School districts vary on adopting state standards

by John Kostouros

One would be hard pressed to accuse Minnesota of rushing into setting education standards for public school students. The state has been through 10 years of false starts, fractious debates and readjustments trying to devise a system for ensuring that all high school graduates have a common base of knowledge and skills. The task has been complicated by Minnesota's historical preference for local control over curriculum and instruction.

Minnesota has never been close to following the path chosen by many states of imposing a state curriculum on schools. Instead, Minnesota created standardized tests for basic skills in reading, math and writing that all students must pass, preferably in eighth grade, and a detailed list of what graduates should know and be able to do beyond the basics, called the Profile of Learning. A separate set of standardized tests, the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, are given in the lower grades and are supposed to be used as a guide for educators and families when evaluating student progress.

It left it up to schools to decide how to teach students the knowledge required in the Profile and how to assess whether they had learned it. It created a sampling of lesson plans for the new learning standards, called “performance packages,” to help educators see how the process was supposed to work and to give teachers a head start on creating the new lesson plans they were sure to need. And it mandated that beginning with the class of 2002, students should successfully complete 24 of the 48 standards on its list.

Problems arose almost immediately, however, when the suggested packages were perceived as mandated, rather than voluntary—a reflection, no doubt, of the heightened sensitivity Minnesota educators have to any attempt to create a state curriculum. It didn't help that many principals and superintendents told their teachers that the sample performance packages were required.

It was in this context that educators were told last June that the Legislature had once again changed course on the Grad Standards, as they're called around the state. To break a legislative stalemate that had lasted through two sessions, legislators backpedaled, agreeing that from now on, the Profile of Learning would no longer be required for graduation. Districts would be free to decide how many, if any, of the 48 recommended Profile of Learning content standards would be required to graduate. After almost 10 years of wrangling, Minnesota was back to each school district setting its own graduation requirements.

Districts would still have to ensure that all 48 of the Profile content standards were offered in the district and would be required to “progress toward full implementation of the Profile, ultimately requiring 24 standards for graduates,” according to the Department of Families, Children and Learning (CFL). But no date was set for full implementation, leaving districts free to require as few standards as they wished for graduation.

The decision process involved the district's licensed teachers and administrators and the local school board separately voting on how many content standards to require. If the two could not agree, a default of all 24 of the previously mandated Profile standards would be imposed. Districts must take a new vote on the content standards each year and report their decision to CFL.

Districts had until August 15 to tell the state how many content standards they would require.
Minnesota Journal September 19, 2000

Poll finds traffic congestion region’s biggest problem

Traffic congestion is the chief problem facing the Twin Cities metropolitan area, according to Metropolitan State University’s annual Civic Confidence Survey of Twin Cities metropolitan area residents.

Thirty-one percent of area residents cited traffic congestion and seven percent the related problem of urban sprawl. This continues a trend since the survey’s inception in 1996: the perception of crime as the chief problem has dropped dramatically over the years, while the perception of traffic and transportation as the chief problem has grown, especially in the last two years. Last year traffic and urban sprawl combined to surpass crime as the region’s number one problem. This year traffic congestion alone exceeded crime.

As the accompanying table shows, crime, mentioned by 15 percent of Twin Citians, is still a widespread concern, but residents we traffic and transportation as the biggest challenge for policymakers. The related issue of urban sprawl has also grown in importance.

Lack of affordable housing continues to grow as an issue. Only one percent named this problem in 1996; this year over six percent mentioned this issue.

Light rail

The survey found mixed support for light-rail transit. Construction of more roads was the most popular solution for reducing traffic congestion, (36 percent of respondents), followed by construction of a light-rail network (20 percent), improved bus service (19 percent), increased use of car-pool lanes (13 percent) and toll roads or other pay-as-you-go systems (three percent). In 1998 the same question brought much different results: Light rail was the most popular choice (44 percent) and construction of more roads was second (23 percent).

