



**A Citizens League
Research Report**

Straight "A"s for Minnesota's Schools

Achievement, Assessment, Accountability

February 1997

*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.*

Straight "A"s for Minnesota's Schools
Achievement, Assessment, Accountability

**Report of the Citizens League
K-12 Study Committee**

February, 1997

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	i
I. An Education Action Agenda for the 1997 Legislature	1
II. Why Reform is Needed.....	2
III. The Role and Responsibility of the Legislature	6
IV. Recommendations	
A. Focus on the Goal of Improving Student Achievement.....	7
B. Information and Accountability.....	11
C. Innovation	16
V. A Few Cautions.....	21
Appendix A: Summary of Recommendations	23
Appendix B: Work of the Committee.....	25
Appendix C: Minority Reports	

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Minnesota’s students tend to do well—test scores are higher, dropout rates lower, post-secondary education enrollment higher than the national average.

But Minnesota’s education system is not working fine for many of its constituents, and we believe that the system can do better—and must do better—for all students. In today’s globally-competitive information economy, workers must have more knowledge and more advanced skills than in the past. The state’s recent Basic Skills Tests show that too many students are reaching eighth grade without the most rudimentary reading and math skills. The public education system’s record with students of color and students in poverty is appalling. And despite the good news of a budget surplus, Minnesota’s fiscal future will require the education system to produce better-educated students without substantially more resources.

The 1997 Legislature should concentrate on the following agenda:

- Allocate resources and provide incentives for schools, districts and programs that demonstrably improve student **achievement**.
- Establish a statewide **assessment** system to provide consistent information about student, school and system performance to provide clear **accountability** to students, parents and taxpayers.
- Encourage and reward **innovation** in the structures for delivery of educational services.

The Legislature should be in the business of *causing* improvement, not *doing* improvement. The Legislature shouldn’t be in the business of managing schools. Education is a decentralized system where the essential activity occurs between teachers and students. Districts, schools and teachers must decide for themselves to do what works. The Legislature should define expectations of performance for the education system, set broad policy and arrange the *system* in ways that prompt continuous improvement.

Organizations that have improved their quality and productivity offer helpful lessons for those who hope to improve education. The successful organization generally has a focused, unambiguous goal. It has developed reliable, regular information about performance. It has made everyone in the organization accountable for improvement. And it has given the people closest to the action the freedom and encouragement to try new ways of doing things.

Minnesota's education system should do likewise.

In this report, we recommend that the Legislature focus on the goal of improving student **achievement**. *Improved student achievement must be at the core of every public policy related to education.* The top achievement priorities should be to improve reading success among students in grades K-3; improve pre-school readiness among children at risk; improve the achievement of students of color and students in poverty; and improve the achievement of students whose native language is not English. On pages 7 through 11, we recommend specific steps the Legislature should take to support schools' efforts to improve student achievement.

A high-quality student **assessment** and information system is an essential step toward improving the achievement of students and the performance of the education system. On pages 12 and 13, we recommend steps the Legislature should take in 1997 to develop better information about how Minnesota's students and school districts are doing. We emphasize that the state must not only evaluate *students*, but must also evaluate *schools*, including schools' readiness to serve students of color.

The public rightly expects **accountability**, and restoring the public's trust in the education system is one of the Legislature's pressing challenges. The Legislature and public must be able to answer the question: What are the results the state is getting for its roughly \$5.5 billion annual education appropriation? On pages 13 through 15, we recommend steps to ensure that parents and taxpayers get the information they need, and also recommend steps to hold school districts accountable for ensuring equal education opportunity for all students. We also outline how the Legislature can increase the accountability of the education system in the short-term, as it moves toward more directly linking appropriations with expectations for performance improvement.

Every enterprise should invest some of its own resources in improvement and innovation—as a core activity, not something to be added only when “extra” money is available. This biennium, the Legislature has an additional opportunity for innovation, in the form of a projected budget surplus. On pages 16 through 20, we describe how the Legislature can use new education appropriations on specific, time-limited innovations to improve student achievement.

In a “budget session,” education policy will be debated in the context of spending decisions. The central question for debate should be: How must the education system change to improve the achievement of students? And how can the Legislature be assured that its appropriation—the *whole \$6 billion*, not just the margins—will be used to achieve those improvements? We hope this report contributes to the effort to design a system that encourages parents, teachers, principals, and students to continually seek and implement better ways to help students learn.

Straight "A"s for Minnesota's Schools

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I. AN EDUCATION ACTION AGENDA FOR THE 1997 LEGISLATURE

A. The Purpose of This Report

The charge to the study committee was to answer the question: What menu of K-12 education reforms should be on the agenda of the 1997 Legislature as it seeks to improve school performance?

We believe there is much that districts, schools, teachers, parents and community members can do on their own to improve the quality of education. We chose to focus on the state Legislature for several reasons. Education is a constitutional obligation of the state. Local school districts are creatures of the state, charged with carrying out the state's obligation to educate students within the policies set by the Legislature. And elementary and secondary education account for nearly one-third of state general fund spending.*

B. The Agenda

The 1997 Legislature should concentrate on the following agenda:

- Allocate resources and provide incentives for schools, districts and programs that demonstrably improve student **achievement**, with particular emphasis on school readiness, grades K-3, and the achievement of students of color and students in poverty.
- Establish a statewide **assessment** system to provide consistent information about student, school and system performance to provide clear **accountability** to students, parents and taxpayers.
- Encourage and reward innovation in the structures for delivery of educational services, while **assessing** the results and holding innovators **accountable** for improvements in student achievement.

* The League acknowledges three important subjects not covered in this report: (1) the growth in need, services and spending related to special education; (2) the impact of laws related to tenure, seniority and other labor concerns on student achievement and the possibilities for reform; and (3) the impact of the state's education finance (revenue-raising) system on student and school district performance. All three subjects were beyond the scope of a short study, but merit further investigation and discussion.

II. WHY REFORM IS NEEDED

A. The Good News

There is some good news on the education front. Minnesota's students tend to do well. ACT and SAT test results are improving and are among the highest in the U.S. Minnesota students compared favorably with their most accomplished international peers from South Korea and Taiwan on the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics examinations. The state's dropout rates and graduation rates continue to be among the best nationally.

Minnesota received high marks on a recent national comparison of teacher qualifications. The state has been a pioneer in charter schools and other public school choice programs. And during visits to area schools, members of this study committee personally observed many inspiring examples of educators and schools who are achieving remarkable success with their students, sometimes against difficult odds dealt by poverty, language barriers and family disruption.

B. The Bad News

Too often policy makers and citizens conclude from these successes that the education system is working just fine. We are persuaded that the system is not working fine for many of its constituents. And we believe that the system can do better—and must do better—for all students. We have four major concerns:

- **Pretty good is no longer good enough.**

In today's globally-competitive information economy, workers must have more knowledge and more advanced skills than in the past. Today's complex society requires more sophisticated skills of its citizens.

There is compelling research showing gaps between what schools expect students to know, and what is required to function in today's workplaces and communities. Minnesota's Graduation Standards initiative shows that the state has recognized the need for higher standards. But the state's expectations of what students should know and be able to do, as described in the proposed Standards, are still lower than the standards recommended by the National Education Goals Panel. The recent Basic Skills Tests show that too many students are reaching eighth grade without even these rudimentary reading and math skills. The number of remedial

courses offered by post-secondary education institutions has increased dramatically.

- **Too many parents, employers and citizens have lost confidence in the public education system.**

One of the most urgent tasks for education and government officials is to rebuild public trust in the education system.

Surveys of Minneapolis homeowners have found a significant and increasing number of middle and upper class families with children say they intend to leave the city, many of them for reasons related to schools (Minneapolis Planning Department). Local studies have repeatedly indicated that local employers are dissatisfied with the entry-level skills of Minnesota's high-school graduates.

