



The fundamental purpose of education is democracy

Revisiting education's mission serves Minnesota's interest

by Sean Kershaw

Our Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150) agenda asks the question “what can we learn from students that will help them stay motivated in school?” From that, you might conclude we’re assuming that education should be just about what the kids want—which isn’t our intent at all.

But this question highlights two reasons why our current education debate is off the tracks. First, because students are an afterthought in the brick-throwing between opposing interest groups, and more importantly, because the debate ignores the primary purpose of education—democracy itself—which puts the involvement of these students in the right perspective.

By redefining the debate around this purpose, I think we will not only have more success improving education policy and outcomes in Minnesota, we’ll also improve our ability to solve future policy challenges.

The purpose of education

The fundamental purpose of education in a democracy is democracy: to create citizens who are capable of self-governance. It’s not about what the kids want; it’s about what a democracy demands. And it is about more than the kids or the interest groups that are currently throwing white papers and expensive ad campaigns at each other. Every Minnesotan and every institution has a role in education and needs to step up to the table.

Education creates the civic capacity we need in a democracy: citizens who understand democratic virtues; who are informed and understand history; who can deliberate and discern well; who have the ability to pursue their economic interests; and who have the skills to govern for the common good and find common ground in an increasingly diverse Minnesota and a rapidly changing world.

Thomas Jefferson understood this purpose when he said “whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.” The philosopher John Dewey understood it when he said

Most concerning is the feeling that we are losing the capacity to solve this problem.

“we naturally associate democracy, to be sure, with freedom of action, but freedom of action without freed capacity of thought behind it is only chaos.”

Our policy dilemma

Minnesotans understand that our education system is failing. In our MAP 150 poll more than 70 percent said the quality of the system has stayed the same or grown worse in recent years.

The evidence backs them up. Minnesota has one of the highest racial achievement gaps in the country and this, coupled with demographic trends, is likely to soon result in declining numbers of graduates. We perform below our global competitors in math and science, one-third of high school graduates need remediation when they enter higher education, and higher education is unaffordable for too many families.

And perhaps most concerning is the feeling that we are losing the capacity to solve this problem. For example, our current efforts to “do something” to address the symptoms (spend more; test more; mandate more; regulate more; cut more) aren’t producing the outcomes we need. But strategies that only address these symptoms, without going to the fundamental or unifying purpose of the issue, won’t solve the problem.

Reframing the debate

We need to reframe the education debate around its fundamental democratic purpose.

For example, as we move forward with our MAP 150 education agenda, we’ll work with school professionals, parents, employers, and other stakeholders to

demonstrate how students can be brought into a public process to address the barriers to making schools work.

We’ll focus on students, not because they are passive “consumers” of education, but because as citizens of their own schools they play an important role, and they have an obligation to make those institutions work (to be “producers” of education). We’ll focus on what students need to be motivated, not out of their limited self-interest, but because this self-interest is essential to achieve the broader enlightened self-interest of Minnesota. We’ll expand the conversation to include other institutions like employers and community organizations because they have a role and a self-interest in student success.

If we can motivate students and involve them as decision-makers (experts in their own education) we can also instill in them the skills they will need as adults and active citizens. It will expand the narrow-interest domination of the current discussion by focusing on the common interests we have in a better education outcome: a better educated citizenry.

Irony and opportunity

The ultimate irony is this: we know we’re “stuck” in our ability to solve public problems like education. And yet the fundamental purpose of education is to build the democratic capacity to solve public problems.

But this is actually great news. By rededicating ourselves to the purpose of education we provide a means to work through very immediate and difficult differences on this topic, we create models we can use to address other public problems, and we build a new generation of leaders that can successfully solve other public problems.

I can’t think of a better present that the Citizens League could offer Minnesota for its 150th birthday. ●

Sean Kershaw is the Executive Director of the Citizens League, and can be reached at skershaw@citizensleague.net or 651-293-0575x14. You can also comment on this Viewpoint at: www.citizensleague.net/blogs/sean.