Sixty-two percent of area residents said they were unlikely to use the planned light rail-line from downtown Minneapolis to the airport, while 16 percent were likely to use it. Residents identified the most important factor that would influence their decision to switch to light rail was convenience and accessibility (58 percent of respondents). Twenty-three percent said they would never use light rail. Basically, there is a relatively small group of people willing to use light rail, provided it will conveniently take them to work and back that they do not have to pay too much per trip.

Since the first light-rail line is planned for Minneapolis, it is not surprising that Minneapolis residents appear far more likely to use light rail. Fifty-one percent of Minneapolis residents said they would be likely or somewhat likely to use the planned Hennepin Avenue light-rail line, compared to 22 percent of St. Paul and suburban residents.

Education

Consistent with the past two years, most Twin Citians are happy with their local school districts and have a great deal of confidence in them. Seventy-nine percent are either satisfied or somewhat satisfied with quality of services provided, while 73 percent have either a lot or some confidence in their local public school system.

Interestingly, schools were again the only level of government that a significant percentage of respondents believed did not provide enough services.

However, residents of Minneapolis have a more negative view of local school districts than do St. Paul and suburban residents. Twenty-seven percent of Minneapolis residents have no confidence or very much confidence in their local schools, compared to only 19 to 20 percent of St. Paul and suburban residents.

And 48 percent of Minneapolis residents either are dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of services provided by their local school district, compared to 31 percent of St. Paul residents and 24 percent of suburban residents.

Trust in government

Twin Citians are more trusting of local governments than of federal and state governments. When asked which level of government Twin Citians trust to do what is right, almost 50 percent said local government, 31 percent said state government and 12 percent replied federal government.

Metro residents hold employees in reasonably high regard. Eighty-six percent think they do as good a job as other Twin Cities employees and nine percent think they perform better. And a majority (65 percent) of the region’s residents agree that government officials are responsive to their concerns.

The perception of the honesty of elected officials continues to rebound from 1996’s decline, surpassing previous levels. Sixty-one percent believe elected officials are as honest or more honest than Minnesotans, while 39 percent believe elected officials are either less honest or actually dishonest. In 1998, perhaps, more people are willing to give the Clinton sex scandal, only 50 percent believed they were as honest or more honest than average Minnesotans.

Poll continued on page 6

Twin Cities metropolitan poll: From opinion to action by Lyle Wray

Metro State University’s annual Civic Confidence Survey of metropolitan-area residents (see story on page two) offers a snapshot of those issues currently at the top of the public mind. Civic Confidence poll is one important starting point for figuring out what actions we need to take to keep our region economically and socially vibrant. But first, here are a few observations from the poll.

First, context. According to this year’s poll, five percent of citizens considered themselves to be involved in civic activities. This is down from previous years, which ranged from 12 to 17 percent. Perhaps Minnesotans are not as immune to national trends in declining civic involvement as we might like to believe.

Clearly a priority for organizations like the Citizens League has to be reaching out to new generations to find issues of interest and opportunities to get involved. Working to engage youth and new Americans in the Citizens League is a continuing priority.

Political alignment. In 1996, 20 percent of metropolitan residents identified themselves as politically independent. This number increased this year. This change in political alignment, according to this year’s poll results and constructively engage the public.

From polls to action. Poll results, such as these, can be a good starting point for asking more questions. For example, what role do we or do just the effectiveness with which certain advocates deliver their message of the voters? For instance, what should we do to make regional differences in support for light-rail transit, given the differing positions taken on the issue by the region’s two major newspapers? Similarly, has the public’s increasing concern about traffic and the public’s increased media attention to the subject or vice versa?

Furthermore, and perhaps more important, how can we move beyond immediate poll results and constructively engage citizens in the policy process? Opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich has identified seven stages of public opinion: 1) Drowning awareness; 2) Discerning the choices; 3) Discovering the choices; 4) Winning the choices; 5) Weighting the choices; 6) Taking a stand intellectually; and 7) Making a responsible judgment morally and emotionally.

