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A Failing Grade for School Completion: We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

Report of the Citizens League Study Committee on
School Completion Rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

August, 2001

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Charge to the Committee

On March 28, 2000 the Citizens League Board of Directors approved the following charge to the study committee on finishing school and improving outcomes for core city youth: *While statewide school completion rates remain high in Minnesota, our core cities continue to lose an unacceptable proportion of students, especially students of color, before graduation. This is not a minor issue of interest only to the core cities or a footnote to statewide completion statistics. People without at least a high school diploma are unlikely to earn a family living wage. An economy short on labor cannot afford to leave anyone behind. The youth that disappear from our schools can show up in the criminal justice and social service systems. This Citizens League study will examine what our schools can do to improve the alarmingly low completion rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.*

Executive Summary

The number of students who drop out of high school in Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts is unacceptably high. Minnesota's relatively strong statewide graduation rate obscures the crisis occurring in the state's urban schools. Less than half the students who enter the ninth grade in the Minneapolis public schools graduate within four years. In St. Paul, the picture isn't much better. Slightly more than 50 percent of all students who enter ninth grade stay in school until graduation day.

In today's world, failing to graduate from high school portends a lifetime of low-level jobs, depressed earnings and a lowered standard of living. Everyone has a stake in increasing graduation rates. A well-educated work force is vital for the metropolitan area to remain competitive in an economy that demands ever-greater skill levels. The metropolitan region simply cannot afford to abandon so many of its young people to low skill jobs. On moral grounds alone we cannot stand by while as many as 3,000 young people are set on a track to economic hardship each year in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

There are many reasons why students drop out of high school. In addition to academic problems, the Citizens League Study Committee found a range of social forces that impact student achievement, including family background, pregnancy and mental health. But the charge to the Committee was to "examine what our schools can do to improve the alarmingly low completion rates (emphasis added)."

Our belief is that despite external factors, schools must do better at engaging students and become more responsive to their needs in order to keep them in school.

The Committee found examples of many promising practices to boost graduation rates. These practices range from better early childhood education, to smaller schools to more individualized learning. In short, early intervention and a shift toward an educational system that is more responsive to its students needs.

We are encouraged by the recent efforts of the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts to address this issue. Their willingness to acknowledge the problem is a step in the right direction. But ultimately, despite the promising practices and best intentions, there simply is not sufficient pressure on the system to make the necessary improvements. Good intentions and promises of improved performance are not enough. To genuinely succeed in engaging all students, the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts need to set measurable school completion goals, establish clear rewards and consequences for success or failure, restructure the notion of high school, and improve schools capacity for taking the steps they need to engage more students in learning.

We recommend:

- **The Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts should immediately set a goal of achieving a four-year high school completion rate of 80 percent within the next five years.** Individual schools should set goals and be held accountable, reporting their performance to the community on a regular basis. Indicators must be clear and consistent, and the schools should adopt a data-driven system of accountability.

- **There should be clear rewards and consequences for school completion outcomes.**

- **The traditional notion of high school should be restructured for greater flexibility.** The traditional, fixed, four-year framework should be redefined. High school should be formally reorganized as a process that is completed when a student has met all the academic requirements and is ready for the next level of education or work life. For many students this opens up the possibility of early "career-tracking" and reduces the need to choose between high school and work. For some students it might mean completing high school requirements in less time. Others may require more time. Charter schools and other alternatives should be expanded to support innovation. And the use of Post-Secondary Options should be expanded to connect large numbers of at-risk students with the "real world" of work through career exposure and technical education options.

- **Build capacity for school success.** Some changes will take more time. The Legislature should invest now in early education. But we must also step up efforts to improve teacher quality in the most challenging schools. We recommend developing a system of enhanced compensation and resources for teachers who agree to work in the toughest schools.

The current dismal outcomes on school completion are unacceptable and continuing the status quo threatens the vitality and livability of our community. The public, the Legislature, executive agencies, parents, teachers and administrators all hold part of the solution for achieving greater school success for students in our core cities. We must do better for our students and our state. Yet schools have a major responsibility in meeting this challenge. Carol Johnson, Superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools said it well when she told the Committee: "If we can't improve graduation rates, we shouldn't be in the business."

A Failing Grade for School Completion:
We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

Table of Contents

A Failing Grade for School Completion:
We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

Far too many students drop out of school in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The status quo is unacceptable.

Finishing high school is more important today than ever before in our nation's history. Our increasingly knowledge-based economy requires that workers possess at least a high school diploma and, in most cases, additional years of education or training in order to earn a family living wage. Individuals who fail to complete high school can expect a lifetime of reduced income and very limited opportunities.

Minnesota does well overall in the number and proportion of students who finish high school. Of the roughly 64,000 Minnesota students who began the ninth grade in 1995, about 51,000 graduated four years later. Around 7,000 students dropped out before graduation and another 7,000 continued their education within the public school system.[1] This makes the overall four-year completion rate 79 percent and a four-year dropout rate of about 10 percent. While even 7,000 dropouts are too many, these numbers place Minnesota among the states with the highest graduation rates.

Unfortunately, a high statewide average conceals a very different picture in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. *Many students in these cities do not complete the journey from ninth grade to graduation:*

- In Minneapolis, of the 3016 students who should have graduated in 1999, only 1425 did so – *less than half of the total.* 1060 students who should have graduated that year dropped out, *more than one third of the total.* Another 531 students continued their education past the four-year mark.

- In Saint Paul, 1469 of the 2457 students who should have graduated in 1999 completed their educations on time – *barely more than half of the total.* 518 students dropped out before reaching that point and 470 students continued their high school education for another year.

The severity of this problem comes into sharper focus when we look at the cumulative effect of losing thousands of students every year in a job market demanding ever-greater skill levels.

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[1] Statistics on completion rates come from the Department of Children Families and Learning (CFL), based on Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) data as reported in the department's Completion Studies and on the web. Totals and percentages have been rounded. (Appendix I describes how high school completion is measured).

Although high school completion rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul have actually improved somewhat over the last few years, *over the past three years alone, some 5000 young adults in Minneapolis and Saint Paul have left school to enter what could easily become a lifetime of low-level jobs and depressed earnings.*

Who drops out of Minneapolis and Saint Paul schools?

Many national studies have demonstrated clearly that high school completion outcomes are strongly related to family income: students from low-income families generally leave school prematurely at a much higher rate than students from other income groups.[2]

This relationship between income and graduation rates also shows up in local data. In the Saint Paul graduating class of 2000 students who qualified for free or reduced price lunches had a graduation rate 17 percent lower than students who did not qualify for this assistance (all decimals throughout the report have been rounded to the nearest full digit).[3]

Notably, low-income white and black students had nearly the same graduation rate in the Saint Paul class of 2000, suggesting that poor students of *any* racial or ethnic background face similar challenges in finishing school. The gap between white and black students also narrows between students who did not qualify for assistance. This also suggests that the lower overall completion rate for black students reflects, in part, the fact that larger proportions of black students qualify for free or reduced price lunches in both districts.

