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Listening and Learning: 2002

Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk's
Concluding Education Report



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Dear Fellow Minnesotans,

As the Ventura-Schunk Administration draws to a close, it is with mixed feelings that I prepare to leave the Office of the Governor and my position as Lieutenant Governor. I am delighted to have been able to complete my mission of visiting every school district in Minnesota. But I am disappointed that I will not remain in this job in order to apply what I have learned to the development of state education policy. This report, my concluding edition of *Listening and Learning*, will serve as testimony for what I believe needs to be done to improve education in Minnesota.

I am thankful for my profession as an educator, because it awakened in me the drive and inspiration to reach out to every school district in this state to listen and learn about the issues, concerns and successes in education. My goal is to share this information with all people who can make a difference. I believe that working together we can help our young students become educated, successful citizens in today's society.

In last year's report I mentioned that the number one issue I saw throughout the state was declining student enrollment. This year I followed up on that concern by holding four regional workshops to brainstorm for solutions on the issue of declining enrollment. The bulk of this report will consist of a summary of the ideas expressed by school superintendents, board members and panelists in those workshops.

My report would not be complete without offering my heartfelt thanks to all the people who made my visits possible. The superintendents, board members, teachers and students graciously allowed me into their schools. They showed me what was happening in the classrooms and took the time to discuss important educational issues. The workshops on declining enrollment were a team effort with important help from Sandra Stalker and Tom Gillaspay of Minnesota Planning, Vernae Hasbargen of the Minnesota Rural Education Association, Doug Thomas of EdVisions Cooperative and many others. At the Governor's Office my staff worked to schedule my visits, travel with me, take notes and photographs and post my visits onto my Web site; special thanks to Steve LeBeau, my communications director; James Garlough, my executive assistant and scheduler; Cheryl Savage and Wayne Hayes, education policy managers; Paul Moore and many others. On all my travels over four years my closest companions were Sgt. John Dennig, Sgt. Paul Gorski and Sgt. Melissa Strassburg; they did their best to make me feel comfortable, safe and on time. My biggest thanks goes to Governor Jesse Ventura, who chose me to be his running mate, and appointed me to be his Ambassador for Education.

While there is a need for systemic change in the process, administration and governance of public education, I am confident that Minnesotans have the creativity, enthusiasm and determination to overcome every challenge. I am not sure what I'll be doing when I leave office, but I promise I will continue to work hard to keep improving education in Minnesota.

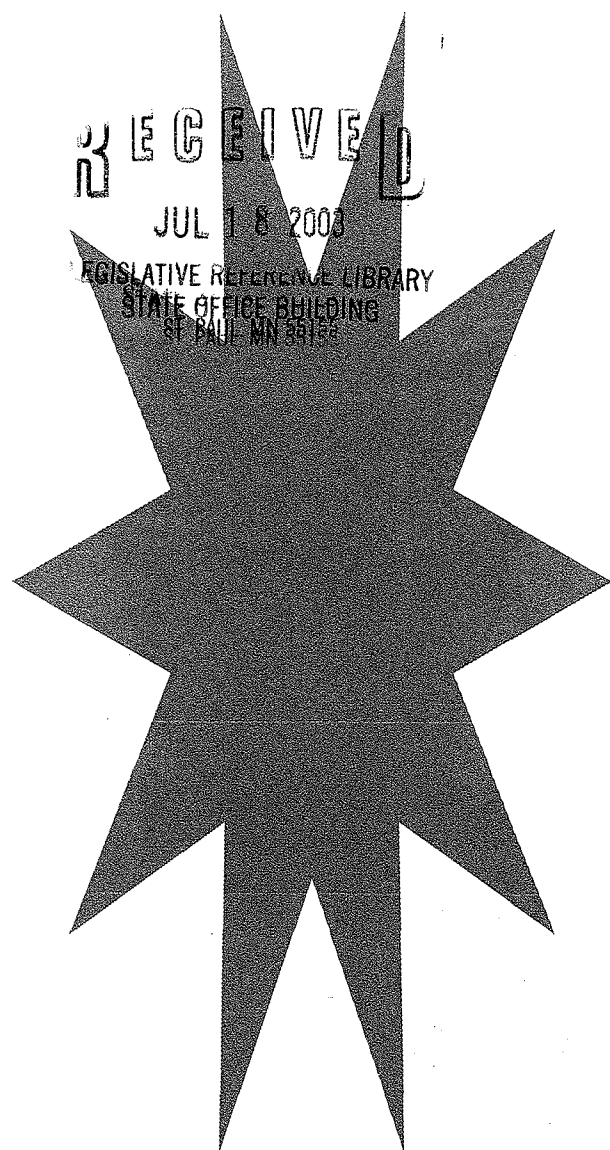
Sincerely,



Lieutenant Governor

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Listening and Learning: 2002 was prepared by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. Contributors to this report included: Lieutenant Governor Mae A. Schunk, Steve LeBeau, Cheryl Savage, Paul Moore and James Garlough.

November 2002

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Declining Enrollment

Preface: Out-of-the-Box Thinking on Declining Enrollment

In 2002 Lt. Governor Mae Schunk convened four workshops for school superintendents and school board members to brainstorm on the problem of declining enrollment. The meetings were held at the Minnesota New Country School in Henderson (March 26), the Discovery Middle School in Alexandria (April 9), the Northeast Service Cooperative in Mountain Iron (May 3) and the Blackduck Public School (May 8).

