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- Listening and learning : listening

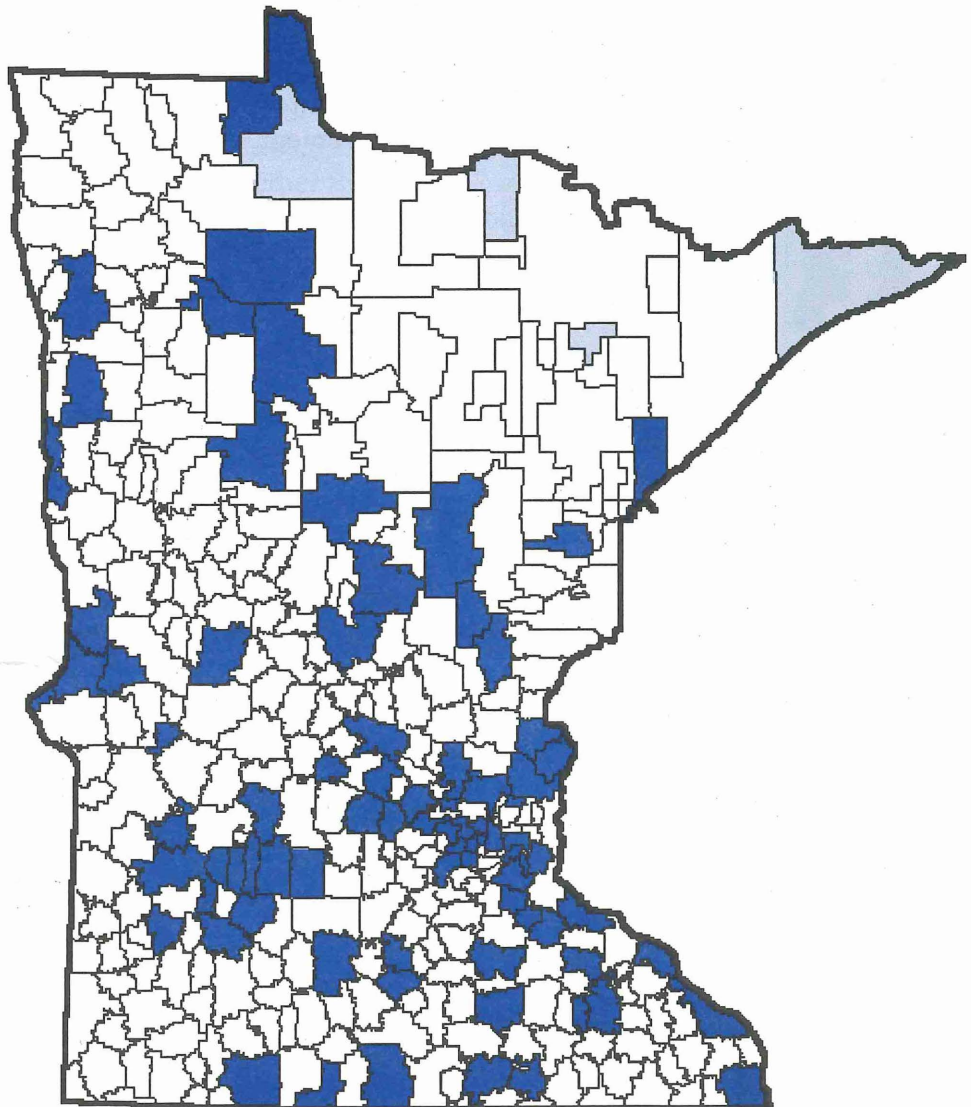


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# Listening and Learning

## Listening to Minnesota 1998–1999

### Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk



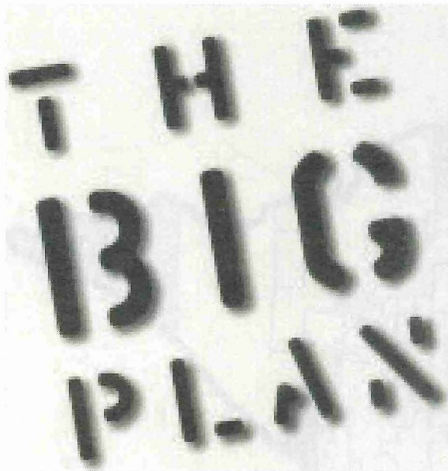
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# Healthy Vital Communities

## The Best K-12 Public Education in the Nation

(An excerpt from *The Big Plan: Strategic Directions of the Ventura Administration*)

“I want to erase the word voucher from the vocabulary,” were Governor Jesse Ventura’s words in his first State of the State address. By these words, he focused the responsibility for delivering results squarely on every parent, every teacher, every administrator and every school board member in Minnesota to do what is right for every child. The Governor’s K-12 initiatives now involve agencies as diverse as Public Safety, the Metropolitan Council, Corrections and Housing Finance in new discussions of how to improve student achievement.



Three tough questions were posed by the new Governor:

**Finance:** How do we get the best bang for our buck on education spending (how can we shape a formula that is based on results, not micro-management at the classroom level)?

**Accountability:** What is the state’s role in clearly spelling out standards and then putting accountability at each level, starting with parents and including local districts?

**Best Educational Practices:** How can we promote the use of what we already know we should do, but too often don’t do (using best practices across disciplines to better align K-12 and human services, health, housing, transit and other state investments)?

The three questions are being addressed in a major study of education co-directed by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor and the Commissioner of the Department of Children, Families and Learning.

Dear Fellow Minnesotans,

The first time I met Jesse Ventura in June 1998, we sat down over a glass of lemonade and talked about how to improve public education. This conversation introduced me to the ideas that later were incorporated into Governor Ventura's *Big Plan*. It is very clear to me that working to create the best K-12 education system in the nation is at the heart of *The Big Plan*.

Governor Ventura likes to base his decisions on experience and observation, and that's why part of my job as Lieutenant Governor is to be his "Education Ambassador." In that role, I have seen what is happening in more than 80 of our 347 school districts.

I have listened to thousands of people — teachers, students, administrators, school board members, parents and community members. And I have benefited from the wisdom and experience of others who care about education.