The Minnesota Journal

Published—Lyle Wray
Editor—Don M. Stridger
Contributing Editor—Ted Kolden

Polling generally indicates stages one through three. The heavy lifting in policymaking comes in the final five steps. The Civic Confidence poll provides good information that responsible policy leaders, including the Citizens League, can use to help the community frame the issues, work through the difficult middle stages, and then decide on a responsible course of action and get it done.

Lyle Wray is executive director of the Citizens League.
Standards

Standards in their curriculum," according to another year to embed the content standards.

Lillesve said the department checked the Department of Families, Children and the content standards did not have time to make the number of required standards up to help educators prepare for implementation.

However, 84 percent of districts said they can take on the content standards. St. Paul will move the number of required standards up to help educators prepare for implementation.

In another change this year, districts will require three classroom days for staff development.

In fact, the committee found a significant number of well-developed alternatives that would increase the state's property-tax relief is targeted to those most in need of assistance. At the same time, 14.5 percent of Minnesota homeowners aren't other problems with the property-assessment system than the property-assessment method.

Thus, increasing market values do not automatically yield higher property-tax bills. Increased local spending and shifting property-taxes from one type of taxpayer to another yield higher property taxes.

Entertaining transit

The New York Times "Business Traveler" column suggests the new rail transit line to Hollywood for executives with their families.

In a recent report, the committee concluded that the perception of value market value is rising rapidly in recent years. But, the report found, property taxes have not been rising at anywhere near the same pace. For taxes payable in 2000, property taxes increased by 3.2 percent.

Limited market value

One of the reforms the committee recommended was further limiting property-tax bills.

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**Affordable housing: It's the right thing, the smart thing for business**

by John F. Grandbois

Despite numerous signals of vitality and growth, one of the most reliable indicators of the Twin Cities region's economic health is flashing red: affordable housing. Housing costs for thousands of lower-income households are so high that many must cut back on food, clothing, medical care or childcare. So great is the fundamental need for shelter that it has emerged as perhaps the single more important issue in our communities.

The plight of our neighbors moves us to turn our recent celebration of the new U.S. Bancorp corporate headquarters on Nicollet Mall into a fundraiser for affordable housing. While we are delighted to continue to make Minneapolis our home, we also feel a personal obligation to help those who cannot afford to rent or own one of their own.

We applaud the efforts of city, state and federal officials, but the problem is too large for publicly funded efforts alone. A solution will require the resourcefulness and leadership of the business community. For businesses, supporting affordable housing is not only the right thing to do, but it’s also the smart thing.

Governments help ensure they have a strong workforce to draw upon to fill jobs. Many for whom affordable housing remains elusive are lower-wage workers—receptionists, clerks, medical assistants or restaurant cooks—who are the backbone of our economy. If affordable housing is unavailable nearby, jobs remain open, productivity suffers and the health and vitality of our community is weakened.

According to the U.S. government, households should not spend more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing. Any more often leads to cutting necessities, such as food or medical care. An estimated 185,000 Twin Cities householders earn less than $30,000 annually and spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Almost 50,000,000 householders earn less than $20,000 per year spend more than half of their income on housing.

There is no easy solution. But we believe that when businesses do what they do best, and partner with local government and community leaders, great things can happen. At U.S. Bank, we learned this early through our own efforts to strengthen Minneapolis and St. Paul neighborhoods by investing homeownership capital.

Traditional mortgages don’t work in many of the Twin Cities’ neighborhoods because they do not cover the cost of the renovations often required to bring a house up to code. And many first-time homebuyers lack the personal finance skills needed to manage mortgage payments.

We need our business community partners to create a solution. U.S. Bank designed a unique mortgage product to cover both the home purchase and rehabilitation and provide a break on the down payment and closing costs. Our partners, such as Northside Neighborhood Housing Services, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) and Powderhorn Residential Development Group, identify potential homeowners and provide counseling about budgeting, cash flow and home maintenance.