As the baby boom generation ages, the Legislature and school districts will have little choice but to convince the growing share of taxpayers without kids that their expenditures on education are worthwhile. That may be a tough sell. In response to a *Pioneer Press*/KARE 11/MPR Poll (*Pioneer Press*, 9/8/96), 20 percent of respondents agreed that "the state's education money has not been spent wisely, mainly because schools have not been held accountable." And 53 percent agreed that "no matter how much money is spent on schools, students' achievement rates will not go up until serious social problems are corrected."

- **The public education system's record with students of color and students in poverty is appalling.**

Student achievement among students of color and students in poverty is dramatically worse than that of white, middle-class students. Standardized tests show achievement gaps of up to 20 percentage points between white students and students of color in the Minneapolis and St. Paul districts.

Minnesota's students of color also are dropping out of school in alarming numbers. If current state dropout rates for grades nine through 12 remain constant, 62 percent of African Americans in the ninth-grade class of 1994 will eventually drop out of school. The projection for Hispanic and Native American students is only slightly better. (This measure of cumulative drop-out rates is a worst-case scenario, since some dropouts will re-enroll or earn a G.E.D.) (Minnesota Department of Education).

State and local policies on housing, transportation and other matters—along with persistent discrimination—have made the Twin Cities area one of the most segregated of large U.S. metropolitan areas (powell, 1996). It is not surprising that Minnesota's schools are becoming more segregated as a result, despite state desegregation policies.

The NAACP and the St. Paul Public Schools have brought lawsuits challenging the Governor, the Department of Children, the State Board of Education, the Metropolitan Council and numerous other agencies to provide an adequate and equitable education. It is beyond the scope of this statement to comment on either of these lawsuits. But it is fair to ask: Why have court orders, state policies and massive additional public expenditures not yielded acceptable educational *achievement* among children of color?

Of course, there are many factors in addition to those under the control of schools that determine student learning, including household income, stability of families and the social institutions of the community, and even whether students attend school regularly. It is first and foremost the responsibility of parents to prepare their children to succeed in school. Schools do bear significant responsibility for student achievement, however, and we believe the system's current record with students of color can and must be improved.

The evidence plainly shows that students of color—including those from disadvantaged backgrounds—can and do achieve at high levels when high achievement is expected. Joe Nathan, nationally recognized expert on education reform, said that successful schools assume that the central problem is not the students—the central problem is to change the assumptions about how education should be done. "Successful schools believe students can learn and offer no excuses," he said.

- **Minnesota's fiscal future will require the education system to produce better-educated students without substantially more resources.**

The good news of a possible budget surplus should not blind us to the grimmer reality the state will face over the long term. State revenues will grow more slowly in the next 20 years than in the past 20 because of long-term economic and demographic trends over which the Legislature has little control.

At the same time, demand for public spending by state and local government is expected to grow faster than revenues.

This demand will be driven by such demographic trends as the coming explosion in the elderly population. Formula-based entitlements have built-in spending commitments that will be increasingly difficult for the public sector to meet. The public, meanwhile, is in no mood for tax increases.

Education, like other public services, will have to become more productive. In the future, schools will have to produce better-educated students without substantial increases in funding.

C. The 1997 Legislative Session

Because 1997 is a budget session, most education policy issues will be debated in the context of spending decisions. Two developments have already set the stage for the budget debate.

First, the Department of Finance has forecast a \$1.4 billion revenue surplus for the coming biennium. Second, the 1995 Legislature, at the urging of the Governor, established appropriation limits ("caps") to reduce spending on K-12 by \$233 million over the 1998-99 biennium. The general education formula allowance would be reduced from \$3,505 in FY 1997 to \$3,430 in FY 1998 and 1999; and the secondary pupil weight would be reduced from the current 1.3 to 1.25 in FY 1998 and 1.2 in FY 1999.

In the face of these budget realities, legislators will be tempted to:

- **Spend more.** Interest groups will make clear that lawmakers' commitment to quality education will be demonstrated by their willingness to appropriate more money to school districts with no strings attached. The Governor and legislators have already pledged to remove the caps and restore \$337 million in formula aid. Nearly everyone is saying that part of the anticipated budget surplus should be spent on K-12 education.
- **Get under the hood and just fix it.** Legislators will be tempted to get into the business of managing schools, by identifying specific improvements—whether more technology or smaller classes—and then telling schools to go do those things.
- **Bash the opposition and fight over ideology.** While legislative leaders have pledged bipartisan cooperation, the inevitable pressures of a budget session will tempt lawmakers into ideological and partisan division. We hope the debate continues on its current, more constructive terms.

- **Design for improvement.** A few legislators will try to design a system that encourages the experts—parents, teachers, principals, students—to continually seek and implement better ways to help students learn. We tip our hat to them, and hope this report contributes to that worthy effort.

III. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE LEGISLATURE

A. Causing Improvement vs. Doing Improvement

The Legislature should be in the business of *causing* improvement, not *doing* improvement. The Legislature should define expectations of performance for the education system, set broad policy and arrange the *system* in ways that prompt continuous improvement.

Sometimes the Legislature's role is to require specific policy changes that can be expected to improve results. The Legislature should not be apologetic about mandating such changes related to its top-priority achievement concerns.

In general, however, the Legislature shouldn't be in the business of managing schools. First, because research literature gives few unambiguous directions about what works to improve learning; there are few simple solutions. Second, experience shows that the Legislature cannot force districts to use effective teaching principles. Education is a decentralized system where the essential activity occurs between teachers and students. Districts, schools and teachers must decide for themselves to do what works.

Most strategies for causing improvement in the education system, such as school-based funding, are too new to judge with confidence how well they work. Therefore, the Legislature cannot restrict itself only to strategies that have been *proven* to be effective.

Policy makers can look to organizations that have improved their quality and productivity for lessons about what works. Those lessons suggest that organizations usually are motivated to improve because of **external pressure**. People and organizations seldom change when comfortable.

Organizations must also face **rewards and consequences** for success or failure to serve their customers. When resources increase regardless of performance—or when good performance goes unrewarded—reallocation and risk-taking are rare. The central problem in American public education is the lack of financial incentives and other recognition focused on student achievement.

School districts continue to get funding regardless of whether students improve, do worse or stay the same.

While pressure can send schools the message that they must improve, schools themselves must figure out *how* to improve. **Organizations that have improved their quality and performance generally have developed:**

- a focused, unambiguous goal;
- reliable, regular **information about performance**—compared with others and with the “best in class”—and about the results of improvement efforts;
- **accountability** (individual and group) for performance;
- freedom and encouragement to **try new ways of doing things**, especially by those who are closest to the action; and
- some **latitude to persevere** in improvement efforts, and strategies for adopting permanently the ones that are successful (Richard J. Murnane and Frank Levy, *Teaching the New Basic Skills*, New York: Free Press, 1996).

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Focus on the Goal of Improving Student Achievement

Improved student achievement should be at the core of every public policy related to education. The central question of the budget debate should be: How should the Legislature’s biennial appropriation be used to cause the needed improvement?

We recommend the following steps:

- As Minnesota implements its Graduation Standards—particularly the Profile of Learning—the Legislature must assure that the standards are set high and students and schools held accountable for meeting the high standards.**

The Graduation Standards have the potential to make a very big impact on student achievement by focusing on what students know and are able to do, rather than on the seat time they have amassed. We heard some concern, however, that the proposed standards are not as rigorous as those proposed by the National Education Goals Panel, and might be too low. One resource person who spoke to the committee expressed

apprehension that the state will devote most of its resources to the basic skills components, and give less effort to the Profile of Learning, which measures higher-order thinking and more advanced achievement.

- ii. **Because of the critical importance of assuring that students enter kindergarten with sufficient preparation, a portion of increases in education spending should be devoted to increased state support for Head Start and other successful pre-school programs.**

Evidence is mounting that when children do not receive adequate mental stimulation in the first few years of life, their neural pathways and cortexes don't develop properly. If language and other cognitive deficits aren't compensated for early, it is nearly impossible to reach grade-level skills in later grades, despite intensive remediation (E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need, And Why We Don't Have Them*, 1996).

High-quality early intervention programs have been shown to improve school performance and reduce the need for special education (Carnegie Foundation).

