

# MINNESOTA Journal

A PUBLIC POLICY MONTHLY FROM THE CITIZENS LEAGUE

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## Making a liberal case for school choice

by Elizabeth Mische

A generation ago, I grew up in a DFL family knowing three important things about Democratic politics: liberals expand the franchise, protect the vulnerable from undue exploitation by those more powerful, and work like hell.

Improving access to the good stuff that the powerful get as a matter of course is a fine liberal goal. So it's perplexing that, when one mentions school choice for low income families in liberal circles today, one is liable to be berated for—at least—unwittingly playing into the hands of conservatives who want to “destroy public education” by taking money away from all public programs.

### A history of making good choices

Minnesota used to be a national leader in education reforms that gave families of all incomes greater ability to meet the needs of their children. Bi-partisan support during several legislative sessions gave us statewide public school open enrollment; the first charter school law in the nation; the country's first post-secondary education option allowing advanced high school students to use part of their school aid to take courses toward high school graduation at colleges and universities; the nation's first refundable tax credit for low income families that invest in educational supplies and services for their children, and quality special education. As far back as 1955, Minnesota lawmakers gave middle-and-above earners some “school tax” relief through a modest tax deduction when they paid private school tuition for their own children, while their taxes benefited their neighbors' access to general fund schools.

The reforms that gave middle- and upper-income families a greater ability to meet the

particular needs of their children logically (democratically) should give rise to another expansion of school choice: choice for low- and moderate-income families who deserve access to what has always been available to those with money. Such expanded school choice—call it vouchers or access grants or whatever one likes—introduces some neutrality into the advantages the well-off have always had educationally.

### School choice and equality

Decently motivated Republicans of my acquaintance say that the reason for Minnesota's failure to further expand school choice lies in the fact that the single largest contributor to DFL campaigns for election is the sole union representing public school K-12 teachers. It is true that here and across the nation, teacher's unions oppose most of the innovations which provide low-income families access to greater educational choice. That's what unions do—protect their members' interests. In fairness, these unions also support local Republicans when the candidate screens for anti-school choice positions—and many do.

But my concern is liberals who oppose freedom to choose uniquely in the case of public education. I think their opposition can be traced to two anxieties and some self-serving partisanship.

First, we liberals believe that no one kind of person is better than anyone else, and this belief gets translated into what, in the case of public education, looks like equality. We build schools and hire people to run them and everybody gets to attend if they want to and, on average, most of these schools are adequate for most kids—

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[www.citizensleague.net](http://www.citizensleague.net)

# State budget deficit requires resetting the mechanism inside the box

by Ted Kolderie

Budget deficits are not permanently gone from Minnesota's fiscal scene. It's none too soon to start thinking about what to do when they recur. So: Is anybody thinking about that? What's the right way to think about that?

Peggy Ingison, the state finance commissioner, warned just before the 2004 legislative session ended that the state general fund is structurally out of balance, by almost half a billion dollars looking into the next biennium. If the state projected growth in spending the way it projects growth in revenue—taking inflation into account—the structural deficit would be about \$1 billion next biennium.

That's not a huge gap. The general fund now runs about \$28 billion a biennium. But closing it will be hard because all the easy things were done in 2003 and 2004—shifts and such—that provided “temporary revenues.”

## So what to do?

In the drawing at right, the box with the hopper on top and the spigot on the bottom suggests the conventional answer: we either cut services or raise taxes. Into the hopper go dollars and people. Out the spigot come services and benefits. If you put less in, people say, you're bound to get less out. If you want more out, you have to put more in. If you do put more in, you will get more out. The media usually echo the refrain: “Folks, there are only two choices.”

This short-term thinking can seem like reality. And for budget people it probably is. Within the biennium, that's all they can do. There's a good case for being smarter about the priorities involved. But priority-setting is still cutting, so still part of the doing-less strategy.

It's better to find both a more sensible priority-setting process and ways to make the service or benefit system work more effectively and more efficiently, as David Osborne and Peter Hutchinson argue in their new book, *The Price of Government*. Osborne wrote *Reinventing Government* and is now a partner in Public Strategies with Hutchinson, a former Minnesota commissioner of finance and Minneapolis superintendent of schools.

Look at “B” in the drawing. “Inside the box” of any system there is some mechanism that turns resources into results. It can work well or badly, efficiently or inefficiently. There is always the option to reset that mechanism so it will work better, will get greater value for money.