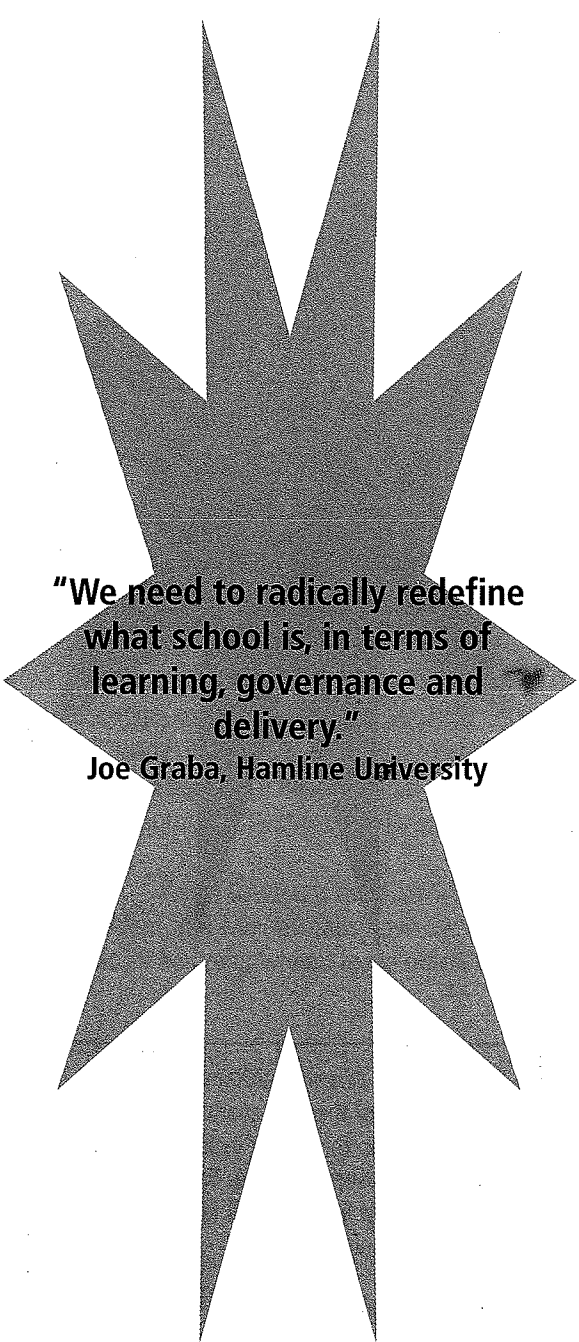
Each meeting included an introduction by Lt. Governor Schunk, a demographic overview from Tom Gillaspay of Minnesota Planning, a panel discussion on ideas that work and small group discussions on the question, "How can your community provide the best educational opportunities for your grandchildren 20 years from now?" Despite regional differences, many of the same key ideas and suggestions surfaced at each meeting.

Introduction: Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk

The most serious problem in schools, both rural and urban, is declining enrollment. When schools lose students, they also lose money, because education revenue is based on a per-pupil formula. The decline in students is due to the smaller size of families, shifting local economies, open enrollment, and other educational options. Problems arise because revenue declines faster than overhead costs. Eventually schools are forced to lay off teachers and cut back programs. The major tension is that each town considers the school to be the heart of its community, even as the school becomes too expensive to operate. The previous answer, consolidation of districts, seems to have run its course. In many rural areas there have been repeated consolidations – along with many closed schools – so that many students spend more than two hours a day riding a school bus. New solutions are needed.

Many administrators think that the only answer is more money, but others have developed four basic responses to declining enrollment:

1. Reduce overhead – e.g. share buildings with other organizations, such as public libraries, early childhood



"We need to radically redefine what school is, in terms of learning, governance and delivery."

Joe Graba, Hamline University

centers, etc.

2. Augment revenues with partnerships – with businesses, non-profits or other districts.
3. Community economic development – more businesses and a better economy brings jobs and families.
4. Reinvent educational/administrative process – e.g. cross-age classes, high-tech one-room schoolhouses, etc.

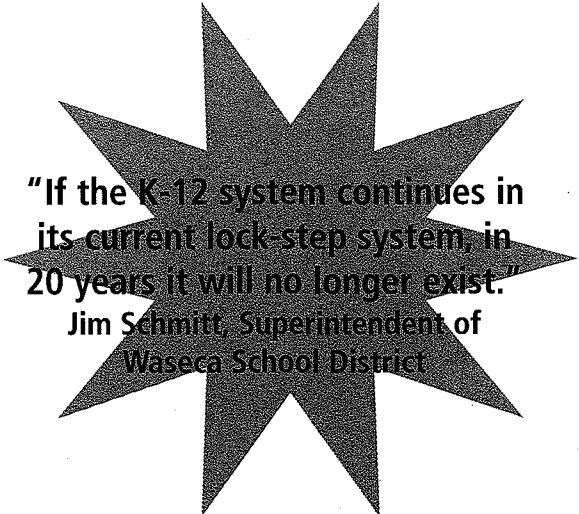
The Graduation Standards have reinvented what a diploma means; districts must now reinvent the means to attain those diplomas. This process of reform is necessary to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of schools.

Demographic Overview: Tom Gillaspay, State Demographer, Minnesota Planning

Minnesota is growing in population (12.4%) nearly as fast as the national average (13%), and we are the fastest-growing state in the Frost Belt (the Midwest, Great Lakes, New England, Northeast). This growth comes from natural increases (more births than deaths) and migration from other states and countries. The important thing to note is the net effect of this growth. Throughout the five state area people are moving from rural areas to the larger cities, most notably to the Twin Cities and its suburbs. The growth area stems from St. Cloud to Rochester. This increase is on pace with major cities like Denver, Seattle and Atlanta. Most of the five state area is in the middle of a long-range decline. Some counties in western Minnesota have been declining for decades.

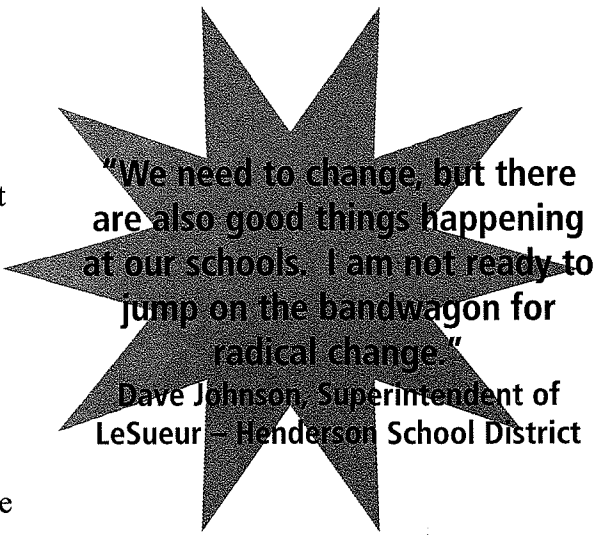
The biggest percentage of growth is not school-age children, but middle-aged people (45-64 years old). It is fair to say that we are in the pre-retirement decade. That means that soon large numbers of teachers will retire. Minnesota is a year or two ahead of the rest of the nation in terms of aging. In some Minnesota counties, one of every four people is 65 years old or older.