In Minnesota there are, in addition to Head Start and the state's Early Childhood Family Education Program, a number of smaller programs—such as “Way to Grow” in Minneapolis and “Cultural Beginnings” in southwestern Minnesota—that are culturally appropriate and trusted in communities of color. The current supply of early childhood education is inadequate and a greater variety is needed, because the same approach and provider are not appropriate to all children.

The Legislature should appropriate seed funding to the Department of Children, Families and Learning to establish a public/private **School Readiness Foundation** to stimulate and support local private or public programs building children's school readiness from birth to age 6 in low-income communities and communities of color.

The proposed School Readiness Foundation would request, evaluate and fund competitive proposals to strengthen comprehensive preschool development of low-income children. The programs should build on family, ethnic, cultural and informal support systems and existing early childhood service providers.

Public schools and school districts would not be eligible for direct foundation grants, in order to stimulate initiatives by

alternative providers, but might benefit as partners with private groups. Following the state's initial appropriation, the Foundation would be funded by private contributors.

- iii. **The state's mandatory attendance law, which currently applies to children ages 7 through 16, should be extended to include children ages 5 and 6, subject to appropriate waivers from districts, to assure that parents are legally required to enroll and regularly send their children to kindergarten or other appropriate early education opportunities.**

National data show that the share of first graders who are age 7 or older increased from one in eight in 1971 to one in five in 1994. First grade students from low-income families—who are more likely to be at risk of cognitive delays—were more likely to be age 7 or older than were first graders from high-income families.

Minnesota already requires districts to offer kindergarten to children who reach age 5 by September 1 of the school year, but attendance is not required before age 7. Lowering the mandatory attendance age would give schools an additional tool to ensure that children get a timely and consistent start to their education.

- iv. **All students should be required to attain third-grade reading and math levels by the end of third grade. Funds necessary to provide remediation for students who do not meet these standards should be set aside by the state from the per-pupil state aid allotment for those students.**

Education researchers have said that the one step that would have the biggest impact on student achievement is to ensure that all children can read and do basic arithmetic by the end of third grade. If these basic educational foundations are not in place by then, it is very difficult for students and teachers to catch up later. Remediation is extremely expensive. Pre-school programs such as Head Start cannot be viewed as a substitute for effective instruction in grades K-3.

There are examples of instructional methods that show that virtually all children can learn to read by the end of third grade. For example, Success for All, a reading and math program developed at Johns Hopkins University, has dramatically improved achievement among disadvantaged children. In use at 300 schools nationwide, the program demonstrates that "substantially greater success can be routinely ensured in schools that are neither exceptional nor

extraordinary—schools that were not producing great success before the program was introduced” (Robert E. Slavin et al, “‘Whenever and Wherever We Choose’: The Replication of Success for All,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1994).

The disappointing results on Minnesota’s Basic Skills Tests suggest that many students get behind early and never catch up. To improve student achievement, and to increase the productivity the education system, the state must focus instruction early on these crucial foundations.

- v. **The state should improve academic achievement of students in poverty and students of color, and reduce achievement gaps between white students and students of color.**

The state must fulfill its commitment to equal education opportunity as a matter of civic honor and legal obligation. The ill effects of inequitable education are growing both for individuals and the state economy. In advanced information economies, individuals’ financial well-being depends increasingly on education. Consigning students of color and students in poverty to second-rate education is consigning them to second-class economic opportunity.

Minnesota’s labor force—already in extremely short supply—will grow more slowly than in the recent past, and after 2015 all the increase in the work force will be among minority workers. If Minnesota is to be a brainpower state, state policies must assure that the future work force—*all* workers—are well educated.

We learned that several strategies are considered key to improving the achievement of students of color and students in poverty:

- establishing high expectations and holding all students to high standards;
- increasing the involvement of parents—one of the most effective strategies for improving the achievement of children of color—in activities ranging from reading to their children to participating in the governance of the school;
- increasing the numbers of faculty, staff, and teachers of color, and providing training to enable all teachers to better understand and connect with students from a variety of cultural and life experiences;

- adopting different curricula and instructional methods that best suit the children in a particular school—choosing from many options such as core knowledge curricula, project-based learning, and multicultural and culture-specific curricula.
 - developing stronger connections with the school's community among parents, religious communities, businesses and providers of health and social services.
- vi. **The state should improve achievement among students whose native language is not English. Each Limited English Proficiency (LEP) student entering the public schools should meet the objective of being able to fully participate in all regular English-only courses in the school within a specified brief period, preferably one year. This should be achieved by a combination of ESL, English immersion instruction, and additional instruction utilizing community resources where available.**

The number of students whose native language is not English has leaped from 9,400 in the 1986-87 school year to 24,000 in the 1995-96 school year. In the seven-county metropolitan area, 60 different native languages are spoken.

Meeting the needs of these students and families is critical to establishing the basic foundations of reading and math described above—whatever the student's age. Fairness dictates that students with limited English be helped to learn English as quickly as possible, rather than "tracked" as low-achievers.

English-language instruction will be costly up front, because of the large numbers of native languages spoken in Minnesota schools, and because of the intensity of instruction required. The long-term cost of remediation, if the initial instruction is not adequate, is likely to be much higher. The state should look for innovative and cost-effective ways to improve language instruction by making use of community and peer resources in addition to formal certified English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

B. Information and Accountability

Legislators should take steps in 1997 to develop better information about how Minnesota's students and school districts are doing. A high-quality student assessment and information system is the

essential first step to improving the accountability of the education system.

Parents want credible information about how their children are doing, and to help them evaluate their schools. Teachers need assessments for the purpose of identifying academic skill or knowledge deficits and arranging for remediation. Administrators and policy makers need good information about how well the system is currently doing in order to improve quality and productivity in the future.

And the public rightly expects accountability. The Legislature and public must be able to answer the question: What are the results the state is getting for its roughly \$5.5 billion annual education appropriation?

We recommend an information and accountability system with the following components:

- i. **The state should implement a statewide, uniform system for assessing students' core knowledge and skills, and for evaluating the performance of schools and districts.**

This should be accomplished through a combination of uniform standardized tests and through the performance-based assessments from the Profile of Learning. The state's testing system should include several features:

- Assessment should be used to improve the teaching and learning process for individual students. Tests should be **both standards-referenced (are students learning what we want them to learn?) and norm-referenced (how does the student's performance compare with her peers'?)**. To avoid excess cost and test overload, the state should use existing assessment tools whenever possible and design tests to meet multiple purposes.
- In order for the education system to use assessment to improve its own performance, it is important for the assessment system to distinguish between the assets and deficits the child brings with her to school and the **"value added"** by the teacher and school.
- The state should set **consistent policies regarding who is tested and how results are reported**. The fact that each school district has some students with special learning needs who might require different tests (or no tests) should

not be a reason to avoid assessment. Appropriate procedures must also be developed to assure test security.

We reviewed briefly the “Minnesota Educational Accountability Reporting System,” prepared by the University of Minnesota’s College of Education. It was beyond the scope of our project and our expertise in student assessment to endorse any particular assessment system. The College of Education proposal appears to have many of the desirable features outlined above, and we encourage state policy makers to consider it carefully.

- ii. **The state should compile, monitor and report information about other measures of student achievement and school performance.** The results of standardized tests should never be used as the sole measure of student, school or district performance. We are especially concerned that test scores not be reported or taken out of context, because they do not reflect the important influence of such factors as poverty or language barriers on student achievement. Other measures of student and school performance might include:

- attendance;
- persistence to graduation and drop-out rates;
- participation and leadership in school activities;
- post-secondary education enrollment or job placement;
- each school’s year-to-year progress in improving the achievement of students in poverty and students of color;
- volunteer service;
- disciplinary incidents;
- parent involvement; and
- satisfaction of “customers”: parents, students, employers, post-secondary education institutions.

- iii. **The state should treat, publicize and enforce the Desegregation and Diversity Rules as two parts of a single state policy to ensure equal education opportunity for all.**

Minnesota’s Constitution requires the state to provide a “general and uniform system of public schools,” and Minnesota law codifies the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling that racial segregation and other race-based discrimination in public schools denies minority students the “equal protection” of the laws.