This can't be done quickly. But it can be done. It is done.

## Resetting the mechanism

In 1973, oil suddenly became much more expensive. Basically, OPEC re-set “the mechanism inside the box” for us, raising the price of oil. That gave us an incentive to insulate our houses, improve industrial processes and increase vehicle mileage. Over the past 30 years, we greatly

effectively.

This has clearly been done in the private household sector. If everyone hired a gardener to take care of their lawn, a chauffeur to drive them around, a cook to get them lunch and dinner, and maids to clean their houses, most people would have a structural imbalance in their household account. And the answer isn't really to set priorities. These are all necessary functions. The problem is the cost of professional service. Clearly, heads of private households make a number of decisions about when they will:

- hire professional services
- hire neighborhood kids or students
- use extended family and friends, or
- do something themselves.

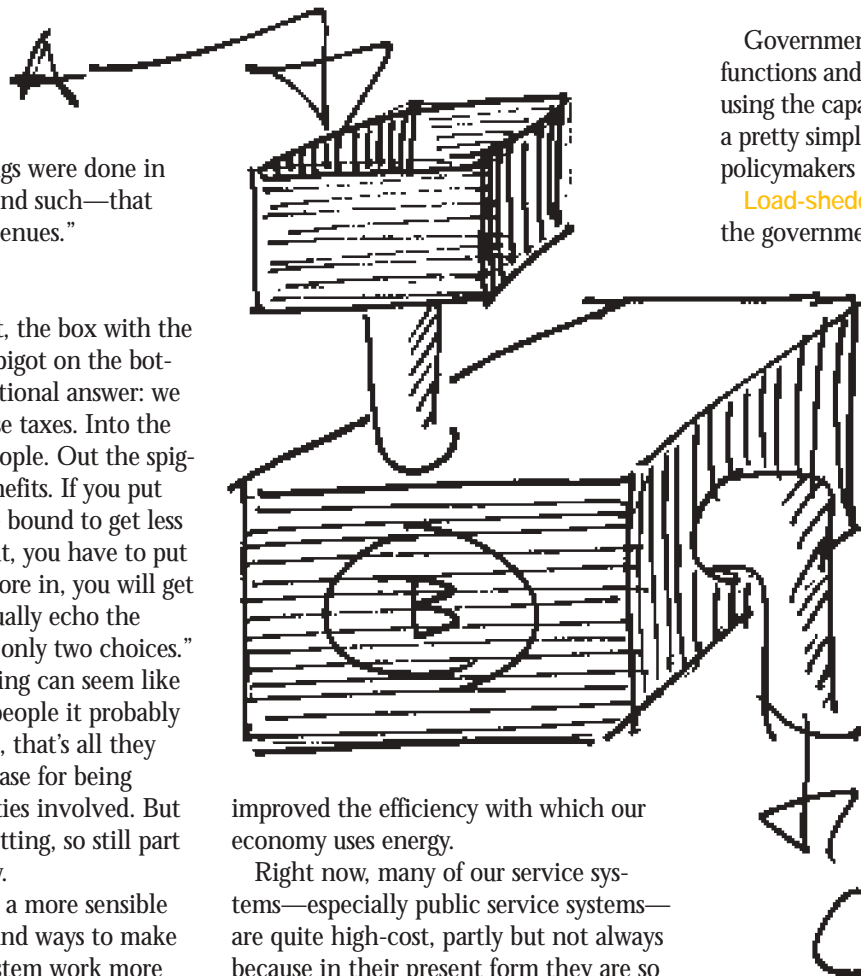
Government, too, can approach some functions and services with the idea of using the capacity of the recipients. There's a pretty simple list of things like this for policymakers to consider for public services.

**Load-shedding.** There really are things the government doesn't need to do. On the

Iron Range in the old days, the city mowed private boulevards. In Minneapolis, police used to fill out accident reports as a service to insurance companies. Policymakers should keep looking for things the government no longer needs to do at all; that can be done and should be done by private individuals or private organizations.

**Prevention.** The cost of dealing with problems will go down if we don't create the problems in the first place. This becomes the effort to get people not to litter, to prevent fires, to stop smoking, to eat right, to reduce violence. We can never

hire enough street-sweepers and cops and doctors and nurses. The only answer is to improve the way people behave. We have laws and incentives to discourage some behaviors and to encourage other behaviors. Most of these



improved the efficiency with which our economy uses energy.