Since 1992, our Home Advantage program has helped thousands of families become homeowners. So much more could be accomplished if affordable housing became a stronger focal point for the business community. We ask business leaders to consider three opportunities to contribute: charitable giving, leadership and volunteerism.

Charitable giving. While the Twin Cities is home to some of the nation’s most generous corporations, only 20 percent of the metro region’s 251 companies with 500 or more employees commit two percent or more of their earnings to charitable causes. Two percent of the give to community organizations and service groups, in an effort to match giving.

Leadership. One of the most powerful things companies can contribute is leadership and personal involvement. As a CEO or business leader, you can join the boards of local nonprofit organizations dedicated to housing. Let’s reach out to public housing agencies to find out how our expertise is needed. Our collective knowledge, energy and varied talents can lead to creative solutions.

Volunteerism. Companies have the unique ability to mobilize large numbers of people in support of a worthy cause. We should make affordable housing a rallying cry for our companies. Encourage employees to get involved personally or through company-sponsored programs.

The affordable housing crisis touches us all. It’s about housing the workforce needed for a strong economy, it’s about creating stable neighborhoods, and it’s about ensuring everyone has a safe and affordable place to live. Realizing this dream will require a higher level of commitment from both the public and private sectors. Most of all, it will take all of us working together.

John F. Grandbois is U.S. Bancorp Chairman and CEO.

**Editor’s note:**

The "On Balance" roundup of editorial opinions from around the state will not appear this month because of space constraints. It will return in October.

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*Affordable housing: It's the right thing, the smart thing for business* by John F. Grandbois

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*Editor’s note:* The "On Balance" roundup of editorial opinions from around the state will not appear this month because of space constraints. It will return in October.
Minnesota has a real winner with its charter-schools sector of public education. The Ford Foundation will (almost certainly) recognize the 1991 law this year as one of the important innovations in American government—creating the schools, but creating the opportunity for teachers and others to start these new public schools.

And now the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has recognized what some of the teachers and others in Minnesota have done to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the law. It has invested $4.5 million to replicate the school model developed by teachers in the charter school sponsored by the LeSuer-Henderson district. The school has no courses or classes and no employees: A professional partnership of teachers designs and runs the learning program on contract to the school.

Not every school in this new R&D sector of Minnesota public education is a winner. Success Academy was a spectacular failure. But the New Country School at Henderson is arguably, learning program and governance both considered, the most innovative public school in America.


Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League, called again to convert all city schools to charter schools, according to the July 27 USA Today. Schools would have 10- to 15-year charters with clear performance standards, principals would set student standards and hire and fire teachers, after scrapping present limitations, and Congress would fund teachers' salaries to a starting level of $27,000.—Lyle Wray.

According to a new report from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Minnesota Legislature is not alone in its tax-cutting fervor—but it is a leader of the pack. Of the 17 states that cut taxes in fiscal year 2000, Minnesota had the second-largest cut, with an 8.4 percent drop in revenue collections. Hawaii had the largest reduction, with an 8.4 drop, and Washington was third at 6.9 percent. On the other end of the spectrum, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Alabama all approved significant tax increases.

Nor are we alone in the surplus pile-up. "Thirty-six states ended fiscal year 2000 with budget surpluses greater than five percent of their annual budget," according to a report at stateline.org, and "18 had budget surpluses exceeding 10 percent."—Kris Lyndon Wilson.

The Family Housing Fund will soon provide more ammunition to affordable-housing advocates. The Fund is about to complete research on the impact of affordable housing on surrounding properties. A series of facts, including the value of homes in surrounding neighborhoods and the time it takes to sell properties when they are put on the market is being considered. Preliminary results indicate there is no negative impact.

—Marina Munoz Lyon.

The recent round of announcements that HMOs would end their Medicare plans in certain areas or completely was like deja vu all over again for Minnesotans. In the late 1980s, HMOs went into those plans in a big way. They soon lost their shirts and many got out.

