

010240

Recommendations for Continuous Improvement of the Profile of Learning

A report presented by the Academic Panel to the
Commissioner of the Department of Children, Families
and Learning consistent with Minnesota Session Laws
2000, chapter 500, section 14, subdivision 12.

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Introduction

In September 2000, a panel of educational experts was established as mandated by Minnesota Session Laws 2000, Chapter 500, section 14, subdivision 12 by Commissioner of Children, Families and Learning (CFL), Christine Jax, to examine, evaluate and seek ways to sustain the rigor of the Profile of Learning standards contained in the Minnesota graduation rule. In accordance with this law, state organizations were enlisted to select members for this panel. (See APPENDIX for Academic Panel membership roster.)

The 12 members of the Academic Panel bring to their task a high level of professional expertise in education and assessment as well as comprehensive professional experience with the Profile of Learning standards. The Panel includes teachers, administrators, a school board member and representatives of teacher preparation institutions of higher education.

At its November 14 meeting, the Academic Panel received for review "Aiming Higher: a Report on Education Standards and Policy for Minnesota." This document was prepared by Achieve, Inc. and CBE (Council for Basic Education), national education consultants contracted by CFL. The Panel held six all-day meetings between November 2000 and January 2001 to analyze this report and develop recommendations.

During these sessions, the Panel heard from:

- Achieve and CBE representatives who answered questions concerning their report
- Dr. Susan Phillips, a national standards reform expert who consulted with Minnesota during the development of the Profile
- CFL curriculum specialists who presented summaries generated from meetings with Best Practice Network Teachers convened by learning area to review the Achieve/CBE report

Panel discussion focused on:

- Profile of Learning laws and rules including the K-12 content standards
- the Profile's intent, early development and current status
- the Achieve/CBE report
- the development of recommendations for continuous improvement of the Profile of Learning

In keeping with its purpose "to examine, evaluate and sustain the rigor of the content standards contained in the Minnesota graduation rule," the Academic Panel submits this report to the Commissioner of CFL. It contains recommendations for refining the Profile of Learning standards and responds to recommendations contained in the Achieve/CBE report.

I. The Profile of Learning

A. Adoption and Current Status

Historically, Minnesota, like other states, mandated that high school diplomas be awarded based on credits (Carnegie units) earned by students in required and elective courses. Credit-based or course-based requirements, however, do not provide consistent learning opportunities.

This lack of consistency, combined with a lack of information about skills actually mastered by students, prompted a call for increased accountability and results in public education. These demands, in turn, led to a call for results-based graduation requirements.

In 1993, the Legislature responded by mandating that the State Board adopt results-oriented graduation rules. Students entering ninth grade in 1996 were required to pass state basic skills tests in mathematics and reading. Those entering ninth grade in 1997 were required to pass these and, in addition, the state basic skills test in writing. In 1998, the state adopted the Profile of Learning standards, an approach that focuses on opportunity to learn, and requires *all* students to complete all required statewide content standards. Subsequently, those entering ninth grade in 1998 were required to pass not only those three basic skills tests but also to complete the state-required Profile of Learning standards in order to graduate.

While many states simply decreed standards, Minnesota's approach has been to build the educational capacity necessary to deliver these new standards. Minnesota's graduation rule, then, ensures that schools *offer* learning opportunities, and that all students actually *have* those experiences.

While the 2000 Legislature enacted laws that amend provisions in the graduation rule regarding implementation of the Profile of Learning standards, all the standards within the ten Learning Areas remain the same as originally adopted in rule.

Currently, to be in compliance with the 2000 session laws, schools must continue to provide learning opportunities in all preparatory standards and in high school standards sufficient to meet the state's graduation requirements. However, the 2000 session laws allow school site votes in conjunction with school board votes to determine how many and which Profile of Learning standards the students will be required to complete in grades K-8 and at the high school level as a requirement for graduation. Consequently, students across the state are being required to complete varying numbers of standards.

(Source: "Statement of Need and Reasonableness for the Graduation Rule, Profile of Learning," December 1997.)

B. A Vehicle for Improving Teaching and Learning

The Profile of Learning has sparked valuable statewide dialog on issues related to teaching and learning. Important questions about how students learn and what they should know and be able to do have given focus to that public discussion. In addition, the Profile has brought significant change to many schools and classrooms since its implementation, enabling teachers to pay special attention to the needs of individual students while increasing the opportunity for *all* students to participate in problem-solving and higher-level thinking.