In Minneapolis, 65 percent of white students who started the ninth grade in 1995 graduated four years later. Asian students had a four-year graduation rate of 56 percent. Graduation rates in four years were 33 percent for black students, 41 percent for Hispanic students, and 17 percent for American Indian students. In Saint Paul, 67 percent of white students finished high school within four years in 1999. About 65 percent of Asian students graduated on time, 46 percent of black students, and 34 percent of Hispanic students.

The clear correlation between race or ethnicity and dropping out does not necessarily tell us what the root causes of dropping out are. The Committee believes that race is often a proxy for larger underlying social forces and factors that contribute to dropping out, as discussed in the next section. Yet, it is true to say that some communities of color in Minneapolis and Saint Paul are bearing the brunt of this issue. This situation is a challenge to our community to meet the needs of students for whom school is not now a success.

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[2] NCES, Dropout Rates in the United States: 1999

[3] Data on Saint Paul 2000 completion rates: "Studying High School Completion in the Saint Paul Public Schools: A Report of Work in Progress," by Stephen Schallenerg, Director of Compliance and Cindy Porter, Research Analyst, Saint Paul Public Schools, March 2001.

Immigration is another important factor beyond racial and ethnic statistics. Over the past decade, both districts have seen dramatic increases in the number of students from recent immigrant backgrounds. While schools do not generally collect data on nationality or citizenship status, they do collect data on the language spoken in a child's household. Language spoken at home can often serve as a reasonable indicator of how many students come from families that have recently arrived in the United States. In Saint Paul Public Schools, approximately one-third of the students now come from families that do not primarily speak English at home. In Minneapolis Public Schools, about one-fifth of students are from households that do not speak English as the major language at home.[4]

Somewhat surprisingly, in Minneapolis students coming from homes in which English is not the primary language spoken actually have a slightly higher four-year graduation rate than do English speaking students: 50 percent of students from families for whom English is not the primary language graduated on time in 1999, versus 47 percent for English-speaking students. Graduation rates differed significantly for different groups of immigrant students. Somali-speaking students had a rate of 59 percent and Hmong-speaking students had a four-year graduation rate of 56 percent. Spanish-speaking students had a graduation rate of only 31 percent that year.

In Saint Paul, 59 percent of students from households that do not speak English as the major language graduated on time in 1999. That was about the same rate as English speaking students. Hmong-speaking students graduated at a rate of 64 percent. Barely one-fourth of Spanish-speaking students in Saint Paul finished high school in four years.

We have to be cautious about making strong conclusions from the data on school completion since there are many methodological challenges to the data. There are differences in how districts and the state measure the problem. Gaps exist in the data on students who transfer or otherwise disappear from the record keeping system.

However, our Committee believes that the bottom line is clear: too many students leave Minneapolis and Saint Paul schools without a high school diploma. In particular, low-income students, many students of color and students from Spanish-speaking families are not succeeding at acceptable levels in our communities' schools.

It does not overstate the situation to say that *we are facing a school completion crisis in Minneapolis and Saint Paul schools.* To be sure, some of the students who leave school eventually earn diplomas through alternative or GED programs. But, we believe this problem is severe enough to demand strong action. Our communities are losing literally thousands of potential neighbors, workers, and breadwinners by letting this situation continue. Added to this is the incalculable pain and loss experienced by dropout students and their families.

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[4] Urban Coalition, Saint Paul Public School and Student Data, March 2000; Minneapolis Public School and Student Data, March 2000.

Why do students quit school?

When faced with the statistics on the number of children who drop out, the first question that comes to mind is "Why?" Why do so many students leave school before graduation? "Dropping out" is a deceptively simple label for a very complex phenomenon that covers a host of personal, social, economic, and institutional dynamics. It most certainly is not a single event that takes place at a clearly defined point in a young person's life. It is more accurately described as a gradual process of detaching from school and community.

Research has identified a number of factors related to a student's educational experiences that are associated with the low school completion rates. Some of the key factors that we have found to be strongly related to leaving school include:

- **Academic performance**

Not surprisingly, poor performance in school, in terms of grades or test scores, is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out. Academic performance as early as the first grade can predict whether a child will eventually drop out or graduate. Grades also tend to drop precipitously immediately before students stop coming to school. The use of "high stakes" testing has also been linked with higher dropout rates.

A major national longitudinal survey of students found that academic problems were at the top of the list of reasons cited by students in their decision to quit school, including "Didn't like school" (cited by 44 percent of dropouts), "Was getting poor grades" (39 percent), "Couldn't keep up with school" (30 percent) and "Couldn't get along with teachers" (26 percent). Half of the dropouts in the survey reported having failed a course, and only 18 percent said they had passed their last year of school.[5]

Retention in grade is another academic factor associated with dropping out. Students who are overage for their grade or have been retained at least once are more likely to drop out than other students. Retention seems to have a greater impact on dropping out than test scores.

- **Attendance and truancy**

Another very strong predictor of dropping out is attendance. This certainly makes sense: when students are not in school, they fall behind academically. One national study found that half of dropouts had missed ten or more days in their last two years in school and a third cut

[5] ETS, Dream Deferred: High School Dropouts in the United States, 1995 (citing National Educational Longitudinal Study data).

class ten or more times.[6] Other research has found a strong relationship between truancy and dropout rates. The cumulative effect of missing school is particularly important: a few days might not matter, but students who miss too many days of school can fall too far behind to catch up.

The strong relationship between attendance and finishing school also shows up in data from Saint Paul's 2000 graduating class. That year's graduates had an average four-year attendance rate of 93 percent. By contrast, dropouts from that class had an average attendance rate of only 64 percent.

On a policy note, Minnesota changed in 1971 from a policy of "average daily attendance" based on students actually present in classrooms to a more liberal "average daily membership" which allowed students to remain on the rolls even if absent up to 15 consecutive days. This had the effect of removing a strong incentive for very strict attendance policies in districts. The pendulum has swung back with more aggressive attendance policies underway or being phased in in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

- **Student mobility and continuity**

Residential or school instability has been linked with a host of academic problems, including dropping out. Students who move around face great challenges in staying engaged in the subject matter of their schoolwork as they shift from school to school and teacher to teacher. They do not get the opportunity to form the strong bonds with teachers and other adults that they need to successfully navigate their educational years.

One national survey found that 24 percent of dropouts had changed schools at least twice, compared to only 9 percent of graduates. Similarly, 54 percent of dropouts had moved at least once, compared to only 15 percent of graduates.[7]

Data from Saint Paul's 2000 graduating class also demonstrate a striking relationship between stability and graduation outcomes. 82 percent of graduates in the 2000 class stayed in the same school for four years, compared to only 1 percent of dropouts. On the other side of the equation, a striking 92 percent of dropouts spent one year or less in the same school, versus only 11 percent of graduates.

In addition to affecting individual students, high mobility rates can also harm the entire school environment. Schools with highly mobile populations are difficult environments for all students, even those who are relatively stable in their own situation. Constantly churning student populations can also challenge the ability of teachers to forge relationships and maintain continuity in their instructional plans.