Early on I heard from four of Minnesota's senior statesmen, George Latimer, Don Fraser, John B. Davis and Gerald W. Christenson. Together they held 22 meetings on public education and shared their findings with me. In our separate venues, we heard that Minnesotans do want the nation's best K-12 system — and they have solid suggestions on how to reach that goal.

The Ventura-Schunk Administration will build upon the education foundation that preceded our tenure. We pledge to continue working with educators, parents, legislators and community members who are committed to building the best K-12 public schools in the nation.

This report is my opportunity to share with you what I have seen, heard and learned this year. The first section of the report outlines the ideas and issues that I heard parents, teachers, students and administrators discuss in district after district. The second section of the report is a selection of the actual comments that school and district administrators made during listening post sessions across the state. Both sections highlight some of the provocative questions that we must address as a state in order to continue moving education forward in our fast-changing economy.

The answers to these questions will affect every child in our state. That is why I encourage you, as a caring citizen, to take at least one hour to visit a school this year. See for yourself what schools have become since you were there. Ask questions. Watch. Listen. Learn. I will be continuing my visits to schools in 2000 and when we have all listened and learned, we will then be prepared to make informed decisions and lead the next wave of improvements in our public schools.

Sincerely,



Mae Schunk  
Lieutenant Governor



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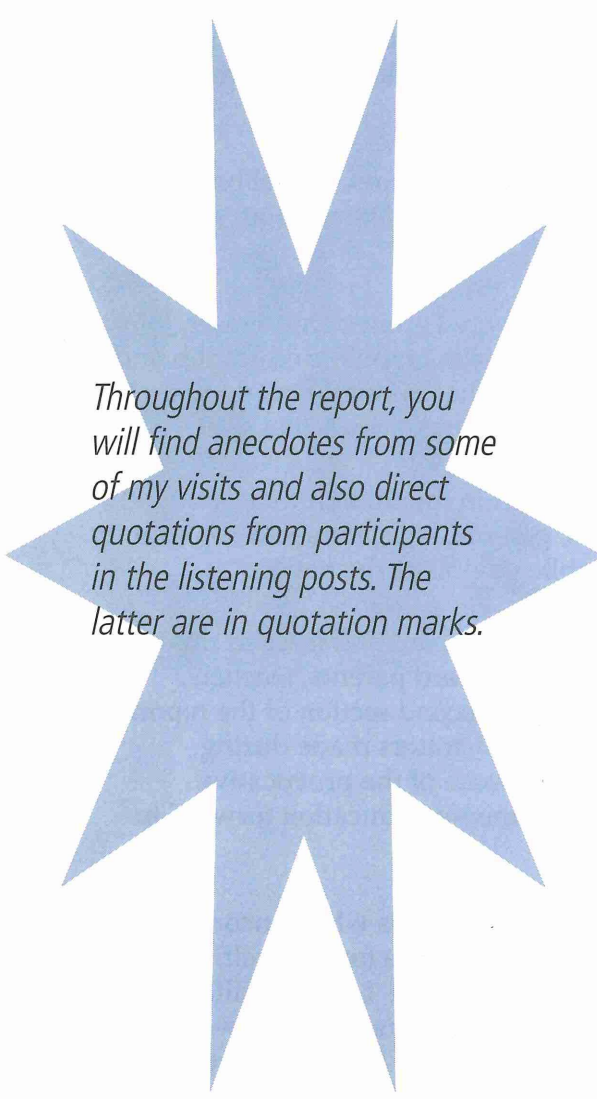
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*Throughout the report, you will find anecdotes from some of my visits and also direct quotations from participants in the listening posts. The latter are in quotation marks.*



## Voices From Around Minnesota: Common Themes

**A summary of the most common themes shared by education administrators, school teachers, students and parents**

The common themes summarized here emerged in the very different formats of school tours and administrator listening posts. The school tours were relatively informal and included visits to classrooms as well as conversations with teachers, students and parents. By contrast, the administrators' listening posts were structured to focus on public education issues. Interestingly, whether the sessions were formal or informal, whether the group was primarily administrators or a diverse mix of parents, students, teachers and principals, the discussions centered on the same common themes. Although the discussions reflected the individuality of Minnesota's independent school districts, the common themes emerged repeatedly, in both school tours and listening posts.

### **STANDARDS: raising educational achievement**

Despite concerns raised by some critics, educators generally are enthusiastic about the ongoing drive to raise academic standards and acknowledge the importance of performance assessment. Across the state, schools have had varying degrees of success in the effort to embed high standards into the classroom curriculum. Many districts have appointed a standards technician to support teachers in implementing the standards and there is evidence that students are becoming more responsive. Many educators and parents have expressed their appreciation for our administration's steadfast support for the standards and clearer, more consistent communication from the Department of Children, Families and Learning.

Many people raised concerns about the number of standards, the relationship between curriculum and standards and the need for continuing communication on how to keep records and collect data.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY: a commitment to excellence**

The drive for enhanced education accountability will continue to be a state–local partnership. Educators understand that increased accountability is an expectation of our administration. Governor Ventura and I believe that accountability at the state level consists of more than simply increased funding for public education. We have demonstrated our belief in local control by successfully advocating for more

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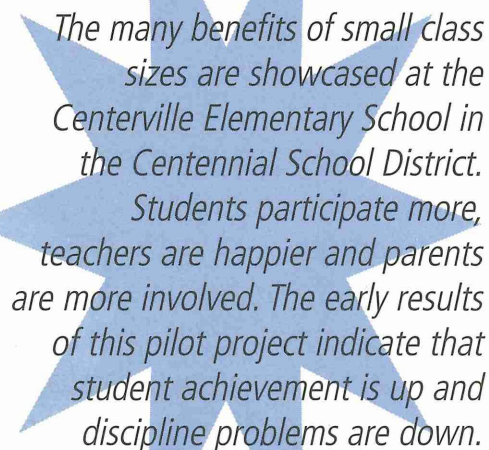
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*At Mora High School, a mock legislature debated a proposal to do away with the new graduation standards and the Profile of Learning. But when a vote was taken, the students chose to keep the grad standards. One student said, "I think grad standards are good for us. They aren't about packing our minds with facts, but about knowing how to use information and demonstrating what we know."*

