

Innovative School Advisory Council

Report of the Council to
Commissioner Alice Seagren
Minnesota Department of Education

and

the Minnesota Legislature

January 15, 2010

The following provides estimated costs incurred in the preparation of this report.

Minimal costs were incurred in the preparation of this report. The Commissioner invested time in the selection and appointment of its members. She and Assistant Commissioner Morgan Brown participated in the first two sessions of the council's deliberations. No other investments of time or funds are attributable to the work of this Council.

I. Introduction

The 2009 Minnesota Legislature created the Innovative School Advisory Council (ISAC) to advise the commissioner and the legislature regarding innovation in the public education arena. Commissioner Alice Seagren appointed the following nine-member council. These appointments were made by August 1, 2009 as provided by the law:

Kristin Anderson, EdD

Retired Superintendent in several rural Minnesota districts

Laura Bloomberg, PhD

Executive Director, Center for Integrative Leadership, University of Minnesota

Al Fan

Executive Director, Charter School Partners

Curtis Johnson, PhD

Managing Partner, Education|Evolving

Steve Massey

Principal, Forest Lake High School

Cindy Moeller

Director, Professional Development/Member Services, Minnesota Council on Foundations

Lynn Nordgren

President, Minneapolis Federation of Teachers

Mark Schmitz

Superintendent, Staples-Motley school district

Terry Tofte, PhD

Executive Director, Conservatory of the Performing Arts Charter School

Morgan Brown, Minnesota Department of Education Assistant Commissioner was Commissioner Seagren's representative to ISAC.

The council met on five occasions to address the charges delegated to it by the legislature.

Although the council expires on June 30, 2011, the 2009 law requires that specific recommendations be made to the commissioner and to the legislature prior to the 2010 Legislative Session.

II. Statutory Charge to the Innovative School Advisory Council (ISAC)

The 2009 Legislature charged ISAC with the following duties and responsibilities (excerpted from Minnesota 2009 E-12 Law Section 65. Innovative School Advisory Council):

(b) The advisory council shall advise and make recommendations to the commissioner on matters such as:

- (1) disseminating information on site-governed schools under Minnesota Statutes chapters 123B and 124D;
- (2) supporting innovation that includes new models of schools, accountability, and funding designed to sustain innovation in charter schools and school districts;
- (3) identifying ways to improve communication, cooperation and the exchange of ideas between and among school sites, charter schools, and school districts regarding how to use current law to foster innovative new schools; and
- (4) identifying ways for schools to learn from innovators in noneducation sectors.

(d) The advisory council shall recommend to the commissioner and the legislature by December 1, 2009 an organizational model for planning the development, start-up, and operation of new, innovative schools for both school districts and charter schools. The council, as part of its recommendation, may suggest legislation to implement this organizational model, including how to capture nonstate and nonpublic funds for planning new, innovative schools.

(e) The Innovative School Advisory Council expires June 30, 2011.

III. Innovative Schools Advisory Council Discussion

The first three ISAC meetings focused on discussions as to how each of its charges could be addressed. The fourth and fifth meetings were used to craft recommendations. ISAC engaged in discussion using electronic means in addition to conducting formal meetings. The meetings included having guest presenters currently in quasi-governmental roles to review their experiences at providing state leadership but not as a part of state government. Audrey Suker, Executive Director of ServeMinnesota, Duane Benson, Executive Director of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) and Bob Wedl, Partner with Education|Evolving, discussed innovation and organizational structures with ISAC.

Audrey Suker reviewed why **ServeMinnesota** was created and how it is better able to carry out its mission as a nonprofit organization than it could when it was a part of the MDE. In 2002, the legislature approved the removal of this function from the MDE and created a statutory “Minnesota Commission on National and Community Service” which is necessary in order for Minnesota to participate in the federal AmeriCorps program. The Minnesota legislation authorized the commission to delegate its duties to an independent nonprofit organization called ServeMinnesota to lead and manage the AmeriCorps program for Minnesota. The Board of the Commission is appointed by the Governor. Legislators are appointed as ex-officio members as is the commissioner.

Ms. Suker provided ISAC with a report titled, “Transitioning from Governmental entity to Nonprofit status: The ServeMinnesota Experience,” which provides a summary of how the organization as a nonprofit has the flexibility to perform its duties efficiently and the autonomy to raise significant funding from the private sector which would not be likely as a part of state government. For example, over \$1 million was raised through the private sector in the past two years for the Minnesota Reading Corps which receives a legislative appropriation as well. While a separate entity from state government,

ServeMinnesota has a contract with the MDE for the state funding appropriated by the legislature. This contract is the accountability link to the state.