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[6] ETS report, NELS
[7] ETS report, NELS

Other "life issues" associated with dropping out

Like many educational issues, school completion rests at the intersection of a range of social forces that can hurt student performance. While many of these issues fall outside of our schools, we cannot overlook the impact they have on student outcomes. Some of these factors include:

- **Mental health**

In Minneapolis schools, for example, 13 percent of children were identified as having a mental health problem. These challenges are reflected in graduation statistics showing that *children with emotional and behavioral disorders that are in special education programs have a four-year graduation rate of only 22 percent.* Furthermore, of the children with serious emotional and behavioral disorders who drop out of school, 73 percent are arrested within five years.

- **Employment**

While work can be a valuable experience for young adults, research has shown that working more than 20 hours per week can negatively affect many areas of academic performance and increase the likelihood of dropping out. About 27 percent of dropouts said they quit school because they "got a job" and 20 percent "couldn't work and go to school at the same time."

- **Family background**

Parental educational attainment and income have long been identified as strong predictors of overall student success and dropout behavior. Children from poor, dysfunctional and single-parent families are also less likely to graduate on time than students from two-parent families.

- **Pregnancy**

Girls and young women face a unique challenge to finishing school with the risk of teenage pregnancy. Some research has estimated that as many as 40 percent of girls and young women who dropout were pregnant when they left school. Nearly one-third of young women cited pregnancy as their main reason for dropping out.

The bottom line: We must engage students to stay in school

While there are many factors that can be linked with dropping out of school, we do not believe that this is an issue "caused" by one or two factors or experiences in a student's life.

It is in fact extremely difficult to predict dropouts based exclusively on student characteristics or risk factors. Many students who face a host of risk factors do not drop out. On the other hand, many students who do not appear to be at risk decide to leave school before graduation. According to one study, the factor that was best able to predict dropouts --absenteeism-- was correct only 16 percent of the time.[8]

Not surprisingly, then, dropout prevention programs targeted at specific risk factors are generally not very successful on a very large scale. They may keep a few students from leaving, but they often miss many more. Clearly, improving our system-wide school completion rates is about much more than just finding the "at risk" students and persuading them to stay in school.

It is also clear that dropping out is not a single event brought on by any particular incident or decision. Although this is sometimes the case, many researchers, and the youth workers and educators who spoke to our committee, have suggested that dropping out is in fact a long process of gradual detachment from school that can begin years before a student stops attending. In some respects, the data support this point of view. Students who drop out often re-enroll or attempt to continue their education before finally leaving the system.

Our Committee believes that keeping students learning in school is fundamentally a matter of student engagement. The risk factors associated with dropping out become problems when students detach from learning, through a process that can begin years before students actually stop coming to school.

On the other hand, students who are engaged in the learning process – interested in what they are studying, aware of where they are headed, and connected with their peers and teachers - can succeed despite whatever risk factors and social or economic challenges they face.

Looking at quitting school as a matter of student engagement leads us to believe that *keeping students from quitting school is fundamentally about improving the educational experience and engaging young people throughout their academic career.*

Focusing on engagement also suggests that what goes on in the schools matters. Too often, discussions of education forget that basic truth and conclude that educational outcomes are determined solely by social and economic circumstances. And while we

[8] Mathematica Study

cannot solve every social and economic ill in our communities, our schools can succeed despite them.

Effective Practices To Engage Students In School

As in many areas of school policy, there is no shortage of good ideas on the strategies, policies, and practices that can boost graduation rates. In fact, there is a substantial consensus on what works to help students stay engaged through graduation.

Two central themes emerged through everything our committee has heard. First, early intervention is critical. Second, educational practice needs to shift away from the traditional, mass-production model of education and toward a system that is more responsive to students' learning needs. The Committee endorsed a number of key effective practices to engage students in school.

- **Early childhood intervention and development**

Because dropping out is such a complex problem, it makes sense that preventing it should begin in the earliest years of a child's life. Education and development in the preschool years lays a foundation for long term academic success, addressing one of the most critical factors in dropout rates. Children who arrive at school with a 5,000-word vocabulary have a dramatically easier time learning than children who arrive with only 500 words. Early childhood education can help develop the resiliency, habits, and basic skills that children need to overcome traditional risk factors associated with low academic achievement.

Given the long time frame involved, can we really say that early childhood intervention has a concrete impact on graduation rates? The research suggests that we can. One study of more than 1100 children in Chicago found that 5 to 6 years of participation in an early childhood intervention program resulted in a reduction of 27 percent in the dropout rate compared to students who did not participate in the program. Preschool participation in the program was associated with a 24 percent reduction in dropouts.[9] This suggests that a meaningful investment in early childhood education and development could take care of around 25 percent of our current drop out rate.

- **Early academic intervention to boost reading ability**

As noted earlier, academic failure is the strongest precursor to dropping out. Reading ability in the early years is a particularly important skill that students need to master early in their

[9] Temple. Reynolds, Miedel, "Can Early Intervention Prevent High School Dropout? Evidence for the Chicago Child-Parent Centers." Urban Education, 35(1): 31-56.

academic lives. Children without the ability to read become increasingly discouraged and unmotivated as they continue through the system. Remediation becomes increasingly difficult as students move into the middle years, when interest in reading often drops off.

Students who do not read at grade level by the third grade are less likely to finish high school. Anecdotally, poor reading skills were cited by a number of speakers to our committee as a central challenge to students in dropout prevention programs and alternative education settings. Focusing on reading skills in the early years must be a priority in a school system that keeps students from dropping out.

- **Parental engagement**

Parents play a central role in improving student achievement. Unfortunately, parental involvement tends to drop off as students get older or fall behind academically. Keeping parents engaged through the high school years is thus a major challenge that schools need to undertake to keep young adults on track to graduation.

Research at Johns Hopkins University has shown *that the most important factor in parental involvement – more than socioeconomic status, family size, marital status, or anything else - is what the schools do to actively encourage and promote parental involvement.*[10] Schools that want to keep kids engaged in learning and on track to graduation have to take aggressive steps to reach out to parents and create opportunities for them to participate. In addition, partnerships with community members and other community resources can help to achieve increased parental engagement.

- **Exposure to careers and technical education**

Vocational or technical education was once a major part of our educational system. Over the last few decades it has faded due to the perception that the approach was academically weak and was used to "track" students away from more challenging academic pursuits. This criticism was not entirely undeserved, as many vocational programs did lose relevance and academic rigor over time. In recent years, however, exposure to careers and technical education have seen renewed attention with renewed links between some schools and technical education, in part due to formal School-to-Work programs and the dramatic rise in demand for technically-skilled workers.

Meaningful opportunities to explore careers, worksites and environments and related learning experiences can help keep students engaged in learning and motivated to graduate. At the most basic level, exposure to careers and future work opportunities can help young people begin developing a sense of their future and the academic preparation they need to participate in a meaningful career. Technical and career education can also help engage students who do not learn well with typical methods in the traditional classroom setting.

[10] Joyce Epstein, Johns Hopkins University

A number of different approaches to career and technical education have been shown to have an impact on reducing dropout rates. *Career academies* combine rigorous academic courses with career-related training, generally in a smaller, more personalized environment than traditional high schools. A major study last year concluded that career academies dramatically reduce dropout rates and boost overall outcomes for at-risk students. Specifically, the study found that students in career academies experienced a dropout rate one third lower than other high-risk students. Students in career academies attended school more often, and completed more credits than other students.[11]

Another approach, the *Jobs for America's Graduates* (JAG) program combines preparation for work with personalized evaluation, sustained guidance from a trained specialist, and exposure to post-secondary training opportunities. Program participants, who are selected based on social and academic risk factors, have a graduation rate of 90 percent. Tens of thousands of students participate in JAG programs through 750 schools in 28 states.