The basic policy documents addressing the state’s commitment to equal education opportunity are the Desegregation and

Diversity Rules of the State Board of Education. The former lays out requirements to ensure that the state does not segregate students by race in its public schools. The second requires that curriculum and instruction reflect the diversity of the state population.

The State Board of Education is in the process of reviewing and revising both rules. Revision is needed. The diversity goals for curriculum and instruction have not been realized. The state's desegregation efforts may satisfy the courts, but many metro-area schools continue to be segregated by race.

The Legislature and Board of Education should make clear that compliance with the Desegregation Rule alone does not satisfy the state's interest in equal opportunity. The poor track record of Minnesota schools with students of color shows that desegregation—focused as it has been on achieving a particular racial balance in enrollment—has been too narrowly defined to ensure equal opportunity.

- iv. **To increase schools' accountability for equal education opportunity, the state should compile a "Multicultural Readiness Report Card" with information about each school's readiness to serve students of color.**

This should include the following indicators for each school and district:

- the racial/ethnic composition of the faculty, administration and other school staff, compared with the composition of the student/parent body;
- the presence or absence of school policies against discrimination, bias and harassment, as well as procedures for monitoring, reporting and ending violations by students or staff;
- the degree to which parents of color are represented in active and significant ways in school affairs;
- the faculty and staff's demonstrated understanding of the cultures, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds of the students and families in their schools;
- the degree to which curriculum and instructional materials reflect the history and diversity of cultures in Minnesota.

- v. **The state should require each school to issue a report annually to the parents of that school, containing information about its students' achievement (described in i and ii, above) and the school's own performance on the Multicultural Readiness Report Card.**

The state should require each district to issue a summary report on these measures to district taxpayers via the Truth-in-Taxation process. (We also would prefer that the Truth-in-Taxation process be improved to ensure that all *renters* receive Truth-in-Taxation statements, as property *owners* now do.)

- vi. **The state must move toward linking appropriations with expectations for performance and improvement.**

We acknowledge that this is more easily said than done. There are many thorny questions to resolve. For example, unless the assessment system can distinguish the relative contributions of school, family and the students themselves to student achievement, withholding appropriations for unsatisfactory "performance" might penalize decent schools that happen to have more poor or disabled students. And we are sympathetic to the school districts' desire for enough year-to-year predictability in funding to allow appropriate planning of program and operations.

Nevertheless, we think that designing an appropriate performance-based funding system, while difficult, is not impossible.

The first step is to get reliable, comparable information about student and system performance, as we recommend above. The Legislature can increase the accountability of the education system, in the short term, in four ways:

- When people get information, public pressure for improvement is likely to increase.
- The opportunity for parents to convert their school to site-funded status, or to a charter school (which we recommend below), would give parents more leverage to insist on improvement in their children's schools.
- Expanding public school choice—through Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, open enrollment, and more charter schools—will give students and parents more alternatives.
- Private schools will remain an option for some.

When appropriate assessment and information systems are in place, the Legislature should look at more direct ways to build in consequences for district and school performance. It should then develop an education funding system designed to reward schools and districts that are successful in meeting high standards and improving student achievement.

C. Innovation

Every enterprise should invest some of its own resources in improvement and innovation—as a core activity, not something to be added only when “extra” money is available. The Legislature should routinely devote a portion of the core education appropriation to innovation.

This biennium, the Legislature has an additional opportunity for innovation, in the form of a projected budget surplus. We acknowledge that the Legislature is likely to use a portion of the surplus to remove the caps on the education formula, “restoring” \$337 million in base education aid. We also acknowledge that Legislators, educators and the public apparently want part of the budget surplus to be devoted to education.

We consider the projected surplus an unexpected windfall and urge that Legislators spend any funds from the surplus on specific, time-limited innovations to improve student achievement. Minnesota’s long-term fiscal troubles are not over, so the Legislature would be unwise to build in long-term spending commitments that future taxpayers and legislatures might not be able to keep.

We recommend the following commitments to innovation:

- i. **The Legislature should make an appropriation to provide Achievement Grants to schools and districts that negotiate measurable goals for improving student achievement, particularly on the top priority concerns:**
 - improving reading success among students in grades K-3;
 - improving pre-school readiness among children at risk;
 - improving the achievement of students of color and students in poverty; and
 - improving the achievement of students whose native language is not English.

Achievement Grants would be one-time grants for specific improvement strategies. Each participating school or district should be required to provide some matching funds. The state should provide the grant to the school or district at the beginning of the project, and should arrange and pay for an impartial evaluation of the results.

We encourage the Legislature to think carefully about the process by which Achievement Grants are distributed. We acknowledge the reality that choices must inevitably be made when resources are limited, and that public expenditures of the magnitude we suggest require appropriate accountability mechanisms.

We nevertheless prefer that the grantseeking and selection process not be overly cumbersome or circumscribed by state-level decisionmakers. Achievement Grants ideally should be provided to as many schools as wish to set improvement goals. We prefer that the Legislature or Department of Children avoid evaluating the merits of the schools' improvement strategies in advance as a way to choose which schools receive the Grants. Rather, we prefer that schools be asked to *specify measurable improvement goals*, given wide latitude in deciding how to use the Achievement Grant funds, and required to document their improvement strategies and the costs of each. The Achievement Grant process should support its purpose, which is to encourage educators to apply their own judgments about what would improve student learning. (The Legislature might form an independent review panel, composed of state policy makers, educators and community representatives, to select recipients of the Achievement Grants.)

Because the purpose of Achievement Grants is to stimulate innovation and risk-taking, the state must recognize that not all of the efforts will succeed. Nevertheless, with valid assessment information both the "successes" and "failures" can provide invaluable lessons for future school improvement. The Department of Children should facilitate the dissemination of information about what worked and what didn't. The state should also reward successful innovations with small "bonus" awards and other public recognition.

- ii. **The Legislature should establish an experimental program to evaluate whether providing funding directly to schools, rather than districts, leads to improved student achievement and greater productivity in the education system.**

In a school-based funding and management (SBFM) scheme, 90 percent of per-pupil funding would follow each student to the school, and 10 percent would remain with the district for central administration. Schools would be given wide latitude in their budget decisions, and would be free to purchase goods and services from the district or from outside vendors.

School districts in Edmonton (Alberta), Victoria (Australia), England and Wales, which have delegated substantial budget authority to school sites, have found that decentralization can free teachers and principals to reallocate resources in ways that improve school operations and instruction.

School-based funding is far from proven as a change strategy, however. Very few decentralization initiatives have had "improved student achievement" as their central objective, nor have they measured the effects on students directly. Systematic evaluation of results has been sadly lacking.

We are persuaded nevertheless that school-based funding makes sense as a strategy for "getting much higher performance out of the system by tapping the knowledge and intelligence of those who provide the service—teachers" (Allen Odden, testimony to the Minnesota Senate Education Committee, January 25, 1996). Decentralization gives schools the responsibility *and the authority* to restructure instructional strategies, budget and staffing to improve student achievement.

The Minnesota Legislature should encourage districts and individual schools to become pilot sites for school-based funding and management, and make improved student achievement the central purpose of the experiments. The state should make Achievement Grants available to cover transition costs for schools or districts that convert to school-based funding, and should evaluate carefully the effect on student achievement.

The state should permit parents to initiate conversion of a school to SBFM. The Legislature should enact a provision that if 50 percent of all site parents vote in favor of converting their school to SBFM, the district may not prevent that conversion from taking place.

- iii. **The Department of Children, Families and Learning should conduct its own initiative to expand the supply of certified teachers of color. The goal of the program should be to**

determine whether increasing the number of teachers of color has a positive effect on the achievement of students of color.

The state should provide an Achievement Grant to the Department of Children for this purpose. The appropriation should underwrite full tuition and fees for persons of color who are enrolled in academic and alternative-track programs to earn bachelor's degrees and teaching certificates within six years. The appropriation should also underwrite part-time employment of these teachers-to-be as teacher aides in Minnesota schools. Participating student/teacher aides should be expected to fulfill a service commitment to Minnesota schools upon graduation.