Both ServeMinnesota and MELF are able to provide significant leadership as well as expert-level consultation, conduct scientifically based research, disseminate the results and make recommendations to the legislature regarding possible policy direction. Yet neither of these organizations has more than a skeleton staff. The work is done primarily by contracting with individuals with expert-level competence in the specific areas of need. When new issues are identified, the organization seeks out different individuals or groups with the expertise to address these issues rather than rely on current staff to address the new issues.

One example is ServeMinnesota providing state and national leadership regarding literacy acquisition from age three to grade three with the Minnesota Reading Corps (MRC) program. ServeMinnesota contracted with some of the nation's leading experts in early and emerging literacy to develop the model, compiled a team of Master Coaches with expertise in the literacy model, trained AmeriCorps Members and site coaches to deliver the literacy instruction, collected formative assessment data, and monitored the fidelity of the instruction and assessment

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process. This model remains Minnesota's only program which tracks students from pre-k through grade 3 to verify the effectiveness of the "age 3 to grade 3" literacy growth of children. Head Start agencies, nonprofit child care organizations, district and chartered schools around the state are learning from this model and some are beginning to change how they organize and implement their literacy programs. In the 2007-2009 biennium the objective of serving 15,000 children from age 3 to grade 3 was met. The new objective is to increase that to 29,000 children by June 2011. In addition to a focus on reading, ServeMinnesota has initiated a math initiative again organized around

the same principles of the MRC. Other states are asking for assistance from Minnesota to develop a similar approach.

The point is this: Without the autonomy and flexibility provided by its independent status, ServeMinnesota would not have been able to launch this impressive effort, nor would it have been able to raise the millions of dollars from federal and private sources.

Duane Benson, Executive Director of the **Minnesota Early Learning Foundation** (MELF), described how this organization was created by the legislature to provide leadership to the development of new models for serving pre-kindergarten children to help “close the achievement gap.” A \$1 million state appropriation was provided to MELF. However, the significant delays in appointing the MELF Board and the extended influence of government in the process for developing the contract with MDE and MELF caused MELF to reject

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the \$1 million appropriation. Rather, it formed an independent board of directors and privately raised a multi-million budget to carryout its mission. The lack of autonomy was such a significant issue that MELF concluded it was not possible for it to accomplish its mission without more independent standing—even though it meant not accepting the \$1 million appropriation.

The MELF Board includes leading literacy experts and business veterans. MELF has adopted literacy-rich learning standards which pre-k organizations must meet in order for them to accept children receiving MELF financial support. MELF support is only provided to families sending their children to MELF approved pre-k programs. Hundreds of children are now being served in unique literacy-rich settings that have been transformed by this model. Mr. Benson reported that the work of MELF is now proceeding as planned. As was the case with ServeMinnesota, MELF could not have accomplished this innovative work without significant autonomy and flexibility, likely not possible within either a state or local bureaucracy.

Bob Wedl, with **Education|Evolving**, focused his discussion on the rationale for having Education|Evolving partner with the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and the legislature to work on the 2009 Legislation regarding Site-Governed Schools (SGS.) This legislation provides teachers with the level of autonomy and flexibility that enables them to start new and different models of schools within the district sector of public education. This SGS model provides new professional opportunities for teachers as well as another way for districts to compete with the chartered sector. Mr. Wedl also reviewed the rationale for the 2009 bill called, “NewSchoolsMinnesota” the aims of which were listed in the legislative charge to the ISAC.

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The Minnesota Legislature has created a number of organizations to provide statewide focused leadership. The Minnesota Historical Society, Enterprise Minnesota and the Minnesota Zoo are other examples where the legislature has created nonprofit entities to carry out state level functions. The Minnesota Rtl Center was another example although its statewide responsibilities were assigned to the St. Croix River Education District rather than requiring a nonprofit entity.

ISAC had extensive discussions regarding the management tools for fostering innovation currently available including chartering, contract alternative schools and the newly enacted Site-Governed Schools legislation. Each of these provides for autonomy from the current management structure and flexibility from bureaucratic rules and processes in exchange for accountability for results. These laws provide Minnesota with the very best platforms in the nation for innovation. With a few exceptions, most districts remain quite cautious about using these current management tools available to start new and

innovative models of schools and schooling. ISAC members nevertheless remain confident that Minnesota educators can and will respond to the challenge of creating new and more innovative school opportunities if provided the autonomy and flexibility necessary and the leadership and assistance to do so.