*At Bishop Elementary School in Rochester, one fourth-grade classroom has become the USS Friendship. The room is a "boat" and students are the "crew" with a goal of personal responsibility combined with teamwork. The students work together on projects, such as evaluating classwork, setting up class celebrations, and even addressing discipline problems.*



*Students at Wheaton High School have a unique opportunity to learn about a high technology business — they run their own Internet provider service for Traverse County. The school district assumed ownership when a local company could not continue with the business. Now TraverseNet has 200 subscribers, and profits are reinvested to improve the business.*



*The many benefits of small class sizes are showcased at the Centerville Elementary School in the Centennial School District. Students participate more, teachers are happier and parents are more involved. The early results of this pilot project indicate that student achievement is up and discipline problems are down.*

*“Even if we had money, we don’t have time to continue expanding our day ... we can’t stop teaching to train and we can’t find reserve teachers to fill in the gaps anyhow.”*

local discretion in the use of state funds. Minnesota is one of the strongest “local-control” states in the nation, but the state’s share of K-12 funding is also one of the highest in the country. Also, the state Department of Children, Families and Learning is following the administration’s agenda and working to become more teacher- and service-oriented. Educators have said that they appreciate the administration’s commitment to work in partnership with them to ensure excellence in all our schools. This sort of partnership is unleashing the creative potential of teachers and students alike.

Educational research indicates that standards rise fastest where schools take responsibility for their own improvement. I have seen much evidence of this during my school visits: I saw walls of brightly displayed student work and projects; I saw teachers emphasize the positive and encourage students to improve and produce better results; I saw administrators and teachers demonstrate consistent support for high achievement. The concern that schools would be measured strictly on the basis of test scores is gradually subsiding, as we and others have stressed that we are out to help our public schools, not bash or destroy them. Determining fair and accurate ways of assessing education accountability will be one of our state’s foremost challenges in the coming months and years.

#### **REDUCING CLASS SIZES: pursuing the ideal**

The principle of reduced class sizes is largely welcomed across Minnesota and the additional money allocated to reduce K-3 classes in the 1999 budget is much appreciated. However, with 70 to 80 percent of school district general fund dollars spent on salaries, there is a direct correlation between class sizes and contract settlements with school staff.

There are also differences in the interpretation of the state’s 17-to-1 target ratio. These factors mean that actual class sizes do not always get smaller in the targeted elementary grades. Also, some districts have found accommodating smaller class sizes a challenge within their existing facilities. During my visits, I saw how innovative solutions to this challenge could provide effective learning opportunities. The advantages of small class sizes for primary students have also brought attention to class size in secondary schools, with many educators agreeing that learning would also be more effective in the upper grades if class sizes could be reduced.

#### **TEACHING: high status, high standards**

Minnesota faces the serious and urgent challenge of recruiting and retaining good teachers. Competition from other industries, as a result of the state’s continued strong economy,



is contributing to acute shortages in some subjects, including science, math, special education and industrial technology. Although adequate numbers of new teachers are graduating from our teacher preparatory schools, a major challenge is to encourage teacher graduates to teach instead of choosing another career. Many educators have also said how important it is to ensure that those who enter teaching are successful and remain in the profession.

The classroom teacher shortage is compounded by a shortage of substitute teachers. Some districts have adopted innovative solutions to this problem, working cooperatively across district boundaries to identify a shared pool of substitutes. In addition, some administrators have proposed changes in state retirement laws to allow retired teachers more flexibility in helping to fill the areas of need.

Just as there is concern about recruitment and retention of teachers, there is growing concern about administrator turnover, the number of administrators due to retire and the preparation of new administrators.

#### **STAFF DEVELOPMENT: commitment to the profession**

Teachers agree that they need more quality time to devote to staff development. This is necessary to ensure quality instruction and the successful implementation of the state's graduation standards. Also, the successful use of technology represents a major challenge to teachers. Other suggestions and concerns raised by educators in the past year include the mentoring of new teachers, longer classroom internships, training teachers to teach effectively in smaller class sizes, adequate time for staff development without taking teachers away from their classrooms where they are needed, and helping the general public understand the value of staff development time for teachers. Educators and administrators alike stressed the importance of targeting professional development to meet the specific needs of individual schools and of retaining good teachers.

#### **CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS: a constant theme**

With salaries accounting for a significant share of school districts' budgets, educators and the public alike recognize the importance of negotiating sound teachers' contracts, but many administrators would like to improve the process. They say the negotiations are very time-consuming, and place administrators and teachers in adversarial relationships that are counterproductive to the shared aim of raising standards and improving student learning. With the exception of the metropolitan area superintendents' group, the call for

*"Money is needed to train staff in computers because most of the kids are more knowledgeable than the teachers."*

*"I'm here to speak on behalf of statewide negotiations ... we are asked as rural districts to raise student achievement, then we commit teachers and board members to months of bargaining. The antagonism between teachers and administration is terrible."*

*"I'd like to not go through negotiating and spending nearly six months every two years on bargaining talks. It takes a lot of energy. It takes energy away from kids."*

*"I'd like to see statewide bargaining. What drives superintendents and boards batty is trying to negotiate 350 contracts. We'd like to do something for student achievement besides bargaining."*

*"The Governor will have a field day when he sees the teacher salary settlements. We've got teacher shortages. The Governor wants us to live within our means and we're caught in the middle."*



*"When I looked at Minnesota's funding formula, I started to chuckle. It looks like a New England town meeting gone sour. I hope the three people in this state who understand the formula don't ever go anywhere on the same plane."*

*"Excess levies used to be about the extras ... now they've become vital for necessities."*

*"In the last two years, I've spent easily 2,000 hours of speaking to get an operating levy passed. The city doesn't need to do that for a new sewage treatment plant — I do, for kids!"*

*A visit to a one-room schoolhouse in the Northwest Angle reminded me of my own childhood. While I had to walk two miles to school, most of these students use boats and snowmobiles to get to class. When travel is impossible, students study at home. The Angle Inlet School has only fifteen K-6 students, but their commitment to learning is tops.*

statewide contract bargaining was a constant theme in the listening posts. It was accepted, however, that the many variations between districts make it virtually impossible to prescribe a fair and equitable salary structure without also weakening local control in other ways. Administrators are seeking ways to enhance the public impression that teaching is a valued profession, and at the same time provide flexibility in differentiated contracts and pay. Some districts, for example, are already considering longer-term contracts.