The purpose of the Profile of Learning standards, as stated in Law (MS.120B.02), is to set high expectations for all Minnesota students. Yet in practice, the Profile has been expected to serve as a tool for improving teaching and learning and as a statewide system of accountability.

The Academic Panel believes that public debate over and use of the Profile of Learning standards often has been confused between these two roles. Groups involved with education such as educators, parents, community partners and legislators, as well as evaluative agencies such as Achieve and CBE, use, refer to, and review the Profile in ways that reflect this confusion. The Achieve/CBE evaluation, for example, vacillates between a focus on the Profile's instructional role and its role for achieving accountability.

In the Panel's view, the Profile of Learning was not intended, in and of itself, to serve as an accountability system. This does not mean, however, that schools and students should not be held accountable for the Profile of Learning standards. Nor does it imply that the Profile should not be a component of an accountability system. Panel members support the continued use of the Profile's standards and local performance assessments as a tool for making decisions about individual student learning, but recommend that Profile of Learning performance assessments not serve as the basis for comparing schools, districts, or students among districts. (See Note, page 4.)

Further, the Panel believes that the Profile of Learning can be an excellent tool for guiding teaching and learning as well as raising student performance expectation *provided* the state acts to: 1) bring greater clarity to the Profile's standards, and 2) make curriculum frameworks and exemplars readily available for use by teachers and districts.

The Profile of Learning is designed to improve teaching and learning by:

- serving as a framework around which all districts can build a comprehensive scope and sequence that aligns with recognized standards
- offering teachers alternative assessment tools that measure higher levels of thinking
- providing teachers with information about what students have and have not learned
- giving teachers a basis for sharing instructional strategies and examining best practices
- collecting data from which to make decisions on resource allocation and programmatic changes
- ensuring local control while meeting consistent statewide expectations

Evidence from individual school districts farthest along the implementation continuum suggests important, positive outcomes:

- The Profile's K-12 structure has helped align local curriculum, instruction and assessments.
- Increasing discussion has created collaboration between and among teachers in schools, districts, and the state.
- The Profile has prompted across-discipline curriculum collaboration among teachers, increasing their understanding of the depth and breadth of their subject areas.
- The standards and the scoring rubrics have helped to set the bar by defining expectations for teachers and students.
- A standards-based system has encouraged data-driven decisions in instruction, materials, professional development and curriculum revision at classroom and teacher levels.
- Teachers have found curriculum frameworks supportive and helpful.
- The Profile has encouraged teachers to change and improve their instructional delivery.

NOTE: A second report from Achieve/CBE focusing on the alignment of the Profile of Learning standards and the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) tests is expected in early 2001. The Panel will review that report, and further consider the Profile of Learning's standards relative to assessment and accountability.

II. Nine Recommendations for Improvement

The Profile of Learning has been in effect since 1998; however, its implementation has raised issues and calls for change. Some implementation provision changes were made by 2000 session laws. The Panel urges decision makers to recognize the tremendous amount of human energy invested in the Profile by school districts and educators across the state. Minnesota's educational community is primed to move toward full implementation of the Profile. The Panel recommends building on the current Profile of Learning, and makes the following nine recommendations to sustain the rigor of the Profile and improve its implementation.

Recommendations one, two and three should help streamline the Profile of Learning, increase consistency of expectations across the state, and ensure that the CFL is appropriately staffed to carry out one of the largest educational state mandates from the Legislature in years.

1. Give the CFL Commissioner expedited rule-making authority to carry out recommended revisions as appropriate.
2. Establish an implementation schedule and end-date specifying the point in time when all graduating Minnesota students will meet the same requirements.
3. Ensure that CFL has sufficient staff and resources dedicated to the Profile to provide leadership, coordination, communication, implementation and evaluation.

Recommendation four should enhance the ability of school districts to implement and use the Profile of Learning as designed.

4. Appoint a specific person within CFL to take leadership of a process to accomplish the following:
 - Consolidate the Learning Areas. (The Panel recommends reducing the number of Learning Areas while at the same time preserving the breadth and comprehensiveness of the content standards. For example, distribute "Research & Inquiry" within the other Learning Areas.)
 - Examine and evaluate the number of required and elective standards per level (primary, intermediate, middle, high) for reasonableness and manageability.
 - Identify and eliminate undesired redundancy in content standards between and within the Learning Areas.
 - Establish a manageable state-level review cycle for continuous improvement of the Profile (e.g. Are the standards comprehensive and relevant? Do they reflect current Best Practices for teaching and learning? Are they organized logically?).