Communities of color have frequently said that recruiting, hiring and retaining teachers of color is essential to improving the achievement of students of color.

Teachers are the schools' most important resource to students. Some researchers have said that the bond between teacher and student is at least as important as—perhaps more important than—techniques of curriculum and instruction.

Alienation between home and school might “[make] it difficult to nurture a bond between child and teacher that can support development and learning” (James P. Comer, “Educating Poor Minority Children,” *Scientific American*, November 1988). The imbalance between a mostly white, female teaching force and a largely-minority student body may worsen the difficulty (“Improving Student Performance in the Inner City,” *Policy and Research Report*, The Urban Institute, Spring 1996).

The jury is still out about how much impact increased racial diversity of the teaching staff would have on student achievement, apart from other desirable benefits that might result. The need for improved achievement of students of color is great, Minnesota's teaching force is still overwhelmingly white, and communities of color say the strategy is needed. The state should take the initiative to add teacher aides of color and evaluate the impact on children's achievement.

iv. The Legislature should expand and strengthen charter schools by:

- removing the limit on the number of charter schools that can be formed;

- allowing proposed schools to apply directly to the state for a charter; and
- ensuring that all per-pupil aid (including referendum levy funds), follow each student to the charter school.

Minnesota has received accolades from across the U.S. for its pioneering charter school law. Since that law was passed in 1991, a number of charter schools have been formed that are providing excellent educational opportunities for students and parents.

But the charter schools momentum appears to have stalled in Minnesota. While state law permits up to 40 charter schools, half of those slots remain empty. Meanwhile, other states have passed stronger charter school laws, and are establishing private and public support systems to nurture their charter schools.

Charter schools press the education system to improve by giving parents and students other public-school choices, and encourage teachers and parents to innovate. The Legislature should take steps to strengthen the charter schools law as a means of leveraging improvements in the education system as a whole. (As the charter schools movement expands, the state must also ensure that appropriate accountability is maintained.)

The state also should permit parents of district-based public schools to convert their schools to charter status: *If the state's data on student achievement (test scores and other indicators, such as attendance and dropout rates) show low achievement, and 75 percent of all site parents vote in favor of converting the school to a charter school, the state and district may not prevent that conversion. The school would become a "new" entity outside the authority of the school district. The school would be chartered by the State Board of Education, and the school's board would be accountable to the State Board for the performance of the school.*

- v. **The Legislature should preserve and strengthen Minnesota's other choice programs—Post-Secondary Enrollment Options and open enrollment.**

The Legislature should require that all per-pupil aid (including referendum levy funds), follow each student to the district (and preferably the school) of enrollment. The Legislature should also remove barriers that prevent these options from

being used more fully. For example, the Legislature should prevent districts from closing their doors to open enrollment unless the district is full.

V. A FEW CAUTIONS

- A. **Don't appropriate new money specifically for the purpose of lengthening the school day or year, or for smaller class sizes, as across-the-board state policies.**

There is convincing evidence that small classes are beneficial for some children, in some subjects, at some times. Some effective early reading programs, for example, involve small classes, grouped by ability, in first and second grades. There are other intriguing findings that year-round schooling can improve achievement for some students. Such strategies are worth exploring.

But research has repeatedly shown that *across-the-board* reductions in class sizes yield disappointing improvements. And the fact that Korean and Japanese students, who consistently outperform American students, spend considerably fewer hours and days in class suggests, as Albert Shanker noted, that "the issue, then, is not merely how much time kids spend in class, it's what they are doing while they're there."

Increased instructional intensity would be very expensive if mandated as across-the-board state policies, assuming that teachers, administrators and other staff would require additional compensation for additional work time. Districts already can choose to adjust their school-year schedules and class sizes; there is no need to change state policy to permit such changes. Districts and schools are best qualified to decide how the potential benefits of greater instructional intensity stack up against the cost—and against the benefits of other steps, such as reducing absenteeism or increasing parent involvement.

- B. **Reject the Administration's proposal to provide expanded tax deductions and tax credits to families for educational purposes.**

The tax proposal would add a very large long-term commitment into the tax code which, because it would not be subject to the same fiscal scrutiny as a direct spending program, would reduce the Legislature's ability to confront its future budget pressures. Tax expenditures, by directing relatively more benefits to higher-income taxpayers, would devote scarce public resources to additional services for students who are already educationally advantaged, while failing to adequately address the financial barriers faced by the

lowest-income parents and students. And there would be no practical way for the state to hold parents or vendors accountable for the results achieved (defined in terms of student learning) for the additional \$150 million in education spending.

C. Be wary of advice to spend our way to improvement by simply increasing the per-pupil aid amount beyond its 1997 level.

Again, we acknowledge that the spending caps will be lifted and the per-pupil aid and weighting will be restored to their 1997 levels. Some education leaders, such as the Minnesota School Boards Association, have urged the Legislature to increase the formula aid amount still further.

K-12 education spending per pupil has increased faster than inflation for many years. It's true that the formula allowance per pupil has shrunk in real terms in the last couple of years. But there has been a substantial increase in state general fund spending on several items—special education, class size reduction, and technology, for example—that are not included in the formula allowance (Tom Melcher, Department of CFL, conversation with staff). Minnesota's real *total* education spending—including capital spending and debt service—from all state and local sources increased from \$5,522 per ADM (average daily membership) in 1984 to \$6,600 in 1995, an increase of 20 percent *after accounting for inflation* (Mark Larson, Minnesota Planning, testimony to committee).

Empirical research shows, surprisingly, that *overall* spending on education is only weakly related to student achievement. Money does matter, of course, when directed to "inputs" that have a big effect on learning. A great deal of education spending is directed to activities that have little impact on achievement for most students, however (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1995). In Minnesota, for example, one of the fastest-growing portions of the education budget is employee health benefits expense, which grew 54 percent per student between 1981 and 1993 after accounting for inflation (Minnesota Planning).

Were resources unlimited—or were the need for improvement less acute—we might urge the Legislature to increase spending across-the-board and be content that some of that spending might yield some improvement. The Legislature should be cautious about granting automatic, no-strings-attached spending increases.

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Improve Student Achievement

1. Assure that Minnesota's Graduation Standards are set high and students and schools held accountable for meeting the high standards.
2. Devote a portion of increases in education spending to increased state support for Head Start and other successful pre-school programs.
3. Extend the state's mandatory attendance law, which currently applies to children ages 7 through 16, to include children ages 5 and 6.
4. Require all students to attain third-grade reading and math levels by the end of third grade. To provide remediation for students who do not meet these standards, set aside funds from the per-pupil state aid allotment for those students.
5. Improve the achievement of students in poverty and students of color, and reduce achievement gaps between white students and students of color.
6. Establish an objective that each Limited English Proficiency (LEP) student should be able to fully participate in all regular English-only courses within a specified brief period, ideally one year.

Information and Accountability

7. Implement a statewide, uniform system for assessing students' core knowledge and skills, and for evaluating the performance of schools and districts.
8. Compile, monitor and report other measures of student achievement and school performance, such as attendance, persistence to graduation, post-secondary education enrollment, job placement, and parent involvement. Do not use test scores as the sole measure of student or school performance.
9. Treat, publicize and enforce the Desegregation and Diversity Rules as two parts of a single state policy to ensure equal education opportunity for all.
10. Compile a "Multicultural Readiness Report Card" with information about each school's readiness to serve students of color.

11. Require each school to issue a report annually to its parents, containing information about its students' achievement and the school's performance on the Multicultural Readiness Report Card.
12. Move toward linking state education appropriations with expectations for school and district performance improvement.