- **Smaller schools**

Large anonymous high schools make it easier for students to become disengaged from learning and, ultimately, disappear from the picture altogether. There is a persuasive body of literature that *small schools, as distinct from smaller class size, produce substantial improvements in many areas.*[12] Among the improvements are that students learn more, make more rapid progress toward graduation, are more satisfied with small schools and fewer drop out than from larger schools. Most relevant to this Committee's work, these affects are particularly true for disadvantaged students who may be more dependent on schools for their success. Raywid concluded that these findings: "have been confirmed with a clarity and level of confidence rare in the annals of education research."

Research in short has shown that the impact of school size on graduation rates (and other student outcomes) is magnified in poorer, urban schools. In contrast, students who attend smaller schools perform better academically, attend school more regularly, and are less likely to drop out than students who attend large comprehensive schools. Students in smaller schools are able to form stronger bonds with teachers and other students, and teachers are able to develop a stronger sense of professional community with their colleagues.

A recent Study of Chicago high schools by the Bank Street College of Education confirms that smaller schools have specific benefits in terms of dropout reduction. The study found that annual dropout rates were significantly lower in small schools and schools-within-schools than in other public schools (including the smaller schools' host schools). Even very newly created small schools showed a reduction in dropout rates. Experience with alternative

[11] James J. Kemple and Jason C. Snipes, "Career Academies: Impacts Student's Engagement and Performance in High School." MDRC, March 2000.
[12] Mary Anne Raywid, "Current Literature on Small Schools", ERIC Digest, January 1999.

schools and programs targeted specifically at dropout prevention also confirm the advantages of smaller schools in reaching at-risk students and keeping them engaged in learning.

- **Comprehensive intervention and access to services for other problems**

As noted earlier, students who are at risk of dropping out often face a number of challenges that can interfere with their academic success. Schools and programs that succeed in keeping kids in school often invest in referral and access to services to address outside student needs.

One systematic effort to provide comprehensive services to at-risk youth is *Communities in Schools*, a national program that works to keep kids in school by coordinating community resources and social services through school-based service delivery. An evaluation of the program found that participants generally had higher graduation rates and better academic outcomes than other at-risk young adults. Similarly, the *Quantum Opportunities Program* achieves success by placing a strong emphasis on assisting students overcome other social and personal challenges.

Improved service delivery and referral is also frequently an element of more comprehensive school restructuring programs. For instance, the *Talent Development High Schoo*l model includes social service and mental health programs along with academic enrichment programs for students who need help outside of the classroom.

- **Individualized assessment and intervention**

All students need help and guidance in navigating high school and preparing for college, but the need is particularly great for students who are at risk of dropping out.

Programs that succeed with at-risk students generally invest much energy and time in personalized intervention. These assessments map out each child's educational plan and set a clear roadmap to graduation and beyond.

- **Continuing contact with a caring adult who is responsive to the student's needs**

Perhaps the most important element in engaging students is the presence of caring, responsive teachers, counselors, and other adult mentors. Almost everyone can recall a positive educational experience with a teacher or other adult who helped him or her master a subject, focus their work and plan for the future. This kind of supportive, responsive relationship is particularly critical for students who are in high-risk environments and may lack clear adult guidance in other areas of their life.

Strong connections with adults and teachers are frequently cited as the most successful element of dropout prevention and high school reinvention programs. Reducing school size is a basic step that can often do a great deal to strengthen relationships between students and teachers and other adults, and improved teacher-student connections is often cited as one of

the strongest factors in the success of career academies and other school-within-school approaches. Other strategies include connecting groups of students with the same teacher or adviser throughout high school or even "looping" groups of students and teachers from ninth grade to graduation. Operating outside of the classroom, both *Jobs for America's Graduates* and *Quantum Opportunities Program* assign a single adult adviser to a group of students for the multi-year duration of the program.

But having caring adults is not enough. Effective teachers and mentors also need to be responsive to student needs and well trained to genuinely address the challenges that students bring, identify needs, and to refer students to other sources of help when they need it. Consequently, any successful dropout prevention programs include a strong element of professional development and training.

Clearly, it is possible to keep students engaged in school if we are willing to move beyond the old, one-size-fits-all industrial approach that we currently apply in most of our schools. This list of effective practices and characteristics is not exhaustive, but the Committee believes that it presents a clear direction for our schools to successfully engage more students, boost completion rates, and improve educational outcomes throughout our Minneapolis and Saint Paul schools.

Efforts underway by the districts to improve outcomes for high school students

Both the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts have recently announced major initiatives that include many of the effective strategies that our committee has heard will improve student engagement.

Earlier this year, Minneapolis Public Schools unveiled a "Twelve Point Plan" for improving academic outcomes and graduation rates for students of color. This plan includes smaller learning communities for all students beginning with the entering class in 2002, stronger connections to post-secondary education, and numerous other interventions targeted at improving the high school experience for at-risk students. More recently, in May 2001 a District report directed additional attention to the very serious dropout issue.

Saint Paul Public Schools has announced plans to redesign middle and high schools to develop smaller, career-focused learning communities. The "Education Blueprint" calls for action in three areas: the creation of standards and credentials, the redesign of schools into smaller learning communities around a number of career clusters, and greater effort to connect school to future.

Both districts have earned substantial support from the philanthropic community for their initiatives. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is providing $1.6 million to support the Saint Paul district's efforts to create smaller schools. The McKnight Foundation has offered $1 million to support restructuring efforts in Minneapolis. The Minneapolis Foundation has created the Destination 2010 Initiative, a major project to provide scholarships and other assistance to a group of third graders from low-performing schools in both the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts.

The Committee has a great deal of respect for the leadership of both the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts. They understand the urgency of this issue and recognize the shortcomings of large, industrial-era comprehensive high schools. They know that students need smaller schools, more engaging learning opportunities, and sustained connections with caring, responsive adults.

However, our Committee believes that there is no guarantee that they will, on their own, succeed in restructuring the high school experience to dramatically boost graduation outcomes. Knowing what needs to be done and actually doing it are two different things. Too many times in the past, good, effective ideas for improving school outcomes have been lost in the shuffle of everyday business.

To successfully implement the kinds of practices that everyone agrees will improve graduation rates – to genuinely succeed in radically restructuring high school as a process that engages all students, the Committee believes that the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts need measurable school completion goals, clear rewards and consequences for success or failure, and the capacity for taking the steps they need to take to engage more students in learning.

Recommendations: How Do We Dramatically Increase High School Completion Rates?

While many individual programs and schools have taken some steps to improve student performance and graduation rates, the challenge to our core cities is securing their widespread adoption at a systemic level. What will it take to secure these effective practices throughout our high schools, not as "alternatives" or merely safety nets at the margins of mainstream educational practice?