### **BUDGETS: adequate, predictable, equitable**

Teachers and administrators said how much they appreciated increased funding levels approved by the Legislature and our administration in 1999, but this is generally accompanied by an expectation that funding will continue to increase in order to offset relatively flat levels of funding during much of the 1990s.

Many administrators and school board members are extremely critical of the state's complicated funding formula, but opinion is split about how to improve the state's K-12 education funding structure. While most officials want to maintain local control and flexibility over spending decisions, many also want to restore dedicated categorical funds.

In addition, a small but significant number of administrators said that their districts did not receive some or all of the revenues they should, or did not receive them in a timely fashion, as a result of the complex funding system. Educators, administrators, parents and students have concerns about local levies and the time and effort needed to get referenda passed. They also have concerns about the difficulties that often exist when referenda have not been approved.

An array of issues linked to education funding are being explored in depth during a major study of education that features prominently in the Ventura Administration's *Big Plan*.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENTS: changing educational needs**

Demographics in many districts are changing dramatically. Often this means a growing student population with limited English proficiency. Population changes and the accompanying educational challenges are not confined to Minnesota's urban and regional centers. December 1999 statistics from the Minnesota Demographic Center at Minnesota Planning indicate that roughly one-third of the state's population growth results from in-migration, with international migration continuing to increase.

Enrollment is flat or declining in many districts, making it difficult to maintain staffing, offer smaller class sizes or maintain a full range of courses as pupil-based revenues drop. Residents of rural areas, in particular, are also concerned about consolidation of districts and the distances young students might have to travel. Use of technology and choices such as the post-secondary enrollment option provide some help, although administrators and educators often simultaneously voice a concern about the fiscal cost or impact of those alternatives.

### **SCHOOL CHOICE: excellence for everyone**

The sites I have visited reflect the diversity of Minnesota's public schools. In my visits to charter schools, I observed that these schools tend to have small student populations and also have small class sizes. Parents are very involved and some believe that students can get more individual attention in charter schools. However, charter schools, like other public schools, vary in the quality of services and programs.

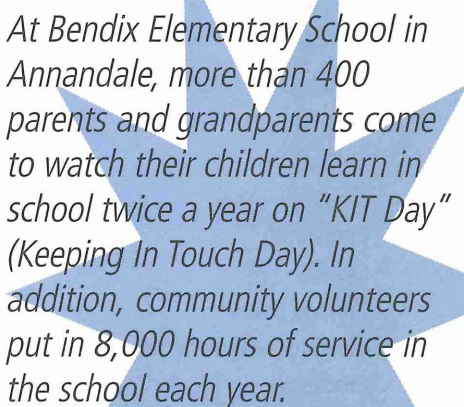
While parents value choice and diversity in school selection, there is concern about the increase in the number of charter schools and the impact this could have on school districts. Some educators and administrators believe that Minnesota has become a target for the creation of new charter schools because there are more options for sponsorship and public funding. These public school educators and administrators believe that existing school districts can provide sufficient education choices without the addition of charter schools. Many parents welcome the opportunity given by open enrollment and school choice to carefully select the most suitable school — public, private or charter — for their child.

### **PARTNERSHIPS: the school, the family, the community**

The importance of parental involvement is recognized as a vital factor in student learning success. I have been pleased to hear that our administration's emphasis on parenting, articulated in *The Big Plan*, is welcomed by many Minnesotans. I have been encouraged to hear during my school visits that the level of parental involvement in many schools is increasing. Some schools are extending the idea of parental involvement by inviting senior citizens to volunteer in schools.

Many teachers shared examples of community-based partnerships that reinforce and extend the learning opportunities within their schools. In addition to partnerships with businesses and organizations, some administrators said they would like to augment their partnerships and would appreciate additional state funding for child care, technology enhancements or early childhood programs.

*Parents and community members in Palisade went all out to keep a school in their small town. Creative financing and a collaboration with the town allowed the Aitkin School District to remodel and expand a small school to serve 28 K-3 students. Otherwise, these young children would have 90-minute bus rides to the nearest school.*



*At Bendix Elementary School in Annandale, more than 400 parents and grandparents come to watch their children learn in school twice a year on "KIT Day" (Keeping In Touch Day). In addition, community volunteers put in 8,000 hours of service in the school each year.*

*In Brainerd, a local business partnered with the Mississippi Horizons School, donating 20 computers for a technology center in the school. In return, employees of the company use the lab in the evening for computer training.*



## School Districts Visited in 1999 by Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk

School District Name	District #	School District Name	District #
Ada-Borup	2854	Mankato	77
Aitkin	1	Marshall	413
Albert Lea	241	Minneapolis	SD1
Alexandria	206	Minnetonka	276
Annandale	876	Montevideo	129
Anoka-Hennepin	11	Mora	332
Austin	492	New Ulm	88
Barnum	91	North Branch	138
Brainerd	181	Orono	278
Brooklyn Center	286	Osseo	279
Browns Valley	801	PACT Charter School	4008
Buffalo	877	Pine Point	25
Buffalo Lake-Hector	2158	Pine River-Backus	2174
Byron	531	Randolph	195
Calendonia	299	Red Lake	38
Campbell-Tintah	852	Red Wing	256
Centennial	12	Redwood Falls	2758
Chaska	112	Robbinsdale	281
Chisago Lakes	2144	Rochester	535
Clearbrook-Gonvick	2311	Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan	196
Crookston	593	Sacred Heart	655
Danube	648	South Washington County	833
Dassel-Cokato	466	St. Anthony-New Brighton	282
Delano	879	St. Cloud	742
Duluth	709	St. Louis Park	283
Eden Prairie	272	St. Paul	625
Eden Valley-Watkins	463	St. Peter	508
Elk River	728	Wabasha-Kellogg	811
Fairmont Area Schools	2752	Wabasso	640
Faribault	656	Warroad	690
Farmington	192	Wayzata	284
Forest Lake	831	West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan	197
Hopkins	270	Wheaton Area Schools	803
Howard Lake-Waverly-Winsted	2687	Willmar	347
Inver Grove Heights	199	Winona	861
Jackson County Central	2862	Yellow Medicine East	2190
Little Falls	482	Zumbrota-Mazeppa	2805



# Voices From Around Minnesota: Listening Posts

## A summary of listening posts with school administrators

The purpose of our listening posts was to hear what school administrators wanted to say about the education system and schools in which they work. More than 300 superintendents, principals, other administrators and educators, and school board members attended these sessions, with a majority of them participating in our dialogues. These sessions were conducted to complement the many discussion forums I have held, primarily with teachers, students and parents, as I visit school districts.