Right now, many of our service systems—especially public service systems—are quite high-cost, partly but not always because in their present form they are so labor-intensive. There are always interests around trying to persuade us that the answer to every problem is some expensive professional service or some big, expensive new machine.

Not so. It is possible to redesign most of these systems so the function gets performed at lower cost and, sometimes, more

*Budget continued on page 4*

# Viewpoint

## Lessons from the Itasca Project: A “true source” for new civic leadership

by Sean Kershaw

Judging from the last legislative session, we're due for some real civic leadership in Minnesota. Judging from the reaction to the Itasca Project, we're *dying* for some real civic leadership in Minnesota.



The real question then isn't the need for leadership. (We're starved for it.)

The key questions relate to what type of civic leadership will work for us today.

The Itasca Project, an informal organization of business executives created to take action on a regional “civic agenda,” provides many clues. Not only does it come at a perfect time politically, it shows us what new civic leadership can look like, and how all of us as citizens will have to be part of this civic action agenda.

### Enlightened self-interest

So what has motivated these CEO's to do something? Let's not kid ourselves. These corporate leaders are involved in this effort because, if it works, it is good for business. (And if we do nothing, it is bad for business.) Their companies have

a long-term financial stake in finding cost-effective solutions to problems like how to improve higher education and how to lessen our transportation frustrations.

It's surprising to me when people have a problem with this, as if self-interest is automatically bad, or that there must be a hidden agenda at work.

These leaders have connected their corporate self interest to the greater (corporate) interest of our region. They know that an inadequate transportation system wastes time for their employees and increases their production costs. They know that productivity growth is dependent on top-notch higher education and an educated workforce. They know their employees don't want to live in a community that slips behind in the quality-of-life race.

Self-interest isn't necessarily a problem. We won't get anything done until we have civic leaders who use this enlightened self-interest to motivate people to take action.

### Global vision, local leadership

Raise your hands if you've heard the one about the business executive that doesn't care about the Twin Cities because he isn't “from here.” Maybe this is true in some cases, but thinking this way may cause us to miss out on new opportunities to see how the world has changed and how we can change too.

Leadership that isn't “from here” is an asset for our region, not a barrier.

The Itasca Project includes leaders that have seen how other communities all over the world have successfully addressed the problems we're facing today. They know that in order to compete in this globalized economy, “one-upping Wisconsin” is hardly a sufficient benchmark. Our horizon, our vision, and our competition are the other side of the world, not the other side of the St. Croix. We need more leaders with a global perspective.

Perhaps in the past, we could succeed

by focusing on a “Minnesota way” that didn't pay much attention to these other places. But in the future, in this larger, more networked, globalized world, in order to be the best, we will have to adapt and assimilate good ideas from all over the world. A little transportation from Phoenix; a little higher education from Singapore; a lot better community in the end.

### CEOs are only half the solution

These CEOs, by themselves, aren't going to fix higher education or transportation. We will. Their leadership is certainly a critical step in addressing these policy problems, but it isn't sufficient to solve them. A sustained solution to these problems depends on citizens—all of us—becoming part of the solution.

Take transportation for example. Policy leaders (from Itasca to the Citizens League to chambers of commerce to the Governor and Legislature) will soon propose and hopefully implement a broad range of transportation strategies to improve capacity and access (more roads and transit).

We'll need to debate and pay for these strategies. But no amount of new roads or transit can compensate for the impact of the transportation decisions each of us makes on a daily basis. Much of the congestion we now face is the result of more citizens having more cars and taking more and longer trips. In the end our behavior, as voters, drivers, and riders will be part of the solution equation.

The challenge and opportunity in all of this is for enough of us to buy in to the new (global and local) civic vision proposed by the Itasca Project and others like the Citizens League, and to see our own self-interest in becoming part of this new civic agenda. We are due for, and on the edge of, a new civic renaissance. **MJ**

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have been in place for some time: fines for littering and speeding; better insurance rates for driving and health care if you don't smoke.

**Mutual help.** Not every "service" requires a professional. People have always taken care of each others' kids, driven each other around, helped with others' medical and social and psychological problems. The public sometimes organizes such efforts: carpool/vanpool programs, or neighborhood crime watch.