Education work in previous Citizens League committees has long recognized that a list of "promising practices" to address educational improvement is of little value unless the main emphasis is the next question: *how do we get these practices implemented at scale and learning and improvement from these practices done on a regular basis?*

Our recommendations therefore focus on *how we get the promising practices put in place and sustained* to make a difference over the short, medium and long-term in our core city school districts. The nub of the recommendations is three fold: set goals, build capacity, and hold schools and districts accountable with incentives and other consequences.

Recommendation 1: Set a goal immediately to achieve a four-year high school completion rate of 80 percent within the next five years.

- **Minneapolis and Saint Paul School districts should quickly set a goal of 80 percent school completion within the next five years as a measurable goal for improving district-wide graduation rates.**

Systems respond better to problems that are measured. Right now, the public and policy makers focus overwhelmingly on one measure of educational success: student performance on standardized tests. We believe that this focus should be complemented with measurement and reporting of school completion rates.

Our Committee believes that the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts should adopt the clear goal of improving completion rates. It is not enough to aim for "improved" graduation rates for students: our core districts need to adopt a clear, measurable goal that is widely understood and accepted as a priority of the same importance as achievement on test scores or any other measure of school and student success.

As an example of the kind of clear goal we expect, we recommend that the districts plan to achieve a graduation rate at least as high as the statewide average of around a four-year completion rate of 80 percent within the next five years. To be sure, reaching the same level of success as the statewide average within five years is a bold objective. As a community, however, we cannot afford to accept any excuses for continued low graduation rates and poor student outcomes in our state's two largest districts.

- **Every high school needs clear high school completion goals to be set and clear plans to reach them**

The districts should set clear graduation rate goals for each individual high school, in the context of a comprehensive, multiple measurement system of school accountability. Goals should be set to reflect the challenges that face each school. In other words, the focus should be on *improving* each school's graduation rate, not just attaining some fixed level of success. Each school's completion goals should also include both the goal of graduation and standards for student performance.

- **School completion outcomes should be regularly reported to the community**

Systems respond to the problems that are measured. Right now, the public and policy makers focus overwhelmingly on one measure of educational success: academic achievement, as measured by student performance on standardized tests. For better or worse, the level of public attention to test scores drives districts and schools to focus on the issue of achievement and take steps to improve outcomes.

We believe that the public's attention needs to be directed to the measurement and reporting of school completion rates as a centrally important measure of school performance.

- **The Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts should adopt a district, data-driven system of accountability for graduation rates.**

We recommend that the districts implement a data-driven system of accountability with four basic pillars: accurate, timely information and intelligence; rapid deployment of resources in a strategic fashion; effective tactics at the direct face to face level; and relentless follow-up and assessment to learn from and improve on experience.

One element of this system should include the clear identification of the specific actions needed to reduce dropout rates and an objective measurement system to track and publicly report on progress in implementing each identified practice. In other words, we believe that the districts should report on their progress on each of the specific actions that they believe will improve student outcomes. If the goal is smaller schools, then the public should receive an annual update on the number of students in smaller schools. If the goal is greater exposure to work-based learning, then the public should know how many students are engaging in work-based learning.

- **The state and the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts need to agree on clear, consistent measurement according to clear consistent definitions and uniform indicators.**

Effective goal setting, reporting, and accountability depend on the use of clear, consistent definitions of the issues surrounding school completion. State and local research systems need to be brought into line with each other. Differing data collection and research methods are no excuse for letting thousands of students leave our schools without diplomas.

Recommendation 2: Set clear rewards and consequences for school completion outcomes.

- **Establish school-based financial rewards for schools that exceed their goals**

Schools need clear incentives in order to attain the goals that are set for them and make the changes in structure and operation that we have identified and that the districts have proposed. However, there is currently no clear reward for schools to succeed in improving student outcomes. Teachers, administrators, and others all express legitimate concern for student performance and strive to do well, but the lack of a clear reward for success is a barrier to comprehensive implementation of effective practices.

We recommend that the district offer schools a clear, no-strings attached financial reward when they meet or exceed their stated goals, including improved completion outcomes.

- **Consequences for not meeting school improvement goals**

In addition to clear rewards, clear consequences need to be in place for schools and for the districts when they do not successfully meet their goals. While we all suffer the long-term consequences of poor student outcomes, there are currently no clear consequences for schools that lose a significant number of students before graduation. We believe that effectively changing schools and obtaining real results hinges on the existence of clear, meaningful consequences. The Committee did not recommend specific consequences for schools not meeting their school completion improvement goals but suggested that the State and the school districts need to include on the menu of consequences transferring management of failing schools to some other entity or turning the school over for charter management as a public school.

Recommendation 3: Restructure high school for greater flexibility

- **Redefine "high school completion" away from the traditional fixed, four-year framework.**

Our Committee's discussion focused on the four-year graduation rate. However, the reality is that many students, particularly those who face many challenges and risk factors outside of

school may take more than four years to finish. While these students are certainly not failures or dropouts, they do not show up in any clear way in our current conception of high school.

Instead of thinking of high school as a fixed time-limited process, we should view it as a flexible, seamless process that ends when a student has mastered the material and is prepared to move on to the next level of their education. For many students, this process will take four years. However, some students will take less time, and others will take more.

At the very least, our data collection and research methods should recognize that high school is more than a four-year process for some students. For instance, measurement and reporting of completion rates should be expanded to include three to six year measures as well.

But moving away from a fixed, four-year definition of high school completion does not mean just letting students sit in their schools for a longer period of time. In a larger way, we suggest that the districts should consider doing away with the traditional structure of high school as a fixed, four-year process. Instead, high school should be formally reorganized as a process that is finished when a student has met all the academic requirements and is ready for the next level of their education or work life. For many students, this will continue to be a four-year process, but we should be willing to recognize that some students will earn their diplomas in three years and others will take five years.

- **Support innovation through expanded student choice for charter schools and other alternatives.**

The Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts should expand student choice and undertake proactive efforts to help students take advantage of alternative learning arrangements, whether that means charter schools, area learning centers, the post-secondary options program, or any other alternative to traditional, district-run schools. Other educational venues should not be seen as "alternatives" which only become available to students when they fail but should be used to respond to the needs of the students.

In a larger sense, we are suggesting that the districts need to change their mission: instead of being in the business of running schools, they should see themselves as being in the business of ensuring that children get the education they need. Educational programs and entities that are not operated by the district should not be viewed as marginal or hostile competitors.

The districts also need to proactively develop a system to discover the effective strategies used by charter schools and incorporate them into traditional schools. Public charter schools and alternative programs can be powerful laboratories for the development of new strategies for engaging students. What is being learned in these programs should be applied in the public school systems. Charter schools often embody many of the practices found to be effective for increasing school completion such as smaller schools and more sustained relationships with teachers.

- **Expand Post-Secondary Educational Options (PSEO) to connect at-risk students with the "real world" of work through career exposure and technical education options.**

Both districts are moving in the right direction in proposing more flexible, career-oriented learning opportunities for our cities' students. To provide more opportunities to students and create pressure for the systems to follow through on their commitment, we recommend that students in high-risk schools be given the opportunity to pursue outside technical training and education opportunities at public expense.