Our eight listening post sessions were unrestricted discussions lasting one-and-one-half hours each and, as you will see, covered a wide range of issues. Although the reported remarks do not reflect my opinions or the opinions of our administration (indeed, several of the stated comments run counter to our administration's belief in local decision-making authority and responsibility for most school decisions), we value the shared perspectives and are including them in our administration's deliberations on education policy and funding.

## Annual Conference for Superintendents Listening Post

Our first listening post took place during the Annual Conference for Superintendents organized by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. Participants were a group of superintendents from a variety of school districts.

### Topics of Discussion

- Teachers continue to be skeptical both about the value of graduation standards and whether they will stay in place. The local media has not been very helpful in this respect.
- Recent speeches by the Governor and Lieutenant Governor supporting graduation standards have been helpful, and teachers are responding positively to these expressions of support.
- Graduation standards need to be seen as an integral part of the curriculum and teachers need ownership of the curriculum.
- If graduation standards are to be successful, instructions from the state must be clear and consistent, deadlines must

### Questions for discussion: Accountability

- How can the state and local school districts accomplish clear, more consistent communication about standards?
- Who is responsible for the professional development of teachers?
- How can we provide quality time for staff development?
- Should school sites have greater responsibility for making decisions about programs and budgets?

*"With regard to graduation standards, quit moving the targets, keep to deadlines and make sure a person answers the phone at the Department of Children, Families and Learning, not a machine!"*

*"Grad standards have made better teachers of a lot of people."*

**Questions for discussion:****Funding**

- Is it the state's role to expand funding for child care?
- The current Early Childhood and Family Education (E.C.F.E.) program is voluntary. Should the state pay to expand E.C.F.E. and make it mandatory?
- Who should pay for school technology purchases: the state, the local district or business partnerships?
- Should the state consider statewide or regional bargaining for school district-teacher contracts?
- How can we be sure that increased funding for education is being best used to improve student achievement?
- Should the State of Minnesota fund specific programs (categorical funding) to target resources for specific needs? If so, how do we decide which ones?

*Distance is no barrier to learning in the Yellow Medicine East District. Thanks to interactive television (ITV), a French teacher in Granite Falls High School conducts language classes with students in four other schools. ITV also expands the range for classes in astronomy and creative writing.*

be kept and test scores must be received in time to inform future curricular planning.

- There are additional pressures on special education teachers.
- Rapid turnover of staff is a problem, particularly in small districts.
- Teachers are burning-out and leaving; vacancies are increasingly difficult to fill.
- Immediate personal advice from the Department of Children, Families and Learning is often needed.
- Training for administrators in implementing the graduation standards is important.
- There needs to be much more flexibility in teachers' contracts to allow for additional work associated with issues such as graduation standards and staff development.
- Regional contract bargaining would save districts a lot of money; statewide health insurance plans should be considered.
- Money for reduced class sizes is much appreciated; districts could use more flexibility in using the revenues.
- Post-secondary options are taking students away from schools that cannot finance certain programs because of budget restrictions.
- State funding for all-day kindergarten should be seriously considered.
- Funding of technology is essential but very difficult to achieve unless it has a categorical protection.
- Declining enrollment is a major issue in rural areas; support is needed for more jobs, affordable housing and day care facilities in order to attract new families.
- Transportation is a real problem in rural districts.

## **Minnesota School Boards Association Listening Post**

The second listening post took place at the fall meeting of the Minnesota School Board's Association and reflected the diverse opinions of a statewide group of about 80 school board members.

### **Topics of Discussion**

- The timing for reporting state test results must be changed; they arrive after school is out for the year and are too late to affect curriculum and budgeting decisions.
- Find out how other states handle data collection; take advice from business and industry.
- The shortage of substitute teachers makes staff development even more difficult.



- Changes must be made to create more staff development time for teachers.
- Budget figures need to be known in advance for planning purposes.
- The increase in special education funding this year has been welcome.
- Vocational education has an important part to play at the high-school level, but current funding arrangements (the phaseout of a categorical source of funding) penalize it.
- Reduced class sizes have created problems of accommodation.
- Problems of accommodation already have been caused by curricular changes.
- Many buildings are in poor condition.
- The use of interactive television in rural areas is crucial.
- Declining enrollment is a problem in 50 percent of school districts; dramatic program cuts are being made and class sizes are increasing.
- The Governor's support for parental involvement is welcomed.
- Early childhood-parent support classes have a significant impact.
- Teachers and school board members should be invited to serve on focus groups for the Governor's education study.
- There is a need for a clear advocate for education to the Legislature.
- Different areas of the state have diverse needs and mechanisms are needed to ensure all districts have their needs addressed.
- We should look to other states and countries for examples of good practice.

### **South Metro Superintendents Listening Post — Burnsville**

This meeting of south metropolitan educators included superintendents from four school districts, and several administrators, teachers and school board members.

#### **Topics of Discussion**

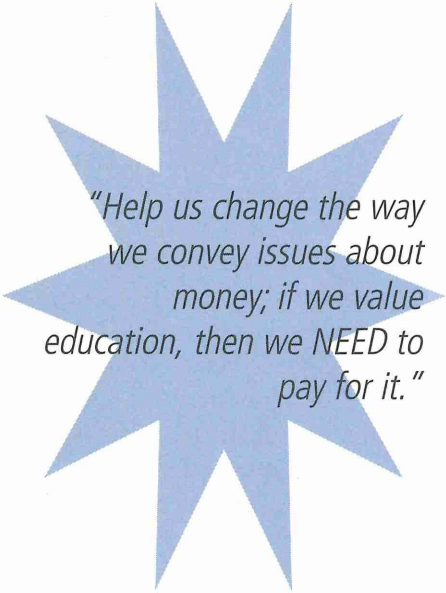
- In terms of student progress and motivation, the Profile of Learning has had a positive effect.
- There are concerns about the administrative work load for the Profile of Learning — scoring, record keeping and reporting.
- There are difficulties in embedding Profile standards in the existing curriculum; teachers need time and support.