**Supported self-help, or co-production.** Somebody sells you the equipment, designs, materials and know-how; you put in the labor. Think of Toro and Betty Crocker. Education is a major opportunity. Both college and K-12 are still dominated by the notion that teachers "deliver" education to students. Everybody knows that kids learn some things on their own. Today students can learn on the web, coached by teachers. That would individualize learning, make it more motivating. Minnesota's tax credit finances the purchases of computer hardware and software and courses that supplement the regular school curriculum.

**Substitution.** Cities used to remove snow; literally pick it up and truck it away. Then they began to plow snow; just move it aside. Now they increasingly melt snow. Equipment can substitute for personal service. Maintenance can substitute for expensive replacement.

**Utilization.** Make better use of the expensive time we do buy. In the cities, professional firefighters work as paramedics when they aren't chasing fires. Smaller cities and rural areas use citizens, volunteer firefighters, who drop their private work to chase fires when they occur. Community programs use school buildings and some chartered schools come into public park and recreation buildings.

**Volunteering.** Lots of people are willing to do service work beyond what we pay professionals to do. Some are docents at a zoo or museum. Others pick up litter along roadsides. Or watch the neighborhood. In Saint Paul, Mayor Kelly has a full-time person helping organize volunteers for the schools. It just needs organizing.

The job for the state is to arrange public systems (again, that mechanism inside the box) so the operating organizations have

incentives—reasons and opportunities—to do these things routinely, on their own initiative, in their own interest, and from their own resources. These "arrangements" can involve:

**Pricing.** Things that are charged for tend to be used more sparingly. It's best for cities not to supply water free. Pricing will be essential to encourage employees to use the high-quality, low-cost medical clinics and hospitals.

In 1973, oil suddenly became much more expensive. Basically, OPEC re-set "the mechanism inside the box" for us, raising the price of oil. That gave us an incentive to insulate our houses, improve industrial processes and increase vehicle mileage. Over the past 30 years, we greatly improved the efficiency with which our economy uses energy.

**Subsidies.** When essential services are priced we need to be sure everyone has money to buy them. It's better to run the subsidies to the consumers than to pay the producers to offer services free. This is the issue with student aid in higher education. We also subsidize home-heating costs in the winter, and child day care.

**Choice.** Let citizens choose the doctor they want, the school they think best. Let public bodies choose the organization that will best carry out the mission.

**Contracting.** This is letting public bodies have choice. They can choose commercial firms, but can also contract with other governmental units and with nonprofits. Contracting is not privatization: the public purpose remains. Government is simply choosing not to handle the service with its own employees.

**Capitation.** Give people or organizations

a lump sum of money and let them keep what they don't need to spend. This will encourage them to use resources more efficiently. When Milwaukee gave each school its own money for substitutes, it saw teacher absences go down. The schools were using the savings for school activities.

**De-credentialing.** Professional groups often try to persuade legislatures to make self-help and mutual-help illegal. Resist this, as a way of encouraging "mutual help."

It is not easy to change our large public systems. Somebody has to think creatively about how the redesign strategies can be applied, and then has to educate both the public and the policymakers who will have to implement these reforms against the opposition of interests vested in the current arrangements.

It is a function that has to be set up outside the budget office. It can be inside state government, or outside.

Unhappily, Minnesota has been losing the organizations that do this system re-design, and losing the "forums" in which these ideas are discussed and in which policymakers learn. The Legislature now does significantly less thinking between sessions than it used to do. (This was the subject of Ted Kolderie's lecture

at the Minnesota Historical Society in October 2001: "Cold Sunbelt: Maintaining Minnesota's Institutions of Public Policy." Look under *Issues & Reports* at [www.citizensleague.net](http://www.citizensleague.net).)

This is a serious problem for Minnesota. If we simply cheapen our public sector and raise our public costs, we'll lose what has helped offset our remote location up here in the north.

So, addressing "the budget problem" begins with resisting the notion that there are only two choices. It's not true that the only options are cutting and taxing. There is always the option to change the way things are done. Insist on it. **MJ**

*Ted Kolderie, now a senior associate with EducationEvolving, has worked on K-12 policy in Minnesota and in other states for the past 22 years.*

# Health courts could create accountability for patients and physicians

by Philip K. Howard

Some of the root causes of America's current health care crisis are unavoidable. No one, for instance, can change the fact that the baby boom population needs more health care as it ages. But there is one underlying problem that has to be addressed if the crisis is to be solved: our broken liability system.