Innovation

13. Provide, from state appropriations, Achievement Grants to schools and districts that negotiate measurable goals for improving student achievement on top-priority concerns: Reading success in grades K-3; pre-school readiness among children at risk; and achievement of students of color, students in poverty, and students whose native language is not English.
14. Establish an experimental program to evaluate whether providing education aid directly to schools, rather than districts, leads to improved student achievement and greater productivity in the education system.
15. Conduct a state-level initiative to expand the supply of certified teachers of color, and evaluate whether increasing the number of teachers of color has a positive effect on the achievement of students of color.
16. Expand and strengthen charter schools by removing the limit on the number of charter schools; allowing proposed schools to apply directly to the state for a charter; and ensuring that all per-pupil aid (including referendum levy funds) follow each student to the charter school. Permit parents of district-based public schools to convert their schools to charter status.
17. Preserve and strengthen Minnesota's other choice programs: Post-Secondary Enrollment Options and open enrollment.

A FEW CAUTIONS

18. Don't appropriate new money specifically for the purpose of lengthening the school day or year, or for smaller class sizes, as across-the-board state policies.
19. Reject the Administration's proposal to provide expanded tax deductions and tax credits to families for educational purposes.
20. Be wary of advice to spend our way to improvement by simply increasing the per-pupil aid amount beyond its 1997 level.

APPENDIX B: THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

CHARGE TO THE COMMITTEE

Improving School Performance: Suggested Reforms for 1997

The study committee should answer the question: What menu of K-12 education reforms should be on the agenda of the 1997 Legislature as it seeks to improve school performance in the face of tight resources?

The board expects that the committee, in developing its proposal, will briefly review the major solutions that have typically been offered to achieve better student performance, examining the empirical evidence and the ideological underpinnings of each. The strategies that are often recommended as the answer to improved educational productivity include:

- reducing class size;
- adopting advanced technologies in schools and classrooms;
- requiring stricter accountability for academic achievement, such as by implementing the state's graduation rule;
- developing funding mechanisms that are based on school performance;
- decentralizing the management of schools through site-based management and other reforms; and
- increasing market competition through charter schools and other choice programs.

The committee should also briefly review the fiscal history and budget projections for K-12 education. Based on these reviews, the committee should form conclusions about which strategy or combination of strategies is most desirable and likely to result in improved student achievement in Minnesota.

Finally, the committee should recommend an agenda of four to five specific action steps that the 1997 Legislature should take to implement the chosen strategy.

(This charge was approved by the Board of Directors on June 19, 1996.)

COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

The committee was co-chaired by Carl (Buzz) Cummins III and Pamela Neary. Committee members Howard Guthmann, Debra Leigh, Yvonne Moore and Nancy Smith also assisted with leadership of subcommittees. A total of 53 committee members took an active part in the work of the committee. In addition to the co-chairs, they were:

Keith Baker	Phyllis Jones	Patricia Saari
Gay Bakken	James Kemble	Jon Schroeder
Robert Bonine	William King	Peter Seed
Delroy Calhoun	Jim Koppel	Art Serotoff
Robert Cardinal	Raeder Larson	Alan Silver
Ruth Fingerson	Debra Leigh	Elin Skinner
Michael Gair	Malcolm McLean	Nancy Smith
Roy Garza	Yvonne Moore	William Smith
James Gilbert	Anthony Morley	Aysha Somasundram
Sally Graven	Donald Newell	Mark Spurr
Howard Guthmann	Patrick O'Leary	Evan Stanley
Ilean Her	Craig Olson	Russ Stanton
Jan Hively	Terence Quigley	Dale Swanson
Michael Hohmann	Janet Sue Raugust	Joanna Vail
Linc Hudson	Don Renquist	Pamela Wanga
Ed Hunter	Jack Rossmann	Thomas Watson
Dave Hutcheson	Phil Ruggiero	Eleanor Weber*
		*deceased

Committee member Gary Joselyn also participated in the deliberations of the committee. However, he disagreed with several of the major recommendations and objected to much of the committee process. Committee members Alan Silver and Dale Swanson dissented from the committee's opinion on certain recommendations. Minority reports by Joselyn, Silver and Swanson are attached as appendixes.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS AND RESOURCE TESTIMONY

The committee met for the first time on September 9, 1996, and concluded its deliberations on January 15, 1997. The Citizens League Board of Directors approved the final report of the committee on January 29, 1997.

During its 11 full group meetings, the committee studied a variety of printed materials and heard from the following resource speakers:

Beth Aune, coordinator of external consumers in the Office of Graduation Standards, Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning.

Jennifer Bloom, director, Minnesota Center for Community Legal Education.

Milo Cutter, teacher, City Academy charter school.

Dan Loritz, vice president of University relations, Hamline University, and former assistant commissioner and director of governmental relations, Minnesota Department of Education.

Vicky Davis, parent, Summit-University Education Consortium.

Claudia Dengler, director of services to children and families, The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Vernae Hasbargen, Minnesota Rural Education Association.

Susan Heegaard, director of education policy, Office of the Governor.

Jim Hilbert, legal fellow and co-director of programs for the Institute on Race and Poverty, University of Minnesota.

Tom Kingston, president and CEO, The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Ted Kolderie, director, Center for Policy Studies.

Mark Larson, strategic planning specialist, Minnesota Office of Strategic and Long-Range Planning.

Don Lifto, superintendent, Northeast Metro District 916, and member, Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA).

Tom Melcher, manager of the finance division of the Office of Management Services, Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning.

Hon. Gene Merriam, member of the Minnesota Senate (on 9/9/96) representing District 49 (Anoka and Coon Rapids).

Van Mueller, professor of education policy and administration, University of Minnesota.

Joe Nathan, senior fellow, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, and director, Center for School Change.

Ruth Anne Olson, education consultant in program design and evaluation.

Randy Peterson, Minnesota Court of Appeals, and former member, Minnesota Senate (Education Committee).

Matthew Ramadan, executive director, Northside Residents Redevelopment Council.

August Rivera, principal, Wenonah Elementary School, Minneapolis.

Fr. Richard Schuler, pastor, St. Agnes Church and School.

Laura Waterman Wittstock, executive director, MIGIZI Communications.

Robert Ziegler, principal, New Hope Elementary School, and president, Minnesota Elementary School Principals Association.

SCHOOL VISITS

Several members of the committee visited local schools to observe personally the challenges facing today's educators and students. The Citizens League thanks the following area schools for welcoming committee members into their communities:

Belle Plaine Elementary, Junior High and Senior High Schools
Creek Valley Elementary School (Edina)
East Consolidated Elementary School (St. Paul)
Edison High School (Minneapolis)
EXPO Magnet School (St. Paul)
Forest Lake Elementary School
Johnson High School (St. Paul)
Montrose Elementary School
Mounds Park Academy, Maplewood
Murray Junior High School (St. Paul)
St. Anthony Park Elementary School (St. Paul)

The League shared the work of the committee publicly and invited comment throughout the process. In addition to the 59 members who served officially on the committee, 43 people were correspondent members. These correspondents received meeting notices and minutes, and were invited to attend meetings as observers.

STAFFING

This report was prepared by Janet Dudrow. Lyle Wray provided staff assistance. Gayle Ruther and Trudy Koroschetz provided administrative support.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Citizens League thanks the Dakota County Library-Wentworth Branch, The St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, and Minnesota Technology, Inc. for providing meeting space for this project.

APPENDIX C: MINORITY REPORTS

MINORITY REPORT

FROM: Alan I. Silver
TO: Board of Directors, Citizens League
DATE: January 29, 1997
RE: *Minority Report to the Report of the K-12 Study Committee*

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### INTRODUCTION

The report of the K-12 Study Committee contains many excellent recommendations. I strongly support the focus on providing incentives to improve student achievement, with particular emphasis on preschool readiness in K-3 reading and math, and the focus on achievement of students of color and students in poverty. I also agree with the Committee's recommendation that assessment of school performance be based upon multiple factors, rather than just test scores, including attendance, graduation and dropout rates. I also applaud the discussion of expanded opportunities for innovation, including charter schools, achievement grants and site-based funding. The Committee's emphasis on multicultural readiness and expanding the supply of certified teachers of color is particularly welcome, as is the rejection of Governor Carlson's proposal to provide expanded tax deductions and tax credits.