The current decline of numbers of students parallels the decrease of the 1970s, but that decline was very sharp and many schools closed; now the rate of decline is more gradual, but it is also more long-term. During the baby boom there were 90,000 births per year; now there are 60,000. Right now student enrollments are at their peak statewide. The declines are showing up more sharply in the rural areas; the non-Metro is a year or two ahead



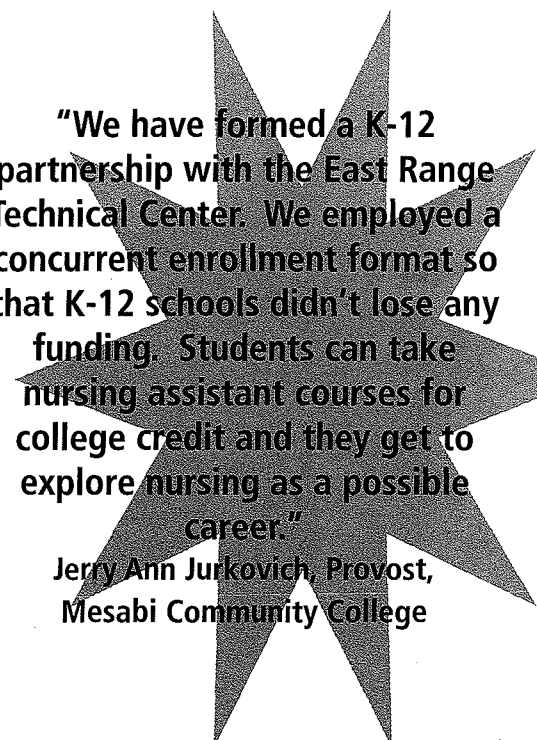
"If the K-12 system continues in its current lock-step system, in 20 years it will no longer exist."

Jim Schmitt, Superintendent of Waseca School District



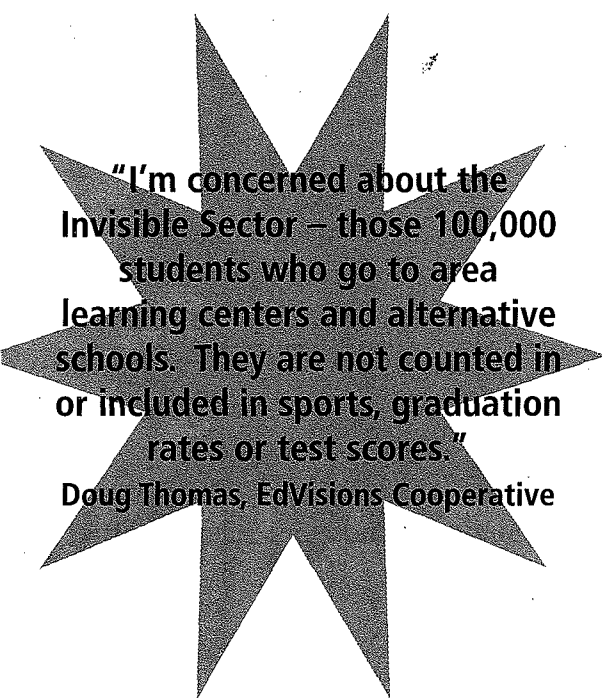
"We need to change, but there are also good things happening at our schools. I am not ready to jump on the bandwagon for radical change."

Dave Johnson, Superintendent of LeSueur – Henderson School District



"We have formed a K-12 partnership with the East Range Technical Center. We employed a concurrent enrollment format so that K-12 schools didn't lose any funding. Students can take nursing assistant courses for college credit and they get to explore nursing as a possible career."

**Jerry Ann Jurkovich, Provost,
Mesabi Community College**



"I'm concerned about the Invisible Sector – those 100,000 students who go to area learning centers and alternative schools. They are not counted in or included in sports, graduation rates or test scores."

Doug Thomas, EdVisions Cooperative

of the Twin Cities. In the Metro, the largest percentage of students is in the 10th grade; K-6 populations are all smaller. In rural areas, 11th grade is the largest group of students.

The biggest change is in the backgrounds of individuals who are coming here. More and more students represent the diversification of our society in terms of language, culture and race. Many rural districts must adapt to rapid increases in diverse students. Accordingly, more innovations are coming from rural areas. These changes can be very abrupt, often as the result of a new or expanded business in town. Currently, Minnesota is one of the least diverse states: 9% of children and 4% of adults in Minnesota are minorities. There are more than 70 languages spoken throughout our school districts – so they can be very different in various locations – e.g. Kurdish in Moorhead; Pelican Rapids is 21% non-English; Worthington was all-white and declining – and suddenly its kindergartens are booming with non-English speakers.

Summary of Suggestions and Comments by Superintendents and School Board Members

Note: The following section presents a cross-section of comments from participants at the declining enrollment workshops, but this does not mean that all participants agree with every suggestion included here.

Funding

The Need for Predictable Funding

The best way to manage a school is to plan at least two years into the future, but that is not feasible when there are great fluctuations in funding from year to year. School districts need predictable and stable funding in order to do long-range planning and to make structurally balanced budgets a reality. The main cause of revenue changes is declining student enrollment. Districts can't cut costs as fast as the number of students declines because overhead tends to remain the same. As enrollment increases, the revenue is greater than expenses; as it decreases, expenses are greater than revenue. Unpredictable funding wreaks havoc on the districts. In addition to fluctuations in enrollments, districts also face many changes with boards and

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):

superintendents. With so much uncertainty, it is especially important to have stable funding as a basis for budget planning.

It would help to allow districts to levy additional money in their districts without going to voters, or to alter the funding formula so that a sudden change in student numbers would not result in a rapid drop in funding. At least there needs to be transitional funding so that districts have time to adapt.

Change the Funding Formula

The state funding model is not working right now for small, rural schools. A more stable and predictable funding formula would be based on schools, buildings, classes or programs, rather than per pupil. Perhaps there could be a combination of classroom and per pupil funding. CFL once examined a resource-costs model that would fund programs instead of students, but did not develop it. These variations on the funding formula would help meet fixed costs during a time of declining enrollment.

Maybe there needs to be a separate funding formula for the Metro area and non-Metro areas because their needs are so different. Minnesota is seeing its political power base shifting even more to the Metro area. There is a concern for disparity between rural and urban funding as we return to local funding from property owners – although it is under the guise of local control. There is also a disparity that works against rural districts, because they cannot benefit from economies of size. Large urban districts can afford extra programs, but small districts cannot.