Although Medicare managed-care plans have been in a steady decline in Minnesota for the past decade, one plan is actually growing. UCare Minnesota passed the 15,000-enrollee mark this summer for its Medicare+Choice plan and is now the second largest Medicare plan in the state. That's a 50 percent increase since the beginning of 2000.

Earlier this year, UCare passed Medica on that plan's way down. Medica will terminate its plan at the end of the year. That leaves HealthPartners barely holding onto first place, with the 18,000 seniors it has enrolled in its Medicare plan since 1995.

About 48,000 seniors are currently in Medicare+Choice plans, or about 10 percent of the senior population. In the late 1980s, nearly three times that number of seniors was in HMO plans.—Allan Baumgarten.

In a report by the Trust for Public Land and Urban Land Institute, Minneapolis was one of only three of the 25 largest cities to earn a four of five-star rating, according to the Aug. 10 USA Today. None received five stars.—L.W.

Joe Graba thought it was wonderful. At a meeting in Two Harbors a school board member came up to him and said, "Joe, I was in your science class in Wadena in 1965 when you made us learn the formula for photosynthesis. The other day, 35 years later, I finally had to put it to use when my son asked, 'Dad, do you know anything about photosynthesis?'"

Graba, until recently the dean of the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University, thinks we're in the process of redefining knowledge. It won't be what kids know, any more. It'll be what they understand—and how they can apply that understanding.

He told the Minnesota Rural Education Association last month something he heard Ernest Boyer quote: "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand."—T.K.

Contributors to "Take Note" include Minnesota Journal and Citizens League staff members and Allan Baumgarten, a health-care policy and finance analyst and consultant, and Marina Munoz Lyon, vice president of the Pohlad Family Foundation.
Matthew Ramadan elected League President

Matthew Ramadan was elected president of the Citizens League at the League Board meeting on August 30.

"I am honored to have the opportunity to lead an organization like the Citizens League," Ramadan told the Board. "As president, I will work to ensure that the League continues to generate the good ideas that make our region a better place to live."

Ramadan stressed the importance of implementing League recommendations and finding new ways to attract and retain members. "Our strength has been our ability to involve average citizens from all walks of life in developing innovative solutions to the challenges that confront us as a community. We need to continue to work to ensure that we focus on making policy, not just producing reports."

Ramadan takes over the leadership of the League from George Latimer, who has served as President since September of 1998. "Matthew's strong ties to the community and his long history of service make him an excellent choice to lead the Citizens League," Latimer remarked.

Ramadan has been a member of the Muslim American Society since 1974, serving as an imam since 1978. He is a founding member of Masjid An-Nur/Islamic Centers of Minneapolis and Saint Paul and the president of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Muslim Council. He has also been a leader in crime and substance abuse prevention efforts, including the founding of the local chapter of African American Men Against Narcotics (AAMAN), along with numerous youth intervention programs.

In addition to electing Ramadan as president the Board appointed Gary Cunningham as Treasurer and appointed the following to one year terms:


Tim Marx is new to the League Board and Sean Kershaw returns after a one year absence; the others are all returnees.
August was not a slow news month at the Citizens League. The release of the property tax study, done under contract for the Department of Revenue, generated a great deal of attention.

The report’s release was covered by newspapers around the state, including the Star Tribune, St. Paul Pioneer Press, St. Cloud Times, Marshall Independent, and Brainerd Daily Dispatch. Stories about the report aired on Minnesota Public Radio, WCCO and Twin Cities Public Television. Co-chair Bill Kelly also spent an hour discussing the report on Minnesota Public Radio’s Midday Program.

Use of the League web site exploded as a result of interest in the report. We recorded nearly 61,000 hits on the day the report was released compared to 12,000 hits for the entire month last August.

In other news, Matthew Ramadan participated in a press conference announcing the finalists for the 2000 Innovations in American Government Competition. As mentioned last month two League innovations are among the 25 national finalists. Ramadan appeared on local television news and was quoted in both the Star Tribune and the Pioneer Press.