Recommendations five through nine should improve the ability of teachers to use the Profile of Learning in a meaningful way.

5. Convene groups of educators immediately, including Best Practice Teachers, to ensure that content standards:
 - are written clearly enough to be understood by all affected by the standards (students, teachers, parents)
 - are uniform in terms of grammar, tone, and syntax
 - reflect an increasing level of expectation from primary level through high school (developmental progression)
 - include declarative knowledge (what students should know) and procedural knowledge (what students should be able to do)
6. Develop and disseminate curriculum frameworks and training guides in every Learning Area as soon as possible so that administrators and teachers are prepared to deliver the content standards. They should be up-to-date, accurate and aligned with recognized standards where available.
7. Identify Best Practice strategies to help teachers and administrators develop instructional delivery systems that align with both curriculum and performance assessments.
8. Maintain and fully fund Best Practice Networks of lead teachers and other support systems in each Learning Area in order to provide instructional support to school districts across the state.
9. Carefully design rubrics and model exemplars. Scoring rubrics must incorporate a progression of expectation (rigor) from primary level through high school.

It is the Panel's belief that these nine recommendations need to be addressed and acted upon immediately to ensure that the capacity necessary to deliver the standards is in place. Further, the Panel believes that without strong leadership and attention to these recommendations, the Profile of Learning, as a vehicle for change, will be unfulfilled.

III. Response to Achieve/CBE Recommendations

Achieve/CBE's report, "Aiming Higher: a Report on Education Standards and Policy for Minnesota," includes the following key recommendations for moving forward. Based on a review of this report and a presentation by Achieve/CBE representatives, this Academic Panel submits the following responses to these recommendations.

Report Recommendation One

Revise the Profile of Learning standards to give them more clarity, specificity, rigor and depth.

Response

The Panel's recommendations include convening groups of educators immediately to address refining the clarity of the language of the standards across all grade levels and Learning Areas. This process should focus on clarity of language (removing ambiguous grammar, run-on sentences, inconsistent sentence structure and numbering, etc.) to improve understanding.

The Panel considers specificity and clarity separate issues, however, and does not agree that content specificity should be increased in the language of the standards as discussed in the Achieve report. Minnesota standards are intentionally broad, leaving choices about specific content and curriculum to local school districts.

The Panel does recommend that declarative knowledge statements (what the student must know) should be part of the standards. In this instance, more specific information can help students and teachers better understand the standards. In general, however, the Panel recommends that content specificity be provided by the Profile's supporting documents--curriculum frameworks, rubrics and exemplars.

Report Recommendation Two

Focus state-required standards into core subject areas, develop statewide performance assessments to measure student achievement in core subject areas (starting with math, science, language arts and social studies), and tie these statewide assessments to graduation requirements.

Response

The Panel disagrees with the recommendations to reduce required standards to core subject areas only, but does recommend consolidating some Learning Areas as long as the breadth and comprehensiveness of the standards are preserved. The Panel recommends that local performance assessments should continue to be the measure of a student's completion of a standard, and that statewide performance assessments should not be developed and used for graduation requirements.

Report Recommendation Three

Take steps toward a more comprehensive system that holds, not just students, but schools and districts accountable for their performance.

Response

The Panel agrees that accountability is important and encourages CFL to continue the development of a statewide accountability system for schools. The Panel will address this in future recommendations. At this time, the Panel believes that any statewide accountability system should be based on multiple measures and should not be dependent on a single measure or mean.

Report Recommendation Four

Continue to build and sustain public support for education reform.

Response

The Panel agrees that it is important to involve broad groups of stakeholders as a means of building and sustaining public support for education reform. However, the Panel also believes that the Profile of Learning provides the necessary foundation on which to continue standards-based reform in Minnesota. To this end, Panel members recommend that CFL be given responsibility for leading an on-going process of continuous improvement to refine the state's graduation standards. The CFL can best facilitate the involvement of Best Practice Teachers, educators and experts experienced in the implementation of standards-based reform to fine-tune Minnesota's Profile of Learning standards over time.

APPENDIX

ACADEMIC PANEL

For Profile of Learning Content Standards

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