#### **Questions for discussion: Best educational practices**

- If parents want smaller class sizes, but districts do not always make that a budget priority, should the state restrict the use of funding to make sure children are assured quality time with their teachers?
- Would a policy of class-size reduction be feasible in the upper grades, where students are grouped on the basis of subject area, not grade level?
- What steps can be taken to attract more high quality people into the teaching profession and ensure we have sufficient well-qualified teachers?
- How can we make sure teachers coming out of college are ready for the rigors of teaching?

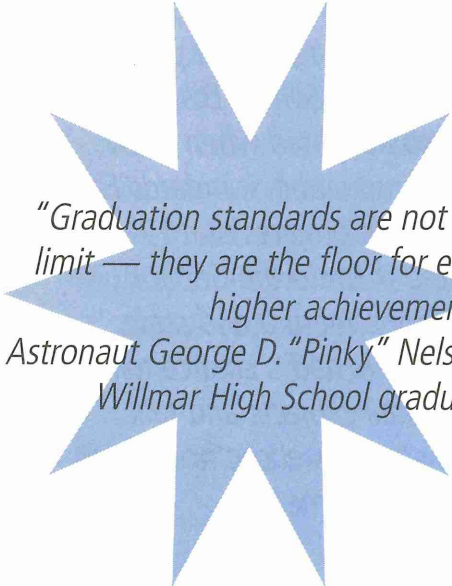
*Success with the graduation standards is a point of pride in the Richfield School District. I was so delighted when I saw their Graduation Standards Fair of student projects that I invited them to the Capitol. Governor Ventura and state lawmakers had a chance to view their projects and talk with students about how much they had learned.*





*"Help us change the way we convey issues about money; if we value education, then we NEED to pay for it."*

*"Just like compensatory funding, special ed funding leapt right over us. If you run an efficient special education program, your efficiency is not rewarded."*



*"Graduation standards are not the limit — they are the floor for even higher achievement."  
Astronaut George D. "Pinky" Nelson,  
Willmar High School graduate*

- Schools are currently facing a problem in recruitment, which will get worse as large numbers of teachers retire over the next few years.
- Interdistrict competition for teachers exacerbates the recruitment problem.
- Mainstreaming special education students creates added stress for classroom teachers.
- An 11-hour working day — teaching, planning, correcting papers — for a teacher is not unusual.
- There is an acute shortage of substitute teachers; creative solutions must be sought.
- Higher salaries are needed to attract young people to the profession.
- There is a strong need for staff development and mentoring to retain teachers.
- The teaching profession is receptive to innovative options such as year-round school or 12-month contracts to increase time for staff development.
- Smaller class sizes do allow for better teaching and increased student achievement in all grades.
- Current funding increases are appreciated, but the underfunding of the past eight years has had a significant impact on education.
- There are problems to be addressed in the funding formula.
- More funding is needed to provide teachers for students with limited English proficiency.
- Preschool work is crucial in families with limited English proficiency.

### **Wright/Stearns County Area Superintendents Listening Post — Rockford**

In addition to geographical proximity, many of these superintendents' districts belong to the same special education cooperative and are also represented in an intermediate district.

#### **Topics of Discussion**

- Year-round school should be considered, but facilities need to be upgraded.
- If the Profile of Learning is to be successful, there needs to be sensible review and development; there is concern about the number of standards at the middle-school level.
- As the Profile becomes more firmly embedded in the curriculum, there will be greater acceptance by parents and students.
- Assessment and reporting procedures for both the Profile and basic skills are troublesome for teachers.

- Transient students, the lack of record keeping software and delay in receiving students' records are all issues of concern.
- There are concerns about the teacher shortage, both for contracted and substitute teachers.
- Ways need to be found to provide professional development resources for teachers without pulling them away from their regular classroom duties.
- Teacher salary negotiations are a major headache; there is concern that settlements will be unacceptably high this year.
- The rising cost of health care benefits is a major issue in negotiations.
- Consideration should be given to moving away from a single pay scale for teachers.
- The Public Employment Labor Relations Act creates difficulties.
- A 12-month, year-round contract should be considered; this could enhance the image of teaching as a good career choice.
- Recent initiatives have improved schools; the reduction of class sizes has been accompanied by a full review of K-3 education.
- The varying abilities of "wealthy" and "less-wealthy" school districts to raise money for bond issues and new equipment needs to be looked at.
- New special education funding does not appear to have been distributed equitably, due to the funding formula.
- More state funding is needed for summer school programs focusing on basic skills.
- Governor Ventura's support for a simple education funding system is appreciated.
- There is a place for categoricals in the funding mechanism; it does protect money.
- Safety in schools is an issue.
- There are high costs involved for transporting students in rural Minnesota.

### **Mankato, Nicollet, Blue Earth Superintendents Listening Post — Mankato**

This group of superintendents meets regularly to discuss individual and regional concerns, as reflected in their discussion topics.

#### **Topics of Discussion**

- There need to be clear strategies to increase the supply of substitute teachers.