Headlines have focused on the rise in liability verdicts and the sharp spike in malpractice premiums—causing doctors to retire early or leave certain states altogether—but those are only the tip of the iceberg. Widespread distrust of justice has fundamentally altered the practice of medicine. Because of it, billions of dollars are squandered annually as doctors order tests and procedures of little or no utility. And doctors and nurses are reluctant to be candid about errors that might lead to better care.

The distrust that pervades American health care is an inevitable result of a system of justice that tolerates, indeed encourages, wildly inconsistent verdicts. According to a Harvard Medical Practice Study, most people don't sue when there's a medical mistake; but 80 percent of claims are made against doctors who made no medical error at all. Juries often let a doctor who made a mistake off the hook; but one out of four cases in which experts believe the doctor did nothing wrong results in payments.

The legal process is not only unpredictable and emotionally wrenching, but staggeringly inefficient, with legal expenses (for plaintiffs and defendants) consuming 50 percent of the total liability costs. Lawsuits go on for years.

Doctors and patients, of course, aren't natural enemies. Both need what justice today is not providing—reliability. Patients need a system reliable to hold doctors accountable when there's a mistake, and doctors need a system reliable to protect them when unfairly charged.

Restoring reliability to health care justice requires questioning the one assumption that, until recently, no one dared even discuss: the role of the jury.

The core flaw with justice today is that no one's in charge—all-important decisions are made by juries that come and go

with each case. Juries can't set precedent; every jury is different, and decisions are often inconsistent. One jury might make a huge award in a particular case, and another, in a similar case, might make no award at all.

Under U. S. law, the role of juries in civil cases is to decide disputed issues of fact, and the role of judges is to rule on the law. Decisions on proper standards of care should fall with the judges as matters of the law, not with juries.

Today, partly as a result of the increasing complexity of medical science, no one working on behalf of society is making binding rulings about what is good care and what is not. No one is deciding when a test is needed and when it is not. What is missing is established standards of care. Juries, deciding facts in individual cases, don't have the authority to establish such standards. Unlike judges' written decisions, their verdicts do not form a body of case law.

The way to create reliability, and also to make the deliberate choices needed to improve care, is to create specialized health courts. It's impossible to fix the current mess when no one has the authority to make the choices needed to bring health care under control.

Since the 1960s, the rise both in medical liability cases and in the complexities of medical science has been dramatic. But there's virtually no body of law that any judge could look to in making rulings. Shifting responsibility back to judges in current courts would begin to instill a measure of consistency, but not necessarily the wisdom needed to restore trust in health-care justice. Health care has become highly scientific. Judges in courts of general jurisdiction have no medical training.

The outlines of a health court could vary, but the basic components seem clear: Health courts would be staffed by judges with medical training. The judges would have the authority to hire neutral experts, instead of experts-for-hire who now confuse and prolong malpractice cases. To reduce legal fees and the emotional toil, proceedings would be expedited, so that injured patients would keep more of any award.

The primary goal of a specialized health

court should be patient safety. This requires reviving or inducing a culture of open communication. With an expert health court, doctors could have the confidence that they would not be penalized for admitting uncertainty or error in the candid back-and-forth in hospital corridors and examining rooms.

Reliable accountability is critical to overcoming the distrust that infects daily choices and the doctor-patient relationship. Patients injured by medical mistakes should be compensated fairly. Doctors who are unjustly charged should be protected. Doctors who are not competent should lose their licenses. An expert court could make these types of decisions reliably and consistently.

Creating a new health court may seem like a radical proposal. But health care in the United States is in meltdown. Specialized courts are common in such areas as taxes, workers compensation, labor issues, and vaccine liability. An expert court or tribunal has long been recognized as the sensible solution in situations where there is a crisis of distrust. Sen. Michael Enzi (R.-Wyoming) has introduced a bill to fund pilot programs for a health court, and several of America's most prominent hospitals, including New York-Presbyterian Hospital, have indicated an interest in offering themselves for the experiment.

Creating a special medical court is an ambitious undertaking and presumably will be opposed by the trial lawyers, for whom the unreliability of the current system is an advantage. Creating such a court, however, will help to strengthen one of the oldest and most basic principles of the U.S. system of justice: that like cases be decided alike.