By giving students the ability to take classes at local colleges and universities, the post-secondary options program has worked well for students who are succeeding in school, both in terms of expanding learning opportunities and giving traditional schools an incentive to expand the number of academically challenging classes.

We believe that a similar program of outside opportunity is also needed for students who are at risk for not completing school. We recommend that these students be offered the ability, through the individualized planning process recommended above, to take technical and alternative education courses outside of their traditional schools, through technical colleges and alternative programs in the Twin Cities metro area. Funding should follow the students who choose to take advantage of this option, just as it does with the post-secondary education options (PSEO) program.

The radical expansion of PSEO to students at risk of dropping out requires a major change in practice but not law, as it is permitted currently. There are two challenges here. How can students be made aware of this option in a clear and timely fashion – whether through aggressive funding of community organizations to get the word out? Second, what kind of barriers in current practices and capacity in the post-secondary system need to be removed so that far greater numbers of students here, as in other states, can take advantage of an expanded post-secondary opportunity. To make this option a reality, then, aggressive information efforts to students at risk and their families are needed and removal of any barriers in the post-secondary system.

Recommendation 4: Build capacity for high school success

If schools are to successfully meet the goals we set for them, we need to put in place a structure to support their progress and innovation. Goals and consequences, in the absence of capacity for change, will only succeed in punishing those schools that are already struggling. Schools need adequate resources to deal with the challenges they face. In addition, the Committee would request that the Legislature take steps to assure that the funds to appropriately resource these needs actually get to the students.

- **The Legislature should invest stable and adequate resources in early childhood education and in reform strategies that will guarantee every student the opportunity for a high level of academic achievement.**

As a baseline investment, the Legislature needs to provide support for early childhood education. Funding also needs to be provided to support a rigorous and proactive program of identification, referral, and seamless provision of assistance for students with family difficulties, physical or mental health problems, or any of the range of other issues that can impact students' lives.

In addition, the legislature should provide funding to reduce class size to 15 students to one teacher in all classrooms kindergarten through third grade in the model of the SAGE (Student Achievement Guaranteed in Education) program, currently in place in many Wisconsin schools. In return for this funding, schools should be required to develop coordinated health and social service programs that will serve children and their families through educational and recreational opportunities and other services offered through the schools. Schools should be required to develop a rigorous academic curriculum and to create a system of professional development for teachers that provide them with the skills needed to effectively teach students from diverse backgrounds and in smaller groupings.

These steps should be taken to guarantee that students in Minneapolis and St. Paul have the opportunity for high levels of academic achievement. Results should be assessed annually and reviewed by an evaluation committee to determine both the effectiveness of the program and the teachers who work in it.

- **Support the development of quality teaching and teacher leadership.**

Teachers are the critical leverage point for improving outcomes in Minneapolis and Saint Paul public schools. The proposals that the districts have articulated, the practices that our committee has identified, and any other recommendations for improving outcomes for inner city students will all succeed or fail based on the professional capacity of each school's teachers. Teacher's skills in the classroom and in reaching out to engage parents to support better educational outcomes are enormously important.

We must step up efforts to reward effective teachers and to improve teaching quality in our most challenging schools. Major changes are needed in teaching practices, investment in staff development and resources, and the system by which teachers are allocated to schools. At present, the school system rewards teachers financially and professionally primarily for the amount of time they have spent in the profession and the amount of additional education they have obtained. There is no clear reward or incentive for improving student outcomes or graduation rates.

The Minneapolis district has moved toward a system of performance-based pay, which is the right direction for revising incentives and rewarding teachers. Building on this, we

recommend the aggressive development of a comprehensive system of enhanced compensation and resources for teachers who agree to work in the toughest schools. A rigorous process with clear performance goals, supervision and support, and annual performance reviews should select these teachers. Teachers who participate in this type of system should be given greater authority and independence and a guarantee of adequate resources. While we believe that increased compensation should be part of the picture, there are a range of other appropriate rewards, including professional recognition, sabbatical and professional development opportunities, and greater authority and leadership.

We believe that teachers will respond to this opportunity if they are guaranteed the conditions, professional support, and resources they need to successfully make the changes that they need to make to improve the classroom experience.

This approach will also help address the impact that current teacher placement practices have on school and student success. Lacking any real reward or adequate resources for working with the most challenging kids, the most experienced and effective teachers can use their seniority to move to the schools with the best-prepared students. The least experienced teachers end up in the schools with the most challenges and the least resources. Offering teachers a concrete incentive to stay in the most challenging schools – through enhanced compensation and professional support – can help foster the kinds of professional environments our schools need. We need very good teachers in place in our schools to meet the serious challenge of dramatically increasing school completion rates from their currently unacceptable levels.

The public, legislature, executive agencies, parents, teachers administrators and students all own part of the solution to greater school success for students in our core cities. Failure is not an option that we should accept and we can and must do much better for our students and our state than we are currently doing.

Appendix I: How do we measure high school completion?

There are many ways to define and measure completion outcomes and dropout rates. Although these multiple measurements can help illuminate different dimensions of this complex and important issue, they can also cause confusion over the nature and extent of this problem.

First, there are three widely used definitions for "dropout rates." *Event dropout rates* describe the number of students who leave school in a given year without completing their education. When people talk about annual dropout rates, they are generally referring to the event rate. *Status dropout rates* measure how many young people are not currently in high school and have not completed an educational program. This rate reflects the cumulative effect of students dropping out each year. Finally, *cohort dropout rates* describe how many of a given group of students leave school over a certain period of time.

In addition, we have seen two definitions of "high school completion rates." The US Census Bureau and the US Education Department generally define the high school completion rate as the proportion of adults who have a high school credential. This is really just a measure of the share of the public who at some point in their lives finished high school. The Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning (CFL) defines the completion rate as the proportion of a cohort of students who complete their high school education within four years. This is an actual measurement of completion outcomes for a group of students.

Statistical descriptions of school completion and dropout rates can differ in their definition of dropout or completion. For instance, adults holding a General Education Development (GED) credential are sometimes included in dropout rates, and sometimes they are not.

Minnesota is unique in having cohort data available on four-year completion and dropout rates for all of the State's students. The federal government and most states do not regularly collect and report cohort data. This information is generally only available for limited time periods or small groups of students. However, since 1992, the CFL has collected data on each of the state's students through the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS). This system records information on 37 different dimensions of each student's demographics, experiences, and outcomes. By assigning each student an anonymous identifier, the state is able to track individual students over the course of their educational career.

Our Committee believes that CFL's four-year completion and dropout data is the best measurement of the nature of this problem. By following a group of students over a period of time, we can see their actual graduation outcomes. Because CFL only describes a student as a "dropout" if they are formally recorded as such by their school district, it gives us at least one fairly solid measurement of the number of young people that do not finish school.

To the extent that it includes such a rich collection of data on every one of the state's students, the MARSS system can be a powerful resource for understanding this subject. Our Committee's review of this subject has necessarily been limited to the data that CFL and the school districts have been able to provide to us, given their own limited research and analysis resources. While we have attempted to draw some conclusions about this issue based on the data we have obtained, there is a strong need for more thorough research.