*At Discovery Elementary School in Buffalo, students shared information about their class project on learning about finances and displayed the Internet web pages they had designed and stories they had written as part of another learning project — demonstrating the value of both traditional curricula and hands-on learning, key components of the state's graduation standards.*

*"We disassemble hogs here. With jobs like these ... skills, salaries and corporate commitment to employees are different from those in high tech industries. Our firms have a lot of turnover ... our class rosters will continue to change frequently. We need more support for English learners ... that's our future."*



*"Negotiations are like going to war with the people in the trenches. It is shameful we have to do that."*

*One of the strongest displays of parental involvement was at Wilson Elementary School in the Anoka-Hennepin School District, with 255 active volunteers whose total volunteer-time averaged 31 hours in the classroom each day. Parents are also involved through the Parent-Teacher-Community Organization, which raised \$61,000 to establish a computer lab at the school.*



*"The magic takes place in the classroom."*

- We need research into why so many teachers leave in the early years of their careers.
- Lack of discipline is a serious problem and contributes to teachers leaving.
- Most superintendents serve about 2.8 years — reasons for that should be identified and evaluated.
- Teacher salaries need a competitive structure for recruitment and retention.
- Staff development needs to occur outside of teaching time.
- Teacher contract negotiations pose many difficulties and detract from the real business of teaching and learning.
- Escalating health care costs have been a major factor in contract settlements.
- A change of teachers' contracts to 11 or 12 months would be very welcome.
- New rules about student-teacher ratios in special education are difficult to administer. State government agencies need to be sensitive to this.
- Declining enrollments are a big issue in greater Minnesota. Budgets based on a three-year enrollment average would buy time to make the big decisions.
- Much time and effort is needed to get an operating levy passed by local voters.
- Interactive communications are essential, but dedicated funding is being reduced at a time when some districts are tied into long-term equipment leases.
- There must not be a gap between statutes and the funding to support them.
- Inequity between districts favors larger urban districts at the expense of rural districts where there is a constant turnover of teachers.
- There need to be additional controls over establishing charter schools.
- The emphasis on parenting in *The Big Plan* is welcomed.
- Parenting and early childhood education should be under the K-12 umbrella.
- Much work needs to be done to encourage parents of lower-income families to participate in parenting education.
- Places in school for all children age 3 and up would be welcome.

## Big Nine Superintendents Listening Post — Faribault

This listening post included a mix of superintendents and administrators with various roles, some of whom had administrative experience in other states.

### Topics of Discussion

- System accountability tests are not necessary, are not valued by students and show a lack of trust in teachers.
- There are concerns that the school curriculum has become too broad and lacks depth.
- Tests are valuable, but are only one measure of how a district is doing.
- Good business practice is to spend 10 percent of budget on staff development. In public K-12 education, the current practice is one percent.
- Training for graduation standards takes up to seven days each year, but the Legislature cut the number of training days five years ago. Much more training time is needed.
- It is important to change the public perception that only sees the time teachers spend in front of pupils as valuable.
- Increased revenues for class-size reductions are much appreciated, but should be in the general education fund for more flexibility.
- Money for class-size reductions should move up to the higher grades.
- Class-size reduction will not work on its own; staff development is essential.
- The complexity of the budget formula has led to problems, particularly when the Department of Children, Families and Learning discovers a mistake was made in funding disbursement several years after the fact and the district has to pay back money.
- Massive resources are expended on daily attendance records.
- Overall enrollment declines, coupled with higher numbers of students with English as a second language, pose new challenges for teachers and administrators.
- There are unique difficulties for some immigrants who are illiterate in their own language or where there is not a history of a written language.
- There is little evidence of support for immigrant families from placement agencies.
- Difficulties in recruiting teachers of English as a second language are exacerbated by the limited number of college courses available in Minnesota.

*“Our community is losing population and we are losing students. It’s hard for the public to understand how we can cut staff on one hand and lower class size in the early grades on the other.”*

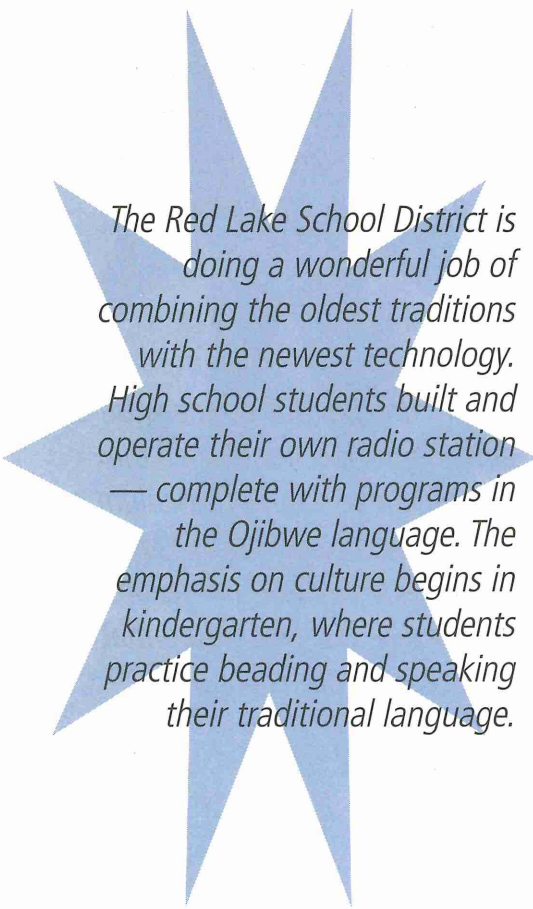
*Is your district short of ESL teachers? At Robbinsdale Cooper High School, a student noticed that many of her classmates didn’t understand English very well. She and other students decided to teach their own ESL class after school.*

*“Our curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep ... look at all the things added to the curriculum over the past 20 years. I don’t know how many of those things are in the Profile, but let’s figure that out and teach what is important.”*



*"My understanding of open enrollment is students may still choose to graduate with friends. Whose standards should they meet? Minnesota schools should have the same standards."*

*"There's no student worth \$2,000 more than our kids because some districts can pass excess levy referendum."*



*The Red Lake School District is doing a wonderful job of combining the oldest traditions with the newest technology. High school students built and operate their own radio station — complete with programs in the Ojibwe language. The emphasis on culture begins in kindergarten, where students practice beading and speaking their traditional language.*

- Communities have welcomed new immigrants, but their efforts are focused on adults.
- The growth in the number of charter schools is having an adverse effect on school district budgets.
- There is some excellent support from local employers for families and their role in their children's education, but difficulties in communication with some employers.
- Parents want a safe school where teachers know their children as individuals.
- Parental involvement is crucial in raising student achievement.

### **Minnesota Rural Education Association Conference Listening Post — Alexandria**

This session included about 60 educators—mainly superintendents and school board members primarily from smaller school districts in greater Minnesota.