Since I agree with so many of the report's recommendations, why do I find it necessary to submit this minority report? Despite the many positive recommendations, I believe strongly that public education in Minnesota will not improve if the amount of money devoted to schools continues to lag behind the rate of inflation, and school districts are forced to cut programs to fund basic operations. The solution is not merely

to spend more money, however, I believe the Committee's report ignores the need for consistency in educational funding. In addition, I also believe that a note of caution is necessary in regard to the portions of the report dealing with accountability and incentives. Although I support the move toward greater educational accountability, I do not believe that the Committee has carefully considered all of the implications of tying funding to student performance, particularly when measured by standardized test results.

### Educational Funding

I urge the Citizens League to delete the language at the bottom of page 5 describing the temptation to "spend more" and the final section on pages 21 and 22 dealing with increases in the per-pupil aid amount beyond 1997 levels. The Committee's report starts from a faulty premise when it states on page 22 that K-12 education spending per pupil has increased faster than the rate of inflation. The statistic that total educational spending has increased from \$5522 (average daily membership) in 1984 to \$6600 in 1995 was, according to the Committee minutes of September 16, 1996, reported to the Committee by Mark Larson, Strategic Planning Specialist with the Minnesota Office of Strategic and Long Range Planning. The Committee's report ignores the other information provided by Mr. Larson during the same meeting. According to the September 16 minutes, Mr. Larson also made the following points:

- \*A number of other states whose spending on education had been very low have increased their spending recently. As a result of their increases, Minnesota's education spending has slipped relative to the national average even though Minnesota's actual spending has increased. In 1960, Minnesota's spending was 13.3 percent above the national average; by 1993, Minnesota's spending was 0.7 below the national average.

....

- \*Spending by program: Between FY 1990 and FY 1995, real per-student spending (from all sources) on regular instruction decreased by 4.2 percent. Per-student spending on exceptional instruction has increased 18.5 percent. Per-student spending on debt has increased 27.5 percent, a

reflection of the substantial investment in capital facilities that has occurred in recent years.

The Committee's report focuses on total educational spending from 1984 to date. The choice of this time frame skews the result. In the 1980's the legislature regularly increased the basic general education formula, which provides funding to school districts on a per-pupil basis. Since 1991, however, the level of funding provided by the state for each student has been virtually frozen. The following funding changes have occurred over the past six years:

| Per-student revenue allowance |                       | Net Allowance | Percent Increase |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1991-1992                     | \$3,050               |               | - 0 -            |
| 1992-1993                     | \$3,050               |               | - 0 -            |
| 1993-1994                     | \$3,050               |               | - 0 -            |
| 1994-1995                     | \$3,150 <sup>1/</sup> | \$3,050       | 0.5%             |
| 1995-1996                     | \$3,205               | \$3,105       | 1.2%             |
| 1996-1997                     | \$3,505 <sup>2/</sup> | \$3,105       | - 0 -            |
| 1997-1998                     | \$3,430 <sup>3/</sup> | \$3,030       |                  |

From 1991 to 1997 the total increase in basic education funding for most districts was 1.7% while inflation grew 17%.

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<sup>1/</sup>The allowance was increased by \$100 but offset dollar for dollar for districts which had excess operating referendum levies over \$100, which is the majority of the districts in the state. Thus, for most districts, the net increase was zero.

<sup>2/</sup>The \$300 increase was not a real increase, but rather elimination of transportation and training/experience categorical revenues, and roll into the basic formula allowance. No actual increase in formula.

<sup>3/</sup>Under current law the allowance is scheduled to be reduced by \$75 per pupil unit for the 1997-98 school year. In addition, the secondary weighting formula is scheduled to be decreased. The net impact over 2 years will be about \$400 per pupil unit statewide.

The statistics on total educational spending also skew the result because they include expenditures for capital facilities , special education, and class size reductions. Much of the increase in capital spending was caused by the substantial movement of the Twin City metropolitan area population from inner city and first-ring suburbs to outlying suburbs, requiring expenditures for new school buildings. Such expenditures have not provided additional operating dollars to Minnesota schools, or improved student achievement. Similarly, money targeted at reducing class sizes may have had a positive impact upon learning for kindergarten and first grade students, however, it did not provide school districts with necessary money to fund other programs or pay general operating expenses. The result of the near freeze in the basic education allowance since 1991 has been that most school districts in the state have had to make significant cuts in programs.

The report correctly points out that increases in funding do not always result in greater student achievement. One of the reasons is that increased funding sometimes goes to pay salary increases to teachers and other staff. It is almost certain, however, that decreases in funding, and failure to keep funding in line with inflation, do impact achievement because salaries are not decreased. Rather, decreases in funding result in either reductions in programs or layoffs of teachers, resulting in larger class sizes. This is what has occurred throughout the state since 1991.

The single greatest benefit the legislature could provide for public education in Minnesota would be consistency, both in policy and in funding. Over the last seven years the legislature has lacked a consistent educational focus. In one session the legislature mandated an increase in the number of days in the school year, and then in the next session it eliminated all requirements with respect to the length of the year; the legislature allocated funds for lower class sizes in the primary grades, but then froze other funding so that the only way school districts could pay for programs was to offset the lower primary class sizes with higher sizes in the intermediate and secondary grades. The Committee is correct when it advocates that the legislature eliminate most mandates and

provide a consistent approach to education in the state. The Committee, however, misses the mark when it does not also recognize that there is as compelling a need for consistency in funding.

If the Citizens League is truly serious about improving public education in this state, it should suggest that the legislature be consistent in funding education up to at least the level of inflation. At a time when the state has a substantial budget surplus, there is no reason why the various programs being recommended by the Committee (most of which I strongly support) need to be funded at the expense of the basic education formula allowance.

### Accountability Concerns

Next, a note of caution. The report is full of statements about the need for incentives and tying of funding to student achievement. On page 6 the report says that the central problem in American public education is the lack of financial incentives and other recognition focused on student achievement, and on page 15 there is a recommendation to move toward linking appropriations with expectations for performance and improvement. The report correctly identifies the risk that withholding appropriations for unsatisfactory performance might penalize decent schools that happen to have more poor or disabled students. I commend the Committee for recognizing this risk, however, I believe that because educational “accountability” has become the buzz word in this state, it is important to underscore the potential hazards of tying funding to performance. If the legislature moves in this direction, it should do so with great caution.

First, the goal of accountability can be achieved, and has already been achieved, in ways other than directly penalizing schools who do not meet someone’s idea of minimum performance. There is a much greater level of accountability in the education system than is generally acknowledged or is recognized by the report. Much of the accountability in the system is attributable to prior initiatives which the Citizens League has championed. These include open enrollment, charter schools, the state graduation rule (including statewide testing of eighth graders), and post-secondary options. These

initiatives, along with the statewide testing and assessment the Committee now proposes, have created a far greater competitive climate for school districts than existed five to ten years ago, particularly among districts in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. There is also competition from private schools, and within Minneapolis and St. Paul there is significant inter-district competition created by both cities' systems of magnet schools. Parents now have choices, and schools know that they are being judged by parents on the basis of test scores and student achievement.

The competition and accountability that open enrollment, the graduation rule and the other initiatives described above have added to education in Minnesota have been positive, and I support added elements of accountability, including the Committee's recommendations for achievement grants to schools and districts that negotiate measurable goals for improving student achievement, and experiments in site-based funding; however, the Committee's endorsement of the movement toward a performance-based funding system is vague and undefined, and, as the Committee report acknowledges, if not properly implemented, could result in penalizing those districts where there is a heavy concentration of students in poverty. If accountability means tying funding to test scores, it will almost certainly result in lower funding where it is most needed—in schools with the highest concentrations of poverty and students of color. Districts and schools which have a disproportionate share of students in poverty need added funding (such as elimination of restrictions on compensatory education revenue which is based on a district's percentage of students receiving AFDC), not "punishment" for failing to achieve the test scores of more affluent districts. If funding is instead tied to "improvement," this penalizes schools that have improved in the years before the new accountability system is implemented.

Tying funding to test results ultimately punishes students, not teachers, because tenure law protects most teachers from the very consequences the Committee is hoping to implement. The only exception is young, untenured teachers, who are often enthusiastic



and innovative, but the first to lose their jobs when decreased funding results in layoffs. The real losers will not be school personnel, but rather the children.