Minnesota's statutes allowing chartering, contract alternative schools and Site-Governed Schools provide the best platform in the nation for innovation. With autonomy, flexibility, leadership, and assistance Minnesota's educators can and will innovate with schools and schooling.

From its deliberations including input from external providers, ISAC drew the following reaffirmations and conclusions:

- 1. Education is the key societal initiative if our nation is to secure its leadership role in the 21st century.*

Minnesota and the nation must renew its commitment to the education of all its children and youth. President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan continue to emphasize the success of our education system is a national security issue. The "Race to the Top" is the new federal keystone for assuring an improved education system. While this commitment has been made before, implementation persistently fails for at least a third of our young people.

Although the world is functioning far differently now than in the 20th century and the economic well-being of more of the world's citizens is vastly improved, the United States must make significant improvements in public education to assure that our youth are prepared for the kind of economy and society this century is producing.

2. Continuous improvement in all aspects of education is an ongoing requirement.

Sharing information about “what works” in a way that is aligned with implementation assistance is an ongoing challenge. School leaders say we are committed to the notion of “continuous improvement,” whether that is better reading and math results, better professional development, better use of technology or better graduation rates. Most also say that continuous improvement can best be made with the use of “research-based practices.” The good news is that with current technology, “sharing warehouses” are available in every field including education.

The University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development alone has numerous research and development projects with provisions for outreach and dissemination to schools of the best practices developed through this research. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal legislation provides millions of dollars for research-based practices in the basic skills. Hundreds of millions of dollars in “staff development revenue” have been provided through general education funding in Minnesota in the past decade. The Race to the Top federal legislation provides substantial revenue for “continuous improvement.” The legislature is encouraged to call for greater coordination among the current organizations already funded to create and disseminate research-based practices.

3. While “continuous improvement” is crucial in any organization, key to significant learning breakthroughs in the 21st century will surely be through innovations not yet developed.

But there continues to be confusion in education circles regarding “innovation.” In the Race to the Top, “research-based innovations” frequently turned out to mean little more than adopting a practice that worked somewhere. That assumption is at odds with what innovation is really about; innovation by definition does not have a research base...that’s why it is called “innovation.” Some would say then that a

commitment to innovation is opening the door to anything and everything, whether it makes sense or not. That is not how innovation works in any sector, and we certainly do not mean to imply it for K–12 in Minnesota. Quality innovation should not be confused with a laissez faire attitude of spontaneity as quality innovation does have a well designed set of hypotheses on which the “innovation” rests, waiting to be demonstrated, and potentially replicated.

Education, more than most industries, has traditionally seemed slow, even shy, about embracing the conditions that rule innovative breakthroughs. Nearly every educator says we want “continuous improvement,” but very few seem willing to go beyond the edge of “what is known now.” But Minnesota educators—and the policy makers who set new directions—have often proved themselves to be different. As we have for the past 25 years, Minnesota must now step up and serve as the driver of innovation in education in the United States.

4. Strong state leadership for innovation is crucial to set the conditions that allow innovation to be active and effective.

And just as new models of schooling are needed, so are new models of leadership. At one time, “state leadership” in education was something the state department of education did. It was a given that if the “state” set new policy, the “state department of education” would be assigned the responsibility to lead the implementation.

But the MDE today barely has sufficient resources to carry out its basic regulatory and service functions. To assign a bold innovative agenda to it is not an auspicious prospect. ISAC members certainly respect today’s concerns about creating either more government or even more organizations than might be necessary. But after considering the question the legislature posed to ISAC, we have concluded that it is in the state’s best interest to create a special organization to promote an innovative sector in K–12.

5. Education, as is the case with other sectors, must find ways to get better results with the same or fewer resources—a challenge that is daunting but achievable if conditions are set that welcome what authentic innovation can deliver.

Revenue forecasts are not likely to improve for some time and will only get worse before they get better.

As evidenced by ServeMinnesota and MELF, the private sector and foundations are likely to provide revenue for new models but will surely not be willing to provide revenue to support state government. It is a better bet that Minnesota foundations will provide seed revenue to a new non-governmental organization with the autonomy and flexibility to lead the development of new models of schooling.

IV. Innovative School Advisory Council Recommendations

1. The legislature should authorize a new commission to lead the work of creating a culture of innovation in learning in Minnesota.