Finally, a Japanese film crew spent the better part of a day at the Citizens League offices filming a special report on charter schools. The reporters interviewed Ted Kolderie and filmed “action” shots of the League office. The news program will appear on Japanese television in November.

Thank you resource speakers

A successful Citizens League study committee depends on the cooperation of people in the community who have special expertise on a subject. One of the great attractions of the League study committee process for many of the participants is the graduate school quality of the “instruction” provided by resource guests. Thanks to the following for their assistance with the property tax project:

Karen Baker, House Research; Glenn Dorfman, Chief Operating Officer, MN Association of Realtors; Gordon Folkman, Minnesota Department of Revenue; Marlowe Hamerston, Minnesota Senior Federation; Mark Haveman, Minnesota Planning; John James, 1000 Friends of Minnesota; Hal Lofgren, Professor of Economics, St. Cloud State University; Tom May, Hennepin County Assessor; Leonard Peterson, Minnesota Department of Revenue; Don Salomone, Executive Director, Minnesota Taxpayers Association; Marty Schmidt, Crow Wing County Assessor; Dick Wray, Minnesota Seasonal Recreational Property Owners Coalition; and Jeff Van Wychen, Property Tax Study Project.

Meetings to gather additional input from residents of Greater Minnesota were hosted by the Lifelong Learning Center at Fergus Falls Community College in Fergus Falls and the Blandin Foundation in Grand Rapids.

No time? Go on-line!

Three new League study committees are set to begin this fall. Many League members are interested in serving on these committees but just don’t have the time. Don’t let that stop you from participating.

If you have access to the internet you can follow League committees on the League’s web site at www.citizensleague.net. Committee notices, minutes, briefing papers and other materials can be found on the web for each committee. We also encourage you to submit comments and questions to the committee.

If you’re interested in a topic, but don’t have the time to serve on a committee, just dial up www.citizensleague.net and join the fun.

Urban Studies at Macalester College

If you’ve ever perused post-secondary course catalogs you’ve probably had the inkling to go back to school. Not to stay up late doing papers or reading half the night, but just to be able to listen and absorb the rich intellectual content of some classes.

This fall Citizens League members have the chance to audit George Latimer’s “Introduction to Urban Studies” class at Macalester College. The course, co-sponsored by Metropolitan State University, is designed to introduce students to critical topics in urban studies and will feature visiting expert lecturers. League members are invited to these lectures.

The class meets from 7 to 9 p.m. on Monday evenings. Most sessions are at the Weyerhauser chapel on the campus of Macalester College, 1600 Grand Avenue, St. Paul. Professor Latimer has assembled a terrific schedule of speakers. For a list of speakers or more information, please call Phil Jenni at the League office 612-338-0791 or email pjenni@citizensleague.net.

Thanks to the members of the residential property tax committee

The League released its contract study on residential property taxes on August 21. The study was conducted for the Department of Revenue as part of the Ventura administration’s efforts to engage citizens in the “Big Plan.” The committee was co-chaired by Mary Anderson and Bill Kelly. A total of 37 individuals took an active part in the work of the committee. In addition to the chairs, they were:

Gay Bakken  Jay Kiedrowski  Phil Ruggiero
David Black  Carolyn Kompelien  Jim Schneider
Allan Burdick  Clyde Miller  Robert Teetsborn
Ken Carlson  Barbara Nelson  Orlan Thorbeck
Calvin Clark  David Newhall  Gedney Tuttle
Tom Darling  Steve O’Malley  Laurie Davis Van Wert
Reginald Edwards  Mary Ogren  Kathleen Vellenga
Vernae Hasbargen  David Pence  Donn Waage
Hugh Hawkins  Mark Pridgeon  Norman Werner
Lincoln Hudson  Craig Rapp  Paul Zerby Sr.
Richard Johnson  Ken Reine  Jonette Zuercher
Suzanne Kennedy  Peter Ries Jr.  Karen Baker