s educators committed to alternative schooling formed what is today the **Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs.** MAAP remains active, with programs all across public education; serving, it is estimated, over 130,000 students.

O In the 1985 legislative session Rep. Connie Levi, the Republican majority leader, agreed to support Governor Perpich's initiative for inter-district enrollment as she sought what that year became the **Post-Secondary Enrollment** Option.

O **'Open enrollment'** had failed in '85 but was enacted and went into operation, staged, in 1987 and 1988; providing for families of lower income the choice among districts always available to families financially able to move their residence or to pay tuition to another district (or to private school).

O In 1986 the Legislature enacted the **High School Graduation Incentives Program**, providing access to alternative programs run by community nonprofits for students 'at risk'. Soon afterward the **Area Learning Centers** program was enacted; enabling an interested district to offer to other nearby districts a program of personalized learning available year-round and, to accommodate students, in the evening.

O In the early 1990s, as the internet developed and as the World Wide Web was made available to the general public, **online learning** appeared. Initially used mainly by white families at upper-income levels, it came during the school shutdowns during the Covid pandemic (and since) to be used much more by families of color and of lower income. The program was completely revised in the 2023 session (see MS124D.094). There are now 146 (state-)**Approved Online Learning Providers**.

O In 1991 the Legislature made Minnesota the first state to have a program for **chartering** new schools. The program invites teachers and others to propose different models of school and provides a process for their approval. About 180 chartered schools now operate; some innovative, some not. For a full description go to https://www.centerforpolicy.org and scroll to "Chartering Is a Strategy . . ."

3. In this 'innovation sector' the traditional 'technology of schooling' changed quite fundamentally. A 'new technology of learning'

appeared -- 'technology' meaning, as economists say, 'the way labor and capital are combined'. In simple terms: *the way things are done*.

Think about the technology of traditional school: Five days a week, nine months a year; students grouped by age, (promoted) year by year from teacher to teacher; a standard curriculum set by adults; at the secondary level, courses and classes; education 'delivered'' by instruction; textbooks, blackboards and teacher talk.

Some fundamentally different concepts emerged from what these schools were allowed and encouraged to try. Consider:

Because students control what's learned, students are treated as co-workers on the job . . . Learning is personalized, to maximize motivation . . . Schools are smaller . . . The World Wide Web is fully available to student and teacher . . . Work is project-based, to show science, history, politics, literature. etc. related to each other . . . Teachers have the autonomy to work individually with students, closer relationships . . . Teachers can be responsible for the school, in partnerships, like other professionals . . . The concept of achievement for student and school includes language and math but extends well beyond.

4. Two conclusions seem obvious, as this innovative 'alternative education' becomes mainline.

a. it is a major accomplishment for Minnesota public education despite its having in a sense 'simply happened'. Today this new and different technology of learning seems relevant and useful *generally* in public education. Conventional school is no longer a good 'fit' for most if not all young people.

b. There is also in this a fundamental lesson to be learned for the process of improvement. Conventional efforts to mandate 'systemic' change fail: *What succeeds is giving those close to the action the opportunity to try things.* (It is a lesson not limited to public education.)

In summary: Across these 60 years an **'innovation sector'** has evolved in Minnesota's public education; improving gradually and, like all innovations, with a mixture of successes and failures . . . producing this **new technology of learning** that seems increasingly liked by students and sought by parents and that is **beginning now to be picked up** in the mainline district sector.

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Everything I read and hear suggests this history is not generally seen and understood. Conventional media are 30 years behind in explaining to Minnesota what has been happening in our public education.

It is unfortunate for the media, too, as they focus more and more on 'things not working well'. Neal Peirce used to say, "There are really only two stories: 'Gee whiz!' and 'Gosh awful!'. In failing to explain to Minnesota what has been happening in our public education our media have been missing the good thing that has happened; are missing the 'Gee whiz!' story.

Ted Kolderie