- Give it a special name—such as MNovate or MInnovate.
- The Commission would then form a nonprofit organization focused on fostering innovation in education.
- The legislature would create the mission of this organization and provide it specific charges. The following mission is an example from which to work:

The Commission's mission is to provide leadership for the creation of new and innovative models of public schools and schooling resulting in: Minnesota's youth learning through models designed around their individual needs and aspirations; new ways emerging for learning to be evaluated; new professional opportunities for teachers; and improved efficiency of the learning systems.

- The Commission would submit an annual report of its accomplishments to the legislature which would serve as its accountability to the legislature.
- The Commission would have a twelve-person board initially appointed by the legislature and governor (four House, four Senate, four Governor). One representative and one senator could be appointed. Members should have expertise or experience in innovation and several members must be from the non-education sector. All members should have some experience that shows support for the risks and rewards of innovative efforts. The Commission should also, to a degree practicable, reflect geographic and ethnic representation. The Commissioner of Education would serve, at least initially, as one of the Governor's appointees. Four members would be appointed for one year, four for two years and four for three years. These 'terms' would be allocated by a lottery method at the initial meeting. Following initial appointment, the Commission would appoint its own members who would be confirmed by the Senate. A member could serve two consecutive terms.

2. The Commission (and its nonprofit successor) would provide leadership for developing innovation in schools and schooling.

The Commission would identify high-priority unmet student learning needs in all parts of the state and identify or facilitate new innovative models to address those challenges. Unmet needs are likely to include challenges such as:

- improving student readiness for kindergarten
- new high school/post-secondary models
- new administrative models for serving students in rural Minnesota
- new administrative, learning or organizational models for districts facing severe fiscal stress
- new models that use low- or no-cost technology as a significant way to improve efficiency in our schools

- new models which focus on student engagement in their learning with a level of connection between the teachers and students so that school is not a place where students come to “watch teachers work”
- other models determined by the Commission.

3. *The Commission would identify current laws that restrict the scope of learning models and constrain innovation.*

Such findings would be a part of the Commission’s annual report to the legislature. The Commission would also provide oversight of current laws intended to foster innovation to determine whether they are effective and if not, what modifications are needed.

4. *The Commission would disseminate information about new school creation to a wide audience.*

The Commission would assist boards, administrators, school sites, and communities interested in creating new schools through the Site-Governed Schools Legislation to make maximum use of this law, with the purpose of raising achievement levels all over the state.

5. *The Commission would create opportunities for current district, chartered and contract schools to learn of new models, exchange ideas, improve efficiency and accountability and enhance innovations.*

Dissemination of such models would occur through the usual methods such as conferences, but also through regular Web-based information sessions at times teachers are available to participate. Easily accessible Web sites would be created that would serve as guides and information for those interested in developing new models. The Commission would also provide opportunities through technology for educators to interact with leading innovators around the world.

6. The Commission would be well positioned to raise revenue from private foundations, federal grants and other sources.

This revenue would both sustain the Commission's operations and be used to provide financial incentives to assist teachers, districts and other new school developers in the creation of proposals for high quality new innovative models of schools and schooling and to effectively implement these new models. The Commission would review, approve and manage these grants.

7. The Commission would develop new models of evaluation to support learning and accountability.

An emphasis on formative assessment would be encouraged. An effort to define learning expectations and measurement in addition to those likely to be included in the National Standards and Assessment would be a part of this task. New, better and less costly "accountability models" would be developed. This work would be done in collaboration with leading evaluation and data analysis experts in public schools, universities and the private sector.

8. The Commission would also assume the following two roles currently housed within the MDE that relate directly to enhancing innovation:

a. Review applications of organizations submitted to the commissioner to serve as authorizers of new and innovative chartered schools and recommend approval or disapproval to the commissioner. The 2009 Legislature clarified the role of authorizers and wisely required state approval of all authorizers. Chartering is a research arm of public education and assuring quality authorizers is one of the better ways of assuring quality chartered schools.

b. Manage the charter school start-up grant process for the creation of new chartered public schools. The Commission is in the best position to carry out this function.

V. Financing the Commission

It is clear that the legislature is not able to appropriate funding for the Commission nor is the Minnesota Department of Education able to take on yet another responsibility, given its own diminished resources.

Therefore, the Commission should be charged with actively pursuing foundation funding, private grants, and federal grants, to finance its work. Also the Commissioner of Education should include at least two years of start-up funding for this new Commission in the Race to the Top application. The Commission can assist schools in the implementation of what Race to the Top envisions, even as it works longer term on fostering innovation.

VI. Continued Role of the Innovative Schools Advisory Council (ISAC)

The Innovative Schools Advisory Council should terminate effective the date the new Commission becomes law.