We don't really have a choice: the distrust that is eating away like a cancer at U.S. health care cannot be cured until justice in health care is made reliable. **MJ**

*Philip K. Howard, a lawyer, is Chair of Common Good ([www.cgood.org](http://www.cgood.org)), the bipartisan legal reform coalition, and the author of "The Death of Common Sense" and "The Collapse of the Common Good." This piece was originally published in the Philadelphia Inquirer May 16, 2004.*

therefore, we're all equal.

But children don't correspond to averages, so this brand of equality isn't really just: people who want something else for their child's schooling (not necessarily better, but different) are free to opt out of the universalized education system we've established if they have money. We just mandate attendance.

Yet if families win boodles in the lottery, through scrappy business dealings, hard work, or inheritance, they are not prevented from choosing a "free" government school for their child's K-12 experience. This amounts to an unfair burden on low earners, making low-income families captive consumers of whatever educational services the local general-funded school offers, even when their child's interests are not served. This inequity is not often articulated, but it makes liberals anxious, so we elide the answer to the question, "whose interests are being served?" into the claim "equality."

The second anxiety is fear (or disapproval) of the idea that families given a voucher may opt for religious schools. I know a bit about religiously operated schools, and I do not long for them for my own children—but other parents do, and many of those schools are as good or better for some children as the government operated schools now available to them.

The U.S. Supreme Court (with which one is, of course, allowed to disagree) held in 2002 that Cleveland's private school voucher program is constitutional, and that the separation of church and state is protected if parents already eligible for public funding of schooling make a free choice to use their child's allotment at a religious school. The Court disagreed with the plaintiffs' claim that parents are "inconsequential conduits" of public money when they use a public-funded voucher for their child's attendance at a school run by religious- or ethical- based organizations, ruling that free choice renders any incidental support for "religion" neutral.

In such a schematic, parents get to make choices that I am not interested in myself. On their way to expository writing, calculus and modern languages, their kids may pray. Most parents will choose schools (private, charter, conventional public) without prayer. Surely this can't

matter as much as whether children are learning well.

As a liberal, I struggle to abjure privilege: I want more people to access the benefits my family has. We could have opted out of the public schools for schools

First, we liberals believe that no one kind of person is better than anyone else, and this belief gets translated into what, in the case of public education, looks like equality. We build schools and hire people to run them and everybody gets to attend if they want to and, on average, most of these schools are adequate for most kids—therefore, we're all equal.

better suited to my children's specific needs and talents. Parents similarly dissatisfied, but less financially secure or culturally adept, do not have such freedom. My children are no brighter than theirs, and I am no more deserving than these parents who can only make do with what is offered by the mostly middle class purveyors of an industrial model of education, a model which increasingly does not serve them well but serves us in partisan ways.

Many of these other parents work like hell—at jobs that pay too little, under conditions that try even predictable economies and good intentions, in neighborhoods so fraught as to defy the most energetic intervention, with personal and cultural histories that provide an uneven playing field for every contest of contemporary life. These impediments make their children more vulnerable than mine to the hazards of a bad educational fit—but they want the same things for their children: excellence, challenge, safety, order, respect for their family's most cherished values,

and actionable regard for their evaluation of the production in which we participate.

### On democracy's behalf

It never surprises me when Republicans complain about public spending—asking whether we are getting value for what we pay for is what I expect conservatives to do. It doesn't even surprise me when a Republican legislator takes the union shilling—that's what politicians do.

But as a democrat, I find it intolerable when liberals, who ought to be asking whether the vulnerable are getting what they need from what we all pay for (and so, seemingly endorse), avail ourselves of the best public and private schools for our children while obstructing poorer people's access to those same choices. Even when we offer to invest more money in the existing monopoly, this obstruction has the effect of disenfranchising individual students and the families that rear them; however unwittingly, it promotes inequality.

It's time for liberals who want to improve access to the best of America, to protect the vulnerable from the contrary interests of powerful others (even when those powerful others are us) to start to work like hell to empower parents—beyond the limitations of income—to make meaningful choices about their kids' schools.