Appendix II: The Economic Impact Of Not Finishing School

The long-term economic consequences of leaving high school without a diploma are often devastating both for the individuals who leave school and for society as a whole. Students lacking a high school diploma face a lifetime of drastically reduced income. An economy short on skilled workers cannot afford to let people disappear. Society also pays a hefty price for dropouts through the social service and criminal justice systems.

Fifty years ago, people with less than a high school education were not necessarily doomed to a life on the economic margins. Jobs in manufacturing, natural resources, agriculture, and other industries offered employment opportunities for people who possessed basic skills and a willingness to work, regardless of their level of formal education. In fact, according to the Census Bureau, only about a third of the population in 1950 had completed high school.

Over the past few decades, information and service-based industries have displaced natural resource extraction and routine production as the principal engines of our economy. The dynamic, knowledge-based work environments that have emerged require a much more sophisticated set of skills and abilities than at any time in the past. Participation in today's economy requires at least a high school diploma and, in most cases, a few additional years of education or training. Individuals who fail to complete high school can expect a lifetime of reduced income and limited opportunities.

The relationship between education and earnings.

Economic research has reliably demonstrated that wages and earnings are strongly based on educational attainment. The gap in income between individuals who do not finish high school and those who reach higher levels of education is striking. According to the Census Bureau, average annual earnings for individuals without a high school diploma in 1999 were $16,121. High school graduates earned an average of $24,572. Individuals with just two years of post-secondary education earned $32,152 – nearly twice as much as high school dropouts. Over a lifetime, this difference in earnings can add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost income.[13]

Students who do not finish high school earn less because they are less likely to be able to find work and the jobs they find tend to pay much less than jobs open to individuals with higher levels of education. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, individuals who left high school without a diploma in 1999 had a labor force participation rate of 57 percent in October

[13] US Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States, March 2000.

of that year. Young adults who graduated in 1999 (and did not continue on to further education) had a labor force participation rate of 84 percent.[14]

According to the Minnesota Department of Economic Security, only about 25 percent of the job openings in the Twin Cities do not require at least a high school diploma. Most of these vacancies are low-skill, entry-level positions, including food preparation and serving, sales, building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, and some production and construction openings. The median wage in the Twin Cities for positions open to high school dropouts is $8.00, compared to $9.37 for positions that require a high school diploma and $19.23 for vacancies requiring a college degree.[15]

Dropping out and the labor shortage: the economic impact of wasted potential.

The economic costs of dropping out are not restricted to just the individual young adults who leave school. Our entire region suffers when we waste the capacity that these individuals have to contribute to our economy and support their families.

As the Citizens League has described in earlier reports, long-term demographic and economic changes are resulting in a shortage of workers at every level that threatens to choke our state's long-term prosperity.[16] While there are openings in the low-skill end of the job market, shortages are most severe in positions that require at least a high school diploma (and generally some additional education and training). Analysis of the Twin Cities labor market by the Department of Economic Security has found that the fields with the tightest demand for workers include healthcare support positions, community and social support services, construction, personal care and service, and computer and mathematical professional positions.[17]

Other social costs of dropping out

In the long run, the rest of society pays a high price for letting young people leave school, through reduced income tax revenues and increased public expenditures for crime control, incarceration, and social welfare programs.[18]

Involvement with the criminal justice system and use of public welfare programs are the result of many complex dynamics, but not finishing high school clearly shows up in the

[14] BLS, "Unemployment and the newest high school dropouts," Monthly Labor Review, July 12, 1999.
[15] DES, Twin Cities Job Vacancy Survey, 2000.
[16] Help Wanted: More Opportunities Than People, November 1998; From Jobs for Workers to Workers for Jobs, November 1999.
[17] DES, Twin Cities Job Vacancy Survey, 2000.
[18] US Dept of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report.

equation. One third of the inmates in Minnesota's correctional system are high school dropouts.[19] More than half of the parents participating in the Minnesota Family Investment Program did not finish high school.

[19] www.doc.state..mn.us/statistics/adultprofile7120000.htm

Appendix III: Effective Practices to Engage Students in School

The Committee endorsed the following key practices:

1. Early childhood intervention and development
2. Early academic intervention to boost reading ability
3. Parental engagement
4. Exposure to careers and technical education
5. Smaller schools
6. Comprehensive intervention and access to services for other problems
7. Individualized assessment and intervention
8. Continuing contact with a caring adult who is responsive to the student's needs

Appendix IV: A Failing Grade for School Completion – Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Set a goal immediately to achieve a four-year high school completion rate of 80 percent within the next five years.

1. Every high school needs clear high school completion goals to be set and clear plans to reach them.
2. School completion outcomes should be reported to the community on a regular basis.
3. The Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts should adopt a data-driven system of accountability for graduation rates.
4. The State and Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts need to agree on clear, consistent measurement according to clear, consistent definitions and uniform indicators.

Recommendation 2: Set clear rewards and consequences for school completion outcomes

1. Establish school-based financial rewards for schools that exceed their goals.
2. Set consequences for not meeting school improvement goals.

Recommendation 3: Restructure high school for greater flexibility

1. Redefine "high school completion" away from the traditional, fixed, four-year framework
2. Support innovation through expanded choice for charter schools and other alternatives.
3. Expand Post-Secondary Educational Options (PSEO) to connect at-risk students with the "real world" of work through career exposure and technical education options.

Recommendation 4: Build capacity for high school success

1. The Legislature should invest in stable and adequate resources in early childhood education and the many other challenges that students face.
2. Support the development of quality teaching and teacher leadership.

Appendix V: Prior Citizens League Study Committees on Education

The Citizens League has a long history in the field of education policy. Highlights include the "Minnesota Miracle" funding equalization plan in the early 1970s, the choice programs of the 1980s, and the charter school movement in the 1990s. As noted by one researcher, "No other organization matches [the League's] staying power or sustained influence as an agenda-setter on educational reform issues."

In developing recommendations to address the school completion problem, the committee may want to keep in mind the Citizens League's past work. Over the years, we have generated many recommendations that address the larger forces that contribute to high school completion, like early childhood education and literacy and reading instruction in the primary grades. The League has also called for a number of systemic changes designed to improve the overall performance of our school system.

Here is an overview of the Citizens League's major K-12 education reports from the last 20 years:

Straight "A"s for Minnesota's Schools: Achievement, Assessment, and Accountability (1997)

The Legislature should focus on defining clear expectations, setting broad policy goals, and rewarding progress toward those goals. Districts, schools, and teachers should be able to decide for themselves what works and should receive support from the state in carrying out effective policies.

Improving student achievement must be the core goal of every public policy related to education. To reach this goal, the committee recommended the following priorities:

- Improving reading ability in K-3
- Improving readiness for school by funding Head Start
- Closing the achievement gap between students of color and white students
- Improving achievement by students whose native language is not English

The Legislature should establish a statewide assessment system to provide information on multiple measures of student, school, and district performance. Specific attention should be paid to measuring each school's capacity and performance in serving students of color.

The Legislature should fund "Achievement Grants" to provide one-time funding to individual schools and districts that create projects to reach measurable improvement goals with emphasis on the priority areas listed above. The Legislature should also consider funding schools directly rather than through districts. The Legislature should also expand and strengthen the charter school law and the public school choice programs.