Other comments about funding

- Money could be used more efficiently if districts weren't bound by so many regulations and mandates. Some questionable regulations include things like elementary physical education – which costs a lot of money. Charter schools have 10 things they can opt out of; these exemptions should also be allowed for public schools.
- Money could be saved through multi-district collaborations in facilities, programs and performances.
- Additional financing is needed for buildings and preschool programs.

"The population in my district peaked at 1100 in 1995. Now it's down to 900, and soon it will be 800. Every child is precious, so we do what is necessary to hold on to each one."

Jerry Ness, Superintendent of West Central Area School District

"Grants provide a way for innovative teachers to obtain a degree of autonomy. One sixth grade teacher realized a dream by getting a DNR grant to create a school forest. This is a good example of place-based education, using local resources as learning experiences for children."

Fleta Carol, Grants and Endowment Coordinator for Proctor Public Schools

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):

"Sixty percent of the jobs in 10 years haven't been invented yet. And a K-12 education is no longer a minimum standard for success in today's world. That's why we've formed a partnership with Alexandria Technical College."

Ric Dressen, Superintendent of Alexandria School District

"We have funding disparities in Minnesota. It is important to put the kids first. We must save the children and change the concept of the way schools are funded."

Russ Smith, Superintendent of Cloquet School District

- Kindergarten students only count as ½, but all-day, everyday kindergarten has been proven to work. The state should fund it entirely. This is especially important for disadvantaged kids, because they need to be prepared for learning.
- If the state is already controlling funding, why doesn't it take a step further and control expenses? The state could even have a statewide salary schedule. Let's not fool ourselves about local control.
- The state should cover the excess costs of special education. We are from the smallest district in the state; it is very sparse, yet our special ed costs are very high. We could go bankrupt because of one expensive student.
- The state should level the playing field by funding technology and technology access. Some districts pay exorbitant costs for long distance phone lines, especially large, sparse districts. Districts must use T1 lines, but they are only funded for 56K lines.

Technology

Online courses

Online classes may be a way to retain students who drop out and to serve homebound students, Alternative Learning Centers and home school students. Many questions arise: Should there be a policy about whether students from one district can take online courses in another district? Should education consist solely of online courses? Should the state develop online courses so districts with better resources don't have an unfair advantage over others?

Technology is poised to make dramatic changes in the way education is delivered. This could mean radical changes for the school system, especially for students not in school 8am-4pm. If all learning is provided online, there need not be any school buildings. Schools could become more like an office environment, where 20 students might be working on 20 different online courses at the same time, as the teacher becomes more of a facilitator than a lecturer.

One big worry is maintaining interpersonal skills. Students need some degree of socialization with peers and teachers, plus they

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):

need to learn to network and communicate face to face with each other. We do not want to treat all students as if one size fits all – One big worry is maintaining interpersonal skills. Students need some degree of socialization with peers and teachers, plus they need to learn to network and communicate face to face with each other. We do not want to treat all students as if one size fits all – and we don't want students to simply spend all day in front of a computer. Technology access is important but it is not going to be a savior of education. You can't totally replace the teaching structure with computers.

Online resources

Downloading reading material and curricula from the Internet could save a lot of money, especially since books quickly become out-of-date.

ITV: Interactive television is a way to share teachers and provide more program offerings for students.


State role in technology: Since technology is essential in education, and education is a state responsibility, the state should develop technology policies for K-12, build a statewide network and provide resources to ensure equity among districts.

Currently there is great disparity among districts: In Nett Lake the cost of Internet connectivity is as much as \$600 per pupil per year; in Rochester access costs are closer to \$1 per pupil per year. Funding needs to be consistent. Both hardware and software are expensive, and poorer districts may not be able to keep up on their own, especially because hardware needs to be replaced every three years.

Any time spent learning outside of the classroom could affect district revenue, because the funding formula is based on a full day at a site. Dramatic changes could also affect the notion of licensure. Districts need to cooperate more closely to develop online classes and to use ITV.

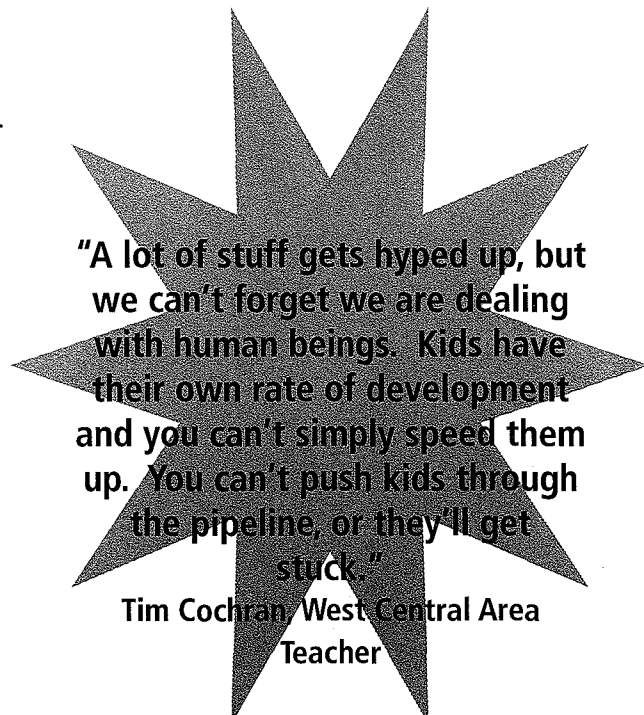
Partnerships

Possible partners for school districts include other districts, higher education, businesses, non-profit organizations and governmental organizations. Partnerships can have benefits in



"Our college's vision focuses on the school as a regional learning center. We need to recognize new realities with new results and new designs. We are in a competitive marketplace and we have to react."