Our trust-busting roots call us to say "no" to those who control the means of production in favor of a "yes" to individual children and families who are entitled to greater regard than the systems that are charged with serving them merely "on average." When liberals allow anxiety or political loyalty to drive us to defend systems instead of people, we've become as illiberal—as conservative—as the free marketeers we critique. MJ

*Elizabeth Mische is Executive Director of the non-profit Partnership for Choice in Education, convener of the Minnesota School Choice Coalition.*

# OnBalance

## Views From Around the State

*State's commitment to higher education receives a failing grade from editorial writers outstate*

Are we pricing the state's poorest students out of the Minnesota's higher-education system, wonders the **Bemidji Pioneer** (6/18). "The continual hike in tuition only further puts access to higher education out of reach to Minnesotans most unable to afford higher education and who would most benefit from it," the paper argues. With tuition and fees expected to increase 12.3 percent at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and 12 to 14 percent at the University of Minnesota, the *Pioneer* fears that higher education is slipping as a state priority. "...the skill level of Minnesota's future workforce depends on the training its current and future workers receive, and restricting access by pricing it out of the reach of more Minnesotans sends the state in the wrong direction. ... Minnesota needs to rethink its commitment to higher education, and begin to assign it the value it deserves in ensuring equal opportunity for all Minnesotans to the workplace of the future."

The **Mankato Free Press** (6/27) seconds that argument. "A state faces choices in how it spends its money. Increasingly in America, it seems we are investing in prisons and police agencies. It would seem wiser to invest in educating children, in preschools and through day care and all the way through higher-education facilities. An educated populace should make more money and pay more taxes to help fund the choices its leaders make. If the issue is truly spending money, it seems foolish to reduce the number of college-educated people in this state."

Three years of double-digit tuition hikes may cause students and their families to begin reexamining their own commitment to higher education, suggests the **St. Cloud Times** (6/21). But students should take the long view, the paper urges. "Students facing such a dilemma should remember the 2000 census showed that college graduates took home an average of \$45,678 a year as compared with the \$24,572 average salary of those who only

completed high school. In addition, in a lifetime a college graduate will earn almost \$600,000 more than someone with only a high school diploma." Even so, the paper notes, "students aren't the only people who need to do some soul searching. Minnesota's political and educational leaders must re-examine the state's commitment to higher education."

Tuition rates have always been a source of complaint, points out the **Brainerd Dispatch** (6/27). "Tuition in the 1860's consisted of a pledge by the students (many of whom had only gone through the eighth grade) to teach for two years after three years of college ... No doubt the college students' parents thought that keeping their progeny off the family farm for two years of college was an excessive financial burden in exchange for a little book learning." The paper cautions, however, that there is "a breaking point for families when it comes to tuition costs and we may be closer to that point than we think."

Tuition hikes aren't the only looming threat to higher education, warns the **Bemidji Pioneer** (7/1). Gov. Tim Pawlenty's recent appointments to the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees, cautions the *Pioneer*, may begin to treat higher education more as a commodity. "Pawlenty's picks decidedly tip the MnSCU board to that not unlike a corporate board of directors where, we fear, the bottom line will be the profit margin not the knowledge margin." Such an approach, the *Pioneer* argues, could result in further reducing the state's commitment to higher education, reduced access for students, and even campus closures, a move "which comes as an easy business decision to those who circulate in the corporate world, but which can be devastating to rural Minnesota. We hope that Pawlenty's intention is not to treat higher education like a business, in which case rural Minnesota residents will be the losers."

A plan by Greyhound to stem \$140 million in losses over the past two years by cutting routes in rural Minnesota, argues the **Duluth News Tribune** (6/30) will leave many rural Minnesotans stranded, including many seniors who use the service to make regular trips to the Twin Cities to visit their children. "As dire straits as the company may be in, it surely must have the means to better determine how to serve a small number of riders. The company could cut runs rather than routes, and if remote areas are served only once a day or on weekends only, it's still better than nothing."

"With Greyhound claiming to carry more riders yearly than those on U.S. airlines and Amtrak combined, surely its computing staff can come up with a model to figure out how to run smaller numbers of buses less frequently to serve those with no other choices."

Minnesota's non-English speaking residents may not be getting adequate representation in the state's courts, **Mankato Free Press** (6/16) cautions. Minnesota, once a leader in training interpreters—who serve as vital liaisons in the legal process—has let the quality of its interpreter program slip at a time when the number of Hmong and Hispanic immigrants is increasing in the state. "Only 64 of the hundreds of court interpreters in the state are certified," the paper notes. There is no agency to oversee interpreter performance and there is no testing to see if interpreters understand their own language well, much less English. ... The integrity of the court system and the rights of non-English speakers are jeopardized by the lack of oversight ... Even when interpreters are well qualified, non-English speakers can face and pose special problems. There are, for example, no words in Hmong for 'jury,' 'due process,' or 'judge.' That's a serious roadblock for Hmong who end up in court for criminal cases or for other types of court proceedings." **MJ**