#### **Topics of Discussion**

- Clarification is needed about graduation rule assessments for students who go to junior colleges under the post-secondary enrollment option.
- Costs to a district can be more than the per-pupil funding amount for students attending some universities under the post-secondary enrollment option.
- Clarification is needed on appropriate standards for students educated out of their home district under open enrollment.
- There are concerns about the lack of accountability for home-schooled youth.
- Review of the extra three days on the school year is necessary.
- There seems to be unfairness in the allocation of sparsity aid.
- There is concern that a lot of legislation is unfunded mandates.
- Graduation standards look to standards-based education, but funding law is set up on a seat-time basis.
- Vocational education has suffered because of funding going into the general fund.
- The rolling of categoricals into the general fund has given the false impression that there is overall more money available.
- It will take some time to catch up with years of underfunding.
- Inequity between "wealthy" and "less-wealthy" districts is a serious issue.

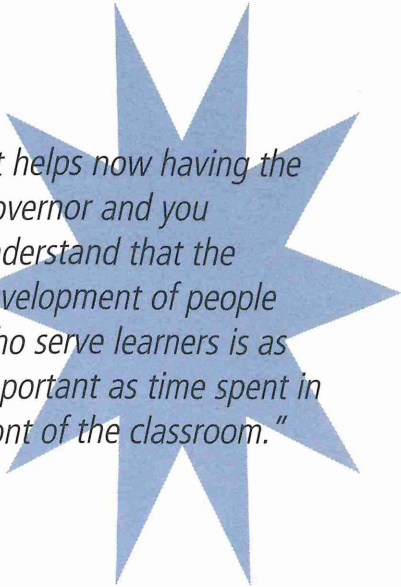
- The funding allocation for each student should be the same for all districts. Some form of merit funding for meeting the standards should be considered.
- There should be increased state aid for students transferred to a school outside of the district in which their home is located.
- There is a very real concern over the possible size of some salary settlements, even though it is recognized that these are deserved.
- Collaboration between districts is being hampered by laws, specifically the Public Employment Labor Relations Act.
- Some rural areas have serious facility problems; should this have to be dealt with locally?
- We should try to learn lessons from charter schools, private schools and industry.
- The state could look at aligning school districts with county lines.
- Early childhood education is important; more funding is needed.

### **Beltline Superintendents Listening Post — St. Louis Park**

This group consisted of superintendents from both inner- and outer-ring suburban school districts, and included districts with both increasing and declining enrollment.

#### **Topics of Discussion**

- There need to be good statewide data collection systems which should be developed before districts are asked to supply the data.
- Districts would appreciate knowing how data sent to the Department of Children, Families and Learning is going to be used.
- Work needs to be done on how to help kids who aren't doing well. Good practices should be identified and shared.
- Some decisions are best handled at the site level, but others need to be made in terms of thinking of what happens as a child progresses through the district.
- We are very supportive of the Profile of Learning, but there needs to be a big push of support from the Governor's Office to help change public perceptions.
- Colleges and universities need to become conversant with graduation standards.
- There is a real need for more time for staff development; if the state is committed to high standards, teachers need training on how to do it well.

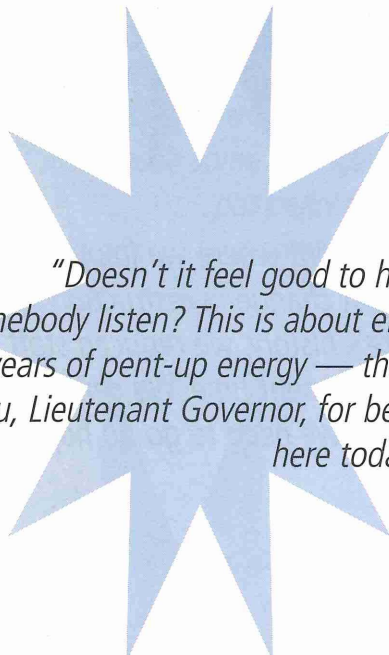


*"It helps now having the Governor and you understand that the development of people who serve learners is as important as time spent in front of the classroom."*

*"The point where we implement the largest change in instruction in our state's history, we reduced staff development time. We can't get to where we need to go on hope."*

*In Hopkins, past and current collaborative planning efforts between school officials and community leaders and citizens — focusing on the assets and needs of area youth — result in partnerships that produce extended learning opportunities and activities for students both in their schools and in their community.*





*"Doesn't it feel good to have somebody listen? This is about eight years of pent-up energy — thank you, Lieutenant Governor, for being here today."*

- Not all money allocated to education will reach school districts due to the complexity of the funding formula.
- Predictability is the number one need when it comes to funding.
- Categorical funding has a place. Financial incentives for districts doing innovative things would assist the reform agenda, help break the mold.
- A lot of accounting work has to be done for no apparent good reason.
- The current funding system creates "haves" and "have-nots." The "haves" have little sympathy for the "have-nots" even when they are in the same district.
- 75 percent of the state's school districts have referenda, but something must be done to raise the cap.
- Erosion of foundation aid is a serious issue.
- Inadequacy of the funding formula is the real issue.
- The marginal cost approach to funding creates problems and needs to be reviewed.
- Current contract negotiations are a real challenge after a decade in a tough revenue environment. Large increases in settlements do not automatically mean districts are being irresponsible.
- Competition between districts is a real issue when it comes to bargaining.
- The Public Employment Labor Relations Act needs to be looked at if school districts are to compete and negotiate and be accountable.
- Alternative forms of contracts should be looked at.
- Is the state considering statewide or regional bargaining?
- State funding for all-day kindergarten needs to be seriously considered; it is the norm in Wisconsin.

*Listening and Learning: Listening to Minnesota 1998-1999* was prepared by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor with assistance from Minnesota Planning. Contributors to this report included: Wayne Hayes and Steve LeBeau, Office of the Lieutenant Governor; Diane O'Brien, Linda Oelker and Sandra Stalker, Minnesota Planning.

January 2000

Upon request, *Listening and Learning: Listening to Minnesota 1998-1999* will be provided in an alternate format, such as Braille, large print or audio tape. For TTY, contact Minnesota Relay Service at 800-627-3529 and ask for the Office of the Lieutenant Governor.