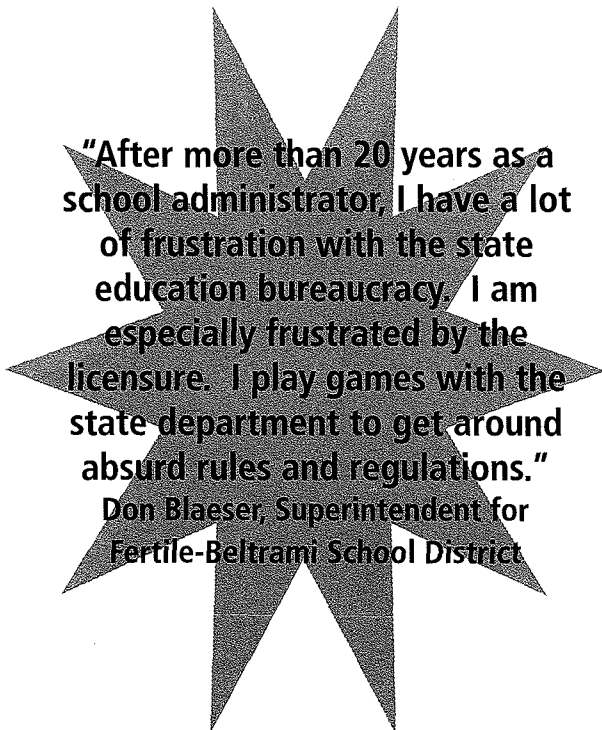
**Kevin Kopischke, Vice President,
Alexandria Technical College**



"A lot of stuff gets hyped up, but we can't forget we are dealing with human beings. Kids have their own rate of development and you can't simply speed them up. You can't push kids through the pipeline, or they'll get stuck."

**Tim Cochran, West Central Area
Teacher**

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):



"After more than 20 years as a school administrator, I have a lot of frustration with the state education bureaucracy. I am especially frustrated by the licensure. I play games with the state department to get around absurd rules and regulations."

Don Blaeser, Superintendent for Fertile-Beltrami School District

terms of increased cash flow, shared overhead costs, access to greater resources, increased programming opportunities and increased public awareness and support.

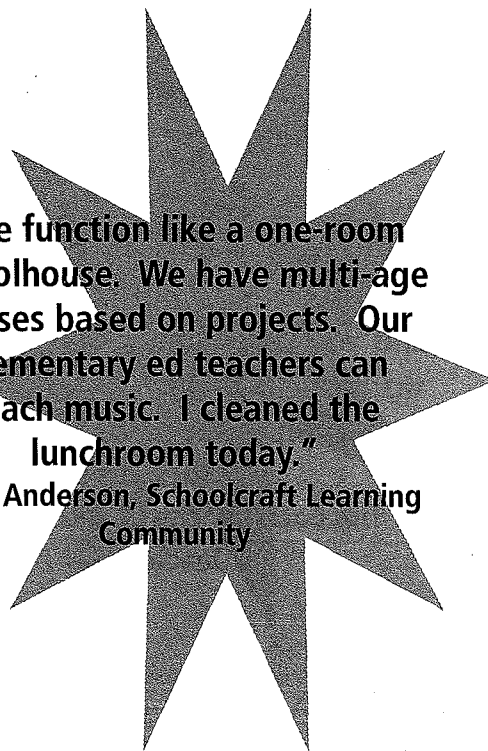
Districts – Many districts already save money by sharing superintendents, business managers, sports teams and teachers. More sharing is possible, but this would require neighboring districts to adopt the same calendars and daily schedules. Ironically, increased district-to-district partnerships run counter to the competitive attitude fostered by open enrollment.

Higher Education – Greater cooperation between K-12 schools and higher education institutions can have numerous positive results. Partnerships in Alexandria (Alexandria technical College) and the Iron Range (Mesabi Community College) have proved mutually beneficial. They share teachers and resources, plus they facilitate the transition from K-12 to higher education for the students.

Businesses – Common partnerships with businesses include shared space and technology. In one community, Brown Printing funded an ITV lab in the school; in return its employees use it at night to take college courses at SW State University. The district also brings ESL teachers to the Brown plant to teach its non-English speaking employees.

Non-profit Organizations/Governmental Organizations – Schools in various districts have become partners with childcare centers, senior citizen centers, community fitness centers, municipal libraries, city offices and other agencies.

Many of these partnerships are forms of co-location, where the school and other enterprises operate under one roof. A key benefit is that schools share their overhead costs with other tenants. A side benefit is that people who enter the building to do business with one of the tenants also become acquainted with the school. Parents using childcare may choose to enroll their child in that school. Community members may become interested in volunteering at the school. As more people get to know the school, they may become more likely to vote "yes" when referendums for schools get on the ballot. A common suggestion was that schools should co-locate with retail



"We function like a one-room schoolhouse. We have multi-age classes based on projects. Our elementary ed teachers can teach music. I cleaned the lunchroom today."

Scott Anderson, Schoolcraft Learning Community

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):

businesses to set up a mall-like atmosphere. It would help more community people see the school, and it may encourage students to be more interested in staying in the school building. This could help prevent dropouts.

Flexibility in Programs and Policies

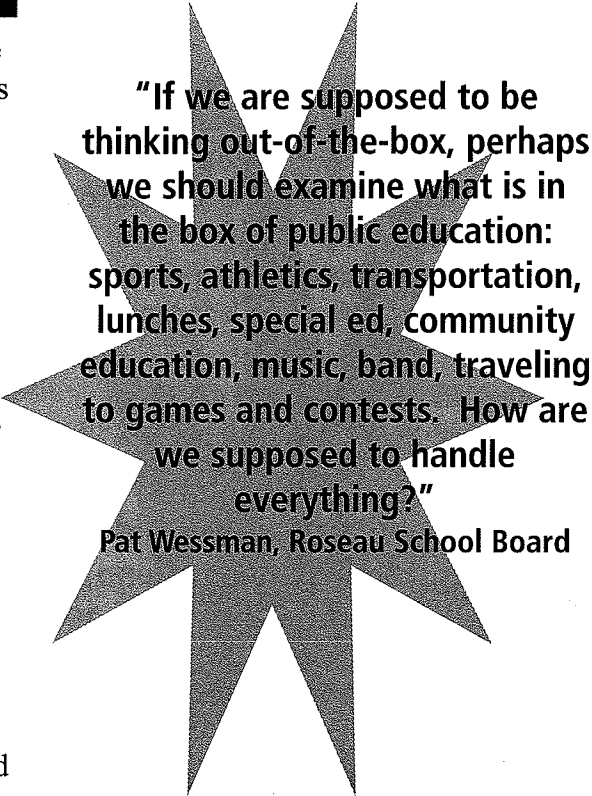
Flexibility

In order to react more quickly and effectively to tight budgets and budget cuts, rural schools would appreciate flexible policies with regard to state mandates and teacher licensure. Some state mandates require certain fixed costs that may not take into account local needs. Several superintendents said that without state mandates, the current level of funding would be adequate. Sometime mandates intended to fix urban problems are needlessly placed upon rural schools. Perhaps there should be two sets of education policies: rural and urban.