# TakeNote

Policy Tidbits

**Married couples will represent a minority** of U.S. households by the end of this decade. In 1963 married couples accounted for 74 percent of all households, but in 2003 the number had dropped to just 51.5 percent. This number is especially significant considering that spending by married-with-children households makes up 37 percent of total consumer spending, and about a quarter of the gross domestic product annually. A recent report in *American Demographics* magazine argues that a primary deterrent to getting married for young people is the high cost of higher education. Many young people want to avoid carrying heavy debts into a marriage, debts which many of them incur by paying the high costs of higher education. As tuition rates have gone up steadily nationally, the median income of people age 25 to 34 has not changed much since the early 1970's. *American Demographics* founder Peter Francese argues that it may be better for the nation to shift its energy away from preventing certain individuals from getting married and put it toward making marriage more affordable for young people in general.

[www.demographics.com](http://www.demographics.com)

**Minnesota was not the only state with a lackluster** 2004 legislative session. According to [Stateline.org](http://Stateline.org), most states' legislatures either put off taking action on, or opted to let voters decide, tough issues such as gay marriage, containing rising health care costs, and education. More than half of the state legislatures had proposals protesting the high costs, penalties and unprecedented federal oversight of the 2002 No Child Left Behind act, but in the end only Maine and Utah signed bills critical of the act. Twenty-two state legislatures debated proposals to bring down the costs of prescription drugs, but only Connecticut, Hawaii, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wisconsin approved measures to help residents import less expensive medicine from Canada. Many legislatures sidestepped the issue of gay marriage, opting instead to let voters decide this November. On a brighter note, most states are finally emerging this year from a three-year budget crunch that the National Governors Association has called the worst fiscal crisis since the Great Depression.

[www.stateline.org](http://www.stateline.org)

**What happens when urban sprawl meets rural agricultural?** County officials in Iowa are realizing that zoning rules are often lacking in areas where the urban and rural clash the most, prompting counties near growing cities to develop compromises that protect valuable farmland and farm life while allowing residential development. "I've heard complaints, not just about livestock, but field work, harvesting and planting when farmers go around the clock because everything they do is dependent on weather conditions," Murray McConnell, planning and zoning director for Dallas County said in the *Des Moines Register*. Washington County environmental health programs administrator Jeff Thoman pointed out that "most rural subdivisions ... are being built without wide enough streets or large enough cul-de-sacs, without landowner covenants or easements. No one is stipulating how road maintenance and snow removal will be paid for." New strategies to deal with urban sprawl range from rewriting zoning laws, to trying to define and protect farmland, to efforts to increase communication and understanding between farmers and people who move into rural areas. [www.dmregister.com](http://www.dmregister.com)

**After the initial euphoria** when arts education was included as a core subject under the No Child Left Behind act, educators are beginning to voice concern that the arts are in fact being left behind. School officials say they need to focus more on math and reading, subjects tested annually under the NCLB law. According to a story in the *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, arts educators are mounting national campaigns to preserve art classes. Citing research that shows a strong correlation between the arts and academic

success, they argue that the arts should be considered as important to a child's education as the three "R's." A recent report by the Council for Basic Education concludes that sacrificing time for the arts may ultimately prove counterproductive, especially for those students at greatest risk of becoming disengaged from school. "There is no question that many children in schools are in deep academic trouble, and we've got to do whatever we can to pull them out of it," said John Broomall, executive director of the Pennsylvania Alliance for Arts Education. "But you don't start by taking things away from them." [www.post-gazette.com](http://www.post-gazette.com)

**Voters are more engaged, but still unenthused.** According to a new report by the Pew Research Center, nearly half of Americans (47 percent) say they are more interested in politics than they were four years ago, up from 38 percent in 1999. The report suggests that the increasing interest in politics is directly related growing sense of this election's importance. Sixty-three percent of those polled say that this year's election "really matters," compared to 45 percent in 1999. Interest among young voters has grown by 13 percent in the last four years, with 53 percent of people age 18-29 reporting that they had given "quite a lot" of thought to the upcoming election. At the same time, 57 percent still report that they find the campaign "dull," and give the Bush and Kerry campaigns an average grade of C. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=218> MJ

*Take Note compiled by Citizens League staff.*