

Testimony about the MN Prosperity/Dream Act (SF723)

April 22nd, 2013

Chair and members of the Committee.

My name is Sean Kershaw, and I'm the Executive Director of the Citizens League

I'm here to ask you to support Senate file 723 for two reasons:

1. Our economy depends on it. Minnesota is on the verge of a significant shortage in skilled workers.
2. Our autonomy as a state demands it. Even with federal immigration reform, state action is needed.

Like you, I have the opportunity to talk with Minnesotans about their hopes for the future, and what makes this a great state. And what compels me about Minnesota's story is not what we were given – in the geography or certainly the weather today, or the natural resources – but what Minnesotan's made of these. For generations, Minnesotans have taken challenges like our relatively remote location and our climate and turned them into opportunities. We've taken our natural resources -- from timber to taconite to topsoil -- and used them to transform the world.

“Made in Minnesota” isn't a statement about where these goods and services were made. It's a statement about the creativity, the idealism and the practicality, of the Minnesotans who made them. This amazingly adaptive mindset is our real export to the rest of the world, and we'll need it as we face the next generation of challenges and opportunities.

How does this relate to the bill before you today?

In the coming years we face new and very real threats to maintaining our economic success.

In just 12 years, our labor force growth will slow to almost zero (a decline of over 90% from 20 years ago). This happens at exactly the time when the Baby Boomers turn 80, and their healthcare costs increase substantially at current trends.

Let me highlight additional statistics that I know you know.

- According to a new set of MN Employment Projections, job openings are projected to significantly exceed labor force growth over the next 10 years.
- 2/3 of jobs in 2018 will require some form of higher education.
- Data from the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce shows that 43 percent of employers are already having issues recruiting qualified employees.
- While the number of high school graduates is projected to decline in coming years, the number of students of color graduating from high school—and immigrant students in particular—is increasing. Their historically lower college-going rates must be reversed.

These demographic trends will determine our destiny only if we fail to act.

For example we all talk a lot about closing the achievement gap, and we should. This bill is a chance to act on something with proven results.

Fourteen other states have passed similar legislation and have seen both graduation rates and college attendance increase among eligible students.

We all talk about competitiveness in terms of taxes and spending, and we should, but not enough in terms of having the skilled workforce that will achieve this competitiveness. This bill is a chance to act on this demand.

This is why the Prosperity Act is so important to pass *right now*. As the Federal government debates immigration reform, one thing is clear: the Federal government WILL not solve our state issue. **Choosing who is eligible for state financial aid and in-state tuition is fundamentally a states right.**

By providing students who are already here, who have successfully completed high school, and who want to go on to higher education, with access to in-state tuition and financial aid like all other Minnesota high school graduates, we not only maximize the investment we've already made in their K-12 education, but we also maximize their ability to contribute to Minnesota's future economic success.

- This bill is not an act of charity to a group of individuals. It's a down-payment on Minnesota's future economic health and well-being.
- There is almost no cost to the choice you are being asked to make, but I believe there is a significant cost of doing nothing.

And while this Prosperity Act is not just about the current students who will benefit from it, I can think of no group that better exemplifies the entrepreneurship and democratic ideals of "Made in Minnesota" as the Dreamers who have worked for years to make this legislation possible.

These student leaders are a present-day embodiment of the risk-taking, the creativity, the hard work, and the intelligence that makes "made in Minnesota" meaningful – and possible.

And during a time when we strive for solutions that cross traditional boundaries of interests and ideologies, I challenge you to find an issue that reflects the same breadth of support (on what else do Education Minnesota and the Chamber agree?).

Please vote for Senate File 723. Make the Prosperity Act a reality.

Thank you for your time.