Flexible policies, especially in regard to teacher licensure, would make it easier to adapt to constant changes and fluctuating revenues. If districts are to implement the 'no child left behind' approach, they must be able to move resources around as the clientele changes – yet how do you manage fluid funding? Teacher licensure gets in the way. Today we need generalists and we need flexibility, so that policies and mandates do not prevent us from solving problems. The state is getting more compartmentalized.

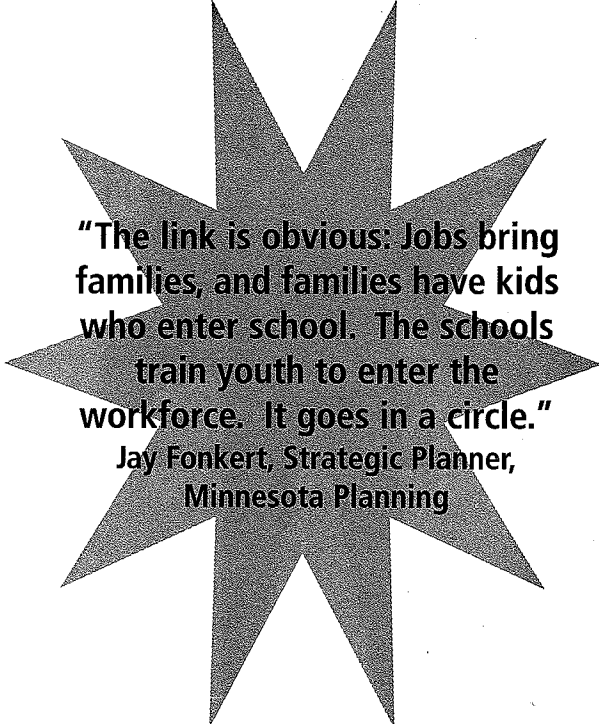
Some suggestions:

- Year-round teacher contracts would enable districts to provide more offerings.
- Teachers should become practitioners and brokers of services rather than hired employees; they can multi-market themselves via online classes, etc.
- Alternative teacher compensation presents a way to make teacher contracts more flexible.
- Classes in small schools can be arranged in multi-age groups, rather than by dividing students by grades.



"If we are supposed to be thinking out-of-the-box, perhaps we should examine what is in the box of public education: sports, athletics, transportation, lunches, special ed, community education, music, band, traveling to games and contests. How are we supposed to handle everything?"

Pat Wessman, Roseau School Board



"The link is obvious: Jobs bring families, and families have kids who enter school. The schools train youth to enter the workforce. It goes in a circle."

**Jay Fonkert, Strategic Planner,
Minnesota Planning**

COMMENTS BY SUPERINTENDENTS AND SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, (CONTINUED):

"Charters are not out to steal kids; they provide an educational opportunity.

Some of our students would drop out if they did not attend our school."

Dee Thomas

Minnesota New Country School

"Small size is a virtue.

Research has shown better scores, more graduates and fewer behavior problems in smaller schools compared with bigger schools with the same sort of students. Small size can allow greater flexibility and innovation."

Terri Anderson, Center for School Change

Open Enrollment

The system of open enrollment is a way to foster healthy competition between schools and to provide parents with educational options. Ideally, innovative and effective schools will attract more students, and encourage other schools to improve in order to keep pace. But all too often open enrollment is used for all the wrong reasons. To a large degree athletics drives open enrollment, which makes it easier for districts to cut teachers before sports programs. Why not let someone else do athletics? Why not have community-based sports programs?

Another big reason for open enrollment – perhaps more than athletics – is childcare. Parents use a geographical factor: they have their kids go to school near their workplace, so they can drive them. In some communities, open enrollment is related to racial issues and "white flight."

Some kids or parents get mad and then transfer schools; they use it as a threat against teachers and principals. It's like trying to stop a roller coaster. Yet schools close doors to special ed kids – but not mainstream kids. This forces districts to be selective.

One subtle impact of open enrollment is that it becomes harder to get parent support for community referendums because the state reinforces the idea that school is a family matter – not a community matter – so referendums fail. School choice is a matter for individual consumers.

"Winning" in open enrollment is questionable. What have they won? Their increased enrollment is not based on residence population, and therefore the figure is artificially inflated. How does that district plan its future? Districts provide an infrastructure for these extra students. But will that infrastructure be needed in 10 or 15 years?

The Value of Small Schools

We need to do what we can to make sure small schools survive, because they tend to be academically excellent. We also need to understand what makes these schools successful. Much of it has to do with students being involved – a greater percentage of students can participate in activities at a small school.

Assessment for Excellence Committee

Walter Maginnis High School, Minnesota Correctional Facility, Red Wing

One of the most worthy education involvements I've had in office has been to chair the Assessment for Excellence Committee, which examined ways to improve the educational program for male juvenile offenders at the Red Wing Correctional Facility. This initiative of Corrections Commissioner Sheryl Ramstad Hvass is typical of her proactive style of management. She knows that education plays a big role in the future success of these young people upon their release from the facility. Indeed, many of the juvenile inmates lack basic educational skills and have diverse learning styles, which add up to significant challenges for teachers.

The Assessment for Excellence Committee carefully evaluated existing programs, reviewed other correctional educational models, and developed a blueprint for enhanced programming and better methods for measuring results.

Among the committee's many accomplishments are:

- An increased number of special education teachers and assistants.
- An enhanced working relationship between the Department of Corrections and the Department of Children, Families and Learning.
- More vocational educational programming to address the needs of the young men who transition from the Red Wing facility to the workforce.
- More therapeutic programming and life skills training in the school day to better meet mental health needs.
- Additional technology for computer assisted instruction, curriculum, testing and staff communication.
- A renewed focus on helping youth successfully transition from the facility to their next learning site, whether that be the workforce, vocational education, an apprenticeship, or high school. In addition, the committee set challenging new goals for next year's Assessment for Excellence plan that include:
 - An increase in special education oversight and resources.
 - Meeting the educational needs of an older juvenile population through adult basic education.
 - Increasing vocational preparation and placement opportunities.

Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk: My Positions on Education Issues:

Profile of Learning

When we took office in 1999, Governor Ventura and I heard many loud complaints about the Profile of Learning from legislators, special interests groups and the education community. As a teacher, I, too, confronted this large-scale change in Minnesota's Graduation Standards with little time to accomplish this revolutionary task. At the same time I realized that Minnesota needed to change the way children were taught, to make them more fully prepared to handle the society and the economy of the new millennium. It makes sense to evaluate students based on what they actually learn and their ability to apply knowledge in action, rather than simply dispensing diplomas to every student who manages to stay in school and warm a chair for thirteen years.

When I started visiting schools and talking with administrators, teachers, students and parents, I saw there were many supporters alongside the detractors. Schools that had started early to implement the Profile began to realize that this was a better way to teach. Many teachers (including myself) commented that this was the way they always taught. While some schools demonstrated their excellence and achievement in implementing the Graduation Standards, others said it couldn't be done; they said it was impossible. What I found was that some were simply reluctant to change, while others just couldn't understand how to do it. Students would complain to me that their teachers would simply plop a Profile packet on their desk and tell them to do it because they needed it to graduate!

Many teachers hesitated to implement the Profile because of cynicism. Twice before, legislators had passed and then retracted plans to adopt standards-based systems; remember Learner Outcomes – LO? and Outcome Based Education - OBE? With ongoing debate in the Legislature on the topic, many teachers assumed the Profile of Learning would also be eliminated, so, they thought, why waste your time to implement it?

All of these factors seriously delayed implementation of the Graduation Standards. Two things turned it around. First, the Legislature in 2000 agreed to allow school districts to temporarily delay using the Standards as graduation requirements, and it allowed schools to choose how many Standards would be required. This took the pressure off the schools that needed more time. Secondly, the Department of Children, Families and Learning dispatched Graduation Standards experts to schools to help them understand how to implement the changes, under the Minnesota Excellence in Education Program (MEEP).

For the last two years it has been rare for teachers or superintendents to even bring up the topic of the Graduation Standards to me. I maintain that we should keep the Profile of Learning, but fix the problems that it has: the paperwork is excessive, the assessment process is confusing, the number of Standards may be too many, and some Standards may need to be reworked and clarified. It is also difficult for small schools with small staffs to effectively deal with all the Standards. Yet it is important to improve these Standards and not start again from scratch. Most districts have made tremendous progress, and they have pleaded with me to keep the Standards. We can't let a highly vocal and politicized minority ruin it for everyone else.

Reform the Education Funding Formula

Governor Ventura has often complained that the formula is way too complicated; it seems that every district I visit thinks the formula is unfair. Most importantly, because the formula is based on the number of pupils, the

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR MAE SCHUNK: MY POSITIONS ON EDUCATION ISSUES (CONTINUED):

statewide decline in student enrollment is wreaking havoc on districts – both rural and Metro. Many participants in the declining enrollment workshops complained that it is exceedingly difficult to plan ahead when the budget itself is so unpredictable. It is extremely difficult for superintendents to foresee future economical and political shifts, and then trim their budgets ahead of time to maintain balance in their districts. But the question of how to change the formula will be a major political endeavor. Some ideas I have heard include basing funding on schools, programs, classes or even having a different formula for rural schools.

A lot of the ideas to reform funding usually include adding more money to the formula. I am not opposed to that, *if* the funding reform is accompanied by administrative and governance reforms, and maybe even reforms in the education process. We have evidence that good education can be more economically efficient. Just adding money is not the answer. We need to learn better ways to spend the money we have.

Reform and Redefine School Districts

We need to create a more efficient way of governing schools by increasing the size of rural districts and streamlining administration. This does not mean eliminating schools. Many superintendents already work for two or three small districts. Some work for even more. They tell me that doing the administrative work is often easier than dealing with two or three school boards! Many rural districts consist of just one building. One idea is to have district boundaries match county lines. The advantage is that many social services are administered on a countywide basis, and this could achieve a good alignment of the social services used by schools. Having district lines conform to county lines may work in some cases but not in others. We could also have regional lines, or lines conforming to population patterns. The important thing is to focus on the schools and the classrooms where the children are, but be flexible and innovative when considering how to administer schools.

School Reform--Best Practices

The Graduation Standards have redefined what it means to earn a high school diploma. Now we must reinvent the means to achieve that goal. Are classrooms obsolete? Why stay until 12th grade if you can finish everything two or more years earlier? We must constantly clarify the purpose of public education, and make sure our approach adjusts to changes in society and the economy. I like the innovations I have seen at some charter schools, especially the Minnesota New Country School in Henderson. It is a veritable high-tech one-room schoolhouse. MNCS appears to be achieving a high rate of success at a much lower cost than the average school. Its success has resulted in a major grant from the Gates Foundation to replicate this school in Minnesota and other states. This is a project I'll be keeping my eye on, because I believe it is the wave of the future and a salvation for small towns desperate to keep their schools.

P-16

We must look at our education system from the perspective of the big picture, from preschool to college graduation. That's what the P-16 movement is all about. We now know from studies into brain research that early childhood education and brain stimulation determine whether students will be successful in college. If we want more college graduates from all sectors of society, we must take early childhood education seriously. We ought to apply what we know about brain development.

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must also pay attention to the “cracks” in the education system, between preschool and kindergarten, and between high school and higher education. The fastest growing industry in higher education is in remedial courses. We must examine higher education programs that are offered in high school – such as Post-Secondary Education Options (PSEO), Advanced Placement classes (AP) and International Baccalaureate programs (IB) – to make sure they fit in well with education goals and finances. We must make sure there is a smooth segue from high school to higher education. Greater efficiencies in these areas will save millions of dollars.

All-day, Everyday Kindergarten

I have seen more schools adopt all-day, everyday kindergartens, and I have seen good results. In some schools these kindergartners are reading by springtime. That in itself justifies the program. One of our most important educational goals is to make sure all children learn to read by the end of first grade. Statistics show that if students don’t read well by third grade, they fall farther and farther behind because they can’t assimilate the new material. Most of these students never enter college, and end up with mediocre jobs. It is a good investment in our economy.

It is true that some students do well without all-day, everyday kindergarten. Those aren’t the ones we are worried about. The biggest impact of full-time kindergarten is on kids who are at-risk, disadvantaged or from non-English speaking homes. These students need more time to grasp the basics so they will truly be ready to learn when they reach first grade.

