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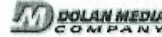


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Profile: Rep. Sandra Peterson

By Todd Messelt, Special to Capitol Report
December 29, 2008

Dist- 45A

Education, energy are top priorities for former teacher from New Hope

Educators in Legislative District 45 can count on a sympathetic ear among state lawmakers, given the trio of teachers who hold the district's House and Senate seats.

"We might be the only district with all of us as educators," says Rep. Sandra Peterson, DFL-New Hope, a former teacher and teacher's union lobbyist who chaired the House Education and Economic Competitiveness Committee last year.

The other half of District 45 belongs to Lyndon Carlson, DFL-Crystal, a former Minneapolis high school teacher who served 18 consecutive terms in the House and today chairs the powerful House Finance Committee.

Peterson's Senate cohort is Ann Rest, DFL-New Hope, who most recently taught English, humanities and creative writing at Armstrong High School – one of the schools where Peterson also taught English.


Peterson was born in Sioux Falls, S.D., after her Scottish-Irish mother (a country schoolteacher) and her Norwegian father (a farmer) eloped to avoid the consequences of what was then considered a mixed marriage.

She grew up the oldest of six siblings on her family's farmstead in rural Benson, a town of about 3,000 people in west-central Minnesota. As a young girl, she immediately took to academics.

"The teacher counted on me to be a second teacher," Peterson remembers. "She had me doing the library, she had me running off her dittos ... and when I was in third and fourth grade, I was teaching first and second graders, which my brother, who was in second grade, hated."

When Peterson was in the fourth grade, the region's country schools consolidated, and she was transferred to Benson Elementary School.

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"I was involved in any thing that would keep me in the school ..." she says. "I loved school. It was the best place you could be."

As a teenager, she participated in as many activities as possible. She wrote for the school newspaper, played French horn and sang in the choir. She was also active in 4-H, demonstrating dairy products, sewing and handwriting at the Minnesota State Fair.

After high school, she attended Macalester College in St. Paul, paying her own tuition, room and board by working as a nanny for a railroad lobbyist and returning home to manage an ice cream store and a drive-in during the summer months.

She took her first teaching job in Mounds View, and then married her late husband, Richard (who passed away in 1990). Richard was a friend of the family who worked as a mid-level manager for GMAC, the financing arm of General Motors.

When he was transferred to Chicago

in 1968, Peterson taught in Chicago-

area schools.

He transferred back to the Twin Cities four years later, so the couple bought a house in New Hope, where they raised two children.

She spent 17 years teaching elementary and senior high classes at Robbinsdale Area Schools. Later in her career, she specialized in dyslexic and emotionally disturbed students, experiences that convinced her of the need for early-childhood education – to this day a priority for Peterson.

She's a member of the Early Childhood Caucus and the House Early Childhood Committee and is one of Legislature's loudest voices for early- childhood education.

"I think it's a crucial area," she says, "and all of the research around early childhood education is very impressive."

Peterson left education in 1987 to serve as president of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers (MFT), a union that once served the bulk of metro area schools. She also served as vice president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO and as vice president of American Federation of Teachers.

She played a leading role in MFT's merger with the Minnesota Education Association (MEA), which in 1998 formed today's Education Minnesota.

Peterson also enjoyed six years on the Minnesota News Council (MNC) board of directors. The non-profit, media-ethics watchdog settles disputes between journalists and their subjects, and then publishes the results to a wide audience as an alternative to civil litigation.

First elected in 2004, Peterson kept a low profile during her first term in the House, partly because the DFL caucus held a minority position in the House in 2004 and 2005.

“We couldn’t be out there, and we didn’t have a huge role,” she explains. “But things changed when we got the majority in 2006. Then it was a whole new ballgame. We had the ability to put our agenda forward, and particularly with education.”

It comes as no great surprise that education is the first of Peterson’s top policy interests: “Education is number one, of course. It includes work force development ... and it includes higher education research, and the biotech industry.”

“Then I think number two would be energy, green jobs, and that whole area of work force development. And then I guess [number three] is transportation, because that’s a huge economic issue for the state.”

When session is out, Peterson says she enjoys participating in women’s social groups and spending time with her 6-year-old granddaughter.

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