Chartered Schools = Choices for Educators + Quality for All Students (1988)

This report led to the passage of Minnesota's charter school law in 1991, the first such law in the nation.

In order to boost outcomes for students and promote desegregation goals, the state should authorize "chartered" public schools in Minneapolis and Saint Paul and, eventually, in the entire state.

Chartered schools should be open to all students and should be free to pursue alternative educational approaches. While they should be operated by licensed educators and comply with desegregation rules and accreditation standards, they should be free of most other state mandates. Funding for the schools will follow from the students who enroll in them.

If the state does not create chartered schools, it should take immediate action to reduce the concentration of minority students in inner city schools. The state should also be responsible for ensuring that Minnesota's parents have the information they need about the various educational choices they have available.

Building Tomorrow by Helping Today's Kids (1988)

Dramatic changes in the economy and in family structure make early childhood development a new public policy priority. Minnesota's children and their parents need expanded access to high quality services and more information to make knowledgeable choices in a diverse service system. Four areas in particular need improvement:
1) Parenting education: school districts should expand the availability and encourage the use of parenting education services and schools and human services agencies should coordinate parenting programs with other programs for families.
2) Early prevention and preschool intervention: state and local agencies should ensure that all children, particularly those at-risk, participate in developmental screenings at least twice between birth and age six; accreditation standards should be adopted for early childhood programs and the state should emphasize diversity in providers, programs and service systems.
3) Child care: The state should broaden access to high quality child care services by expanding funding for the Child Care Sliding Fee program and providing start-up and building improvement loans for providers. Employers should offer childcare information and support for their employees.
4) Coordination and diversity: An assistant commissioner position should be created in Human Services to coordinate government agency programs that serve children. And counties and central cities should establish coordinating boards to ensure coordination of services.

Cooperatively-Managed Schools: Teachers as Partners (1987)

The education system should be restructured to give teachers the opportunity to reach their highest potential as professionals. They should be empowered to take a more active role in school operations and held accountable for results. Key policy actions are needed in three areas:

- Cooperatively managed schools should be created which give teachers the opportunity to participate in operational decisions at their school sites. Teachers should develop the plans for these schools based on their own expertise as educators.

- Teacher education should be improved to give teachers more field experience in teaching and the skills they need to participate in management decisions. Colleges of education need to develop stronger ties to the public education system.

- Teacher licensing standards should be strengthened through the involvement of teachers in licensing decisions and the use of subject matter tests, an internship period, and performance goals in schools.

Rebuilding Education to Make It Work (1982)

This report established the foundation for many of the education reforms introduced by the Perpich administration, including open enrollment and the Post Secondary Enrollment Options program.

In order to boost outcomes for students, Minnesota's public education system should be built around three central principles:

- Decisions about education should be decentralized from the district level to the school level.
- Regulatory barriers should be removed to give schools more flexibility and room for innovation.
- Public education dollars should follow parents' choices about which schools or educational services should be utilized.

Decentralization, flexibility, and innovation are all needed to give schools the ability to address each child's different learning styles and abilities. Elected officials should be involved in policy decisions about education but not operational decisions about schools. School boards and the state should focus on setting standards and defining goals for the entire system, but principals, teachers, and parents should have as much power and flexibility as possible when it comes to determining how each school operates. Public funding for education should follow parental decisions, through vouchers if necessary. The business community should also be willing to promote educational innovation through the creation of a venture capital fund for new educational approaches

THE WORK OF THE CITIZENS LEAGUE STUDY COMMITTEE

Charge to the Study Committee

The Citizens League Board of Directors approved the following charge to the committee on finishing school and improving outcomes for core city youth:

> While statewide school completion rates remain high in Minnesota, our core cities continue to lose an unacceptable proportion of students, especially students of color, before graduation. This is not a minor issue of interest only to the core cities or a footnote to statewide completion statistics. People without at least a high school diploma are unlikely to earn a family living wage. An economy short on labor cannot afford to leave anyone behind. The youth that disappear from our schools can show up in the criminal justice and social service systems. The Citizens League study will examine what our schools can do to improve the alarmingly low completion rates in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Committee Membership

The *Citizens League Study Committee on School Completion Rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul* was co-chaired by George Latimer and Gary Cunningham. A total of 32 individuals took an active part in the committee. The Committee met 23 times between October 25, 2000 and May 9, 2001. The Citizens League Board of Directors approved the report on June 26, 2001. In addition to the chairs, the members of the Committee were:

Curt Boganey
William Connelly
Cheryl Dickson
Joanne Englund
Sandy Hale
Gary Joselyn
Benjamin Kanninen
Larry Kelley
Pradeep Kotamraju
Tom LaForce
Charlotte Landreau
Todd Lefko
Dick Little
Maxine Mandt
Malcolm McLean
Patrick O'Leary
Bharat M. Parekh
David Pence
Stanley Peskar
Jack Rossmann
Anne Rozga
Dudley Ruch
Jim Schneider
Hal Schroer
Alan Silver
Kenneth Stewart
William Svrluga
Tom Swain
Dale Swanson
Kathleen Vellenga

Meetings and Resource Testimony. Resource testimony was provided to the members of the Committee by the following people:

Margo Baines-St. Paul Public Schools
James Burroughs-Summit Academy OIC
Woody Cox-MN Dept. of Children, Families & Learning
Dr. Marti Erickson-Children, Youth & Families Consortium, UM
David Greenberg-El Colegio Charter School
Jennifer Godinez-La Escuelita
Dr. Patricia Harvey-St. Paul Public Schools
Bob Jibben-Metropolitan Federation of Alternative Schools
Dr. Carol Johnson-Minneapolis Public Schools
Ted Kolderie-Educational Consultant
Jim Long-Connections Center
Allan Malkis-The Urban Coalition
Dick Mammen-Change, Inc.
Carlos Mariani Rosa-MN Minority Education Partnership
Paul McMahon-Patrick Henry High School
Joe Nathan-Center for School Change, Humphrey Institute
Dave Onsrud-MN Dept. of Children, Families & Learning
Osman Sahardeed-Somali Community of MN
John Sedey-Education Consultant
Jim Stone-UM Dept. of Work, Community & Family Education
George Strand-El Colegio Charter School
Louise Sundin-Minneapolis Federation of Teachers
Doug Thomas-Center for School Change/Envisions Cooperative
Chia Vang-Education Consultant

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WHAT THE CITIZENS LEAGUE IS

The Citizens League promotes the public interest in Minnesota by involving citizens in identifying and framing critical public policy choices, forging recommendations and advocating their adoption.

The Citizens League has been an active and effective public affairs research and education organization in the Twin Cities metropolitan area for more than 45 years.

Volunteer research committees of League members study policy issues in depth and develop informational reports that propose specific workable solutions to public issues. Recommendations in these reports often become law. Over the years, League reports have been a reliable source of information for governmental officials, community leaders, and citizens concerned with public policy issues of our area.

The League depends upon the support of individual members and contributions from businesses, foundations, and other organizations throughout the metropolitan area.

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These reports are the product of the League's unique program of citizen-based research. To order copies, use the form in this report. Earlier reports are available on request, call the CL office at 612-338-0791.

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