Teacher Quality

The most important factor within the education system is teacher quality. Schools must compete with the private sector for good people, and that means we need to revise teacher pay structures. One idea our administration has promoted is an alternative compensation that rewards outstanding performance by teachers. Each district decides how to determine the criteria for distinguishing excellent teachers. As Governor Ventura says, socialism failed because they paid everyone the same regardless of whether they were good workers or not – yet that is also how we pay teachers. A better way would be to reward the best teachers, and create higher professional pathways they can aspire to, such as master teachers. As it stands now, the only way for good teachers to make more money is to go into administration or leave the profession. We need the best teachers in the classroom!

Another way to improve teacher quality is by having better relations between schools of education and K-12 systems. In St. Cloud, Duluth and Bemidji I have seen excellent, innovative programs where student teachers are placed in schools for a year of student teaching. This is a better way to prepare them for the classroom, and a good means for them decide whether they really want to become teachers. Schools of education also need to work closely with K-12 schools to understand how to best teach new teachers about the Graduation Standards. Some of the biggest obstacles in implementing the standards are teachers who simply don’t get it.

Professional Development of Teachers

The single biggest need for teachers is more time for professional development. One solution to improve the teaching profession is to make it a year-round occupation. With a full year to work with, teachers could spend more time learning about how to implement the Graduation Standards, technology and other innovations in

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best practices. It would also be better for students, because time on teaching tasks would not be interrupted by staff development. Schools would not need to rely on substitute teachers to stand in for the regular teachers who are attending workshops, etc.

Charter Schools

Some of the most impressive schools I have seen are charter schools. At their best, they are innovative schools with creative teachers, involved parents and high student achievement. And they can often show greater results for far less money. New Visions in Minneapolis, the Minnesota New Country School in Henderson, the Minnesota Business Academy in St. Paul and the Metro Deaf School in St. Paul are just a few examples of the innovative schools that we need in Minnesota.

Charter schools provide a choice to parents, teachers and students - within the realm of public education. I would like to see more charter schools addressing the needs of diverse communities. For example, I would like to see more rural districts follow the example of the New Country School. Perhaps some of the smaller districts would benefit if they were able to convert to charter schools. Current law does not allow districts to convert to charter schools. It seems a shame that laws and regulations can stand in the way of solving problems, especially when it could determine whether a community gets to keep its school.

Technology

High-speed technology has already become an essential part of a good education. Computers, Internet access and interactive television have become tools that bring a greater variety of information to students across great distances. We need a strong statewide technology plan to ensure that all districts have access to this technology. The need for distance learning is becoming more and more important in rural schools, and districts are beginning to offer online classes. How soon will we have a virtual high school in Minnesota? Policies and funding levels need to keep pace with these changes.

Testing

At many of my school visits, teachers and administrators raised the concern about having too many mandated state and federal tests. Testing appears to be an easy way to assess the quality and progress of students, schools and the entire educational process. However, testing can be taken to an extreme. When testing is done properly it is a useful tool for teachers and policy makers. But we need to be sure the content of the test aligns with the curriculum; otherwise teachers feel pressured to ignore their curriculum in order to "teach to the tests." This is a worst-case scenario, because then the purpose of education becomes test taking.

Postscript

I have not tallied up the number of miles I have traveled across the state these last four years, as I visited every school district in Minnesota. I don't know how many hours I spent talking with students, teachers and administrators. But I will never forget the incredible energy I found in each school, the shining smiles of children and the caring eyes of adults. Each visit fortified my determination to do what I could, given the stature and limitations of my office, to improve the quality of education in Minnesota. In that effort I am not alone. Many Minnesotans support a strong system of public education as the number one priority in our state. It is my hope that future policy discussions on education will be based on the facts and motivated by what is best for the kids, and not driven by political ideology. If my reports on education help to inform these policy discussions, I will be deeply gratified.

Sincerely,



Lieutenant Governor

School Districts Visited in 2001-2002 by Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk

District Name	Number	District Name	Number
ACGC	2396	Lynd	415
Alden	242	Mahnomen	432
Ashby	261	Maple River	2135
Bagley	162	McLeod West	2887
Battle Lake	542	Medford	763
Bellingham	371	Melrose	740
Benson	777	Menahga	821
Bertha-Hewitt	768	Milroy	635
Blackduck	32	Minneota	414
Blue Earth	2860	Minnewaska	2149
BOLD	2534	Monticello	882
Browerville	787	Mountain Iron-Buhl	1712
Canby	891	Nashwauk-Keewatin	319
Cannon Falls	252	Nett Lake	707
Cass Lake	115	Nevis	308
Cedar Mountain	2754	New York Mills	553
Chokio-Alberta	771	Norman County East	2215
Cleveland	391	Northland	118
Climax-Shelly	592	Ogilvie	333
C-B-G	2888	Oklee	627
Cyrus	611	Ortonville	62
Crookston	593	Osakis	213
Dawson-Boyd	378	Park Rapids	309
Deer River	317	Parker's Prairie	547
Detroit Lakes	22	Paynesville	741
Eagle Valley	2759	Perham	549
Edgerton	581	Plummer	628
Eveleth-Gilbert	2154	Proctor	704
Fergus Falls	544	Red Lake Falls	630
Fertile-Beltrami	599	Red Rock Central	2884
Fosston	601	Richfield	280
Frazee	23	ROCORI	750
Glenville-Emmons	2886	Royalton	485
Goodridge	561	Saint Clair	75
Granada Huntley-East Chain	2536	Sebeka	820
Grand Rapids	318	South St. Paul	6
Greenway	316	Springfield	85
Grygla	447	Staples-Motley	2170
Hancock	768	Swanville	486
Hendricks	402	Ulen-Hitterdahl	914
Henning	545	Underwood	550
Hermantown	700	United South Central	2134
Hill City	2	Upsala	487
Hutchinson	423	Verndale	818
International Falls	361	Virginia	706
Ivanhoe	403	Wadena-Deer Creek	2155
Jordan	717	Walker-Hackensack-Akeley	113
Kelliher	36	Waubun	435
Lac Qui Parle	2853	West Central Area	2342
Lake of the Woods	390	Westonka	277
Lakeview	2167	Windom	177
Laporte	306	Win-E-Mac	2609
Long Prairie/Grey Eagle	2753	Wrenshall	100