The Citizens League has traditionally championed greater competition, and letting the marketplace drive improvement. I applaud any proposals which give parents and community members more information and the opportunity to influence schools. That is a form of accountability which is proving successful and which creates greater educational responsiveness. I support a definition of accountability which enhances competition and which provides rewards for achievement. I feel, however, that the Committee's recommendation could be misapplied, and result in a system of accountability which instead penalizes schools where students score poorly on tests. Any program of assessment and accountability needs to be approached cautiously, be carefully administered, and applied in a manner which truly measures student achievement and the "value added" by each school.


AIS

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TO: Board of Directors, Citizens League

FROM: Dale G. Swanson 

SUBJECT: Minority Report Respecting Report of the K-12 Study Committee

DATE: January 28, 1997

While there remain a number of items in this report with which I might take small exception, I do believe generally that it not only fairly represents the collisions of yin and yang which frequently and welcomely attended our meetings, but also maintains contact with reality. I am nevertheless moved to dissent upon the following several items:

1. Recommendation C. Innovation ii. in its final paragraph recommends enactment of authority for 50% of the parents with students in a single building to "convert" that building to "school-based funding and management", regardless of the views or position of the school district and probably over 99% of the eligible voters and property tax payers of the school district. This "conversion" is earlier described as providing that "90 percent of per-pupil funding would follow each student to the school, and 10 percent would remain with the district for central administration". My primary objection to this and the recommendation which follows is the evident replacement of the current version of representative democracy that applies to the delivery of education with an oligarchy of parents. While under a heading which refers to improving student achievement and "productivity", there is no indication how any spending decisions would be made at the site after conversion nor any suggestion of what internal controls and other accountability measures would be required of such experiments. It is at least as likely that conversion might be sought to avoid certain kinds of expenses such as those of providing a free and appropriate education to significantly disabled pupils than to truly be innovative. Upon the altar of flexibility, this offering represents in the aggregate an unwarranted reduction.

2. Recommendation C. Innovation iv. refers to expanding and strengthening charter schools. Ironically again, the last paragraph

proposes that 75% of the parents with pupils in a building may “convert” the school to a charter school if there is some “state data” showing low achievement. As reflected by the somewhat higher approval rate, the result is that parents then acquire “a “new” entity outside the authority of the school district”. Referring again to the earlier discussion under this item, it appears that this “conversion” entitles the new entity to all per-pupil aid, including referendum levy funds. The new entity would be unbridled by most state laws, all school district policies and apparently be governed by some of those parents who affected the conversion. As a bachelor, I am once again offended by this proposed termination of any influence I might bring to bear upon such a school in my district. Unless we assume that those 75% of site parents will correspondingly agree to the recertification of levies so that only the real estate of site parents is taxed for the operation of that school, it seems we would have classic taxation without representation. There is no better evidence of how ambiguous terms like “low achievement” can be than the debates which occurred in our Committee over whether current data on Minnesota students reflected low, medium or high achievement. Since those who tend toward the “change for the sake of change” school of thought view present data as reflecting low achievement, this may be a criterion which fails to distinguish anything. While there is something stimulating about the prospect of “converting” a school much like “taking the hill or the beach”, I am concerned that truly educational objectives may be less common than others such as saving athletic teams or implementing a species of censorship. If it is really such a good idea to provide a handful of parents with virtual rights of eminent domain over buildings and facilities and the opportunity to form their own governance and accountability systems, then I believe that site customers should be given the same right to convert their police and fire stations and post offices. Since ownership and contributions to operating revenue apparently are not relevant, perhaps a specified minority of the consumers of public utilities or radio and television station broadcasts ought to be able to “convert” them. Frivolity aside, charter status today means not only escape from state and local standards, but a virtual exemption from any accountability. Before any expansion of this status occurs, I believe we are entitled to know what charter schools have done with the authority previously granted and what waivers and exemptions in particular were significant to their journey.

3. My final disagreement is over the omission of any reference to expectations, outcomes or accountability as they relate to parents. In

addition to the joys and mysteries inherent in parenthood, society provides income tax deductions, child support from former spouses, a large variety of programs and facilities with significant contributions from nonparents and in this report the keys to and governance of local schools. Given these very significant expenditures on their behalf, it seems to me that some kind of expectations in return, perhaps even some form of report card, would not be presumptuous.

Participation on this Committee has reminded me of the frequent times I spent in class learning far more from my fellow students than at times offered by the teacher and prepared materials. For that, I am grateful and enriched.

## MINORITY REPORT

Gary Joselyn

January 21, 1997

FROM: Gary Joselyn

TO: Board of Directors, Citizens League

RE: Minority Report to the Report of the K-12 Study Committee

I strongly object to the recommendation in the report which asks for "combination of uniform standardized tests," and ask that the Board eliminate this section from the report. The charge to the committee asked it to suggest policies which would, "improve student achievement." Yet, state-mandated standardized testing actually decreases overall student achievement. (We know this from studies of two decades of state-mandated standardized testing in other states.) Therefore this policy should be opposed rather than supported by the Citizens League, however popular it may be in today's political climate in Minnesota. Following is a brief discussion in support of my contention.



A recurring assumption in American education today is that our inability to articulate the complex human behaviors called learning can be easily put aside if we merely convert our complexities to numbers - two digits at least, four decimal points preferred. What we have not been able to accomplish by reason will somehow materialize through authority.

*. . . Roger Giroux*

For every difficult and complex problem there is a simple and correct answer--and it is wrong.

*. . . H. L. Mencken*

Problem: we are spending all this money on education yet we don't believe our students and teachers are doing as well as they should.

Solution: Mandate that all students take a high-stakes, standardized, multiple-choice test and publish the results. This will inform students, teachers and other educational decision-makers and motivate them to improve student achievement.

A difficult and complex problem; a simple, obvious solution--and it's wrong!

This is not a new idea; it was the subject of a great deal of discussion and action throughout the USA 20-30 years ago. Many states, principally states with traditions of strong central control located in the south and east US, adopted mandatory state every-pupil testing. Many states, principally those with traditions of strong local control, including Minnesota, rejected the scheme. The Minnesota legislature rejected this idea at least twice. (And, I might add, so did a Citizens League Committee on Educational Accountability in 1972! This is not a new idea.)<sup>1</sup>

We now have a lot of experience with state-mandated testing and there is no evidence that the states which have it are better off for it and lots of evidence that they are, in fact worse off.<sup>2</sup> Certainly most of them still rank well below Minnesota by any indicators of educational excellence.

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<sup>1</sup> Historical digression: three members of this committee were also members of that committee almost a quarter-century ago: Robert Bonine, Howard Guthmann and myself. Joe Nathan was also a member.

<sup>2</sup> For example see, Mark Raivetz, "Can School Districts Survive the Politics of State Testing Initiatives?", *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 76 1992, pp. 57-65

When Van Mueller spoke to the committee at our first meeting he urged us to base our recommendations on research and not on ideology. The committee disregards Mueller when it recommends state-mandated testing.

**State-mandated standardized testing does not solve any educational problems. it is a symbolic political gesture intended to signal to the public that the problems of low standards are being redressed.**

**It does not work.** The most compelling reason for rejecting state-mandated testing is simply that it does not work. State-mandated, high-stakes, multiple-choice testing does not reform education; we know this from the experience in the many states which have tried it.

Research evidence from the past two decades documents the fact that testing policies have not had the positive effects intended, while they have had unintended negative consequences for the quality of American schooling and for the equitable allocation of school opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

The current frenzied interest in testing is motivated by a desire to improve public education. Policy makers believe that, by setting standards and measuring attainment, they will spur teachers to teach better and students to learn more. This idea of test-leveraged reform is not new. The same logic motivated the push for minimum - competency testing in the 1970s and the education reform movement of the 1980s. But earlier efforts at test-driven reform failed. In 1983 the authors of *A Nation at Risk* specifically rejected "minimum-competency" examinations because "the 'minimum' tends to become the 'maximum,'" thus lowering educational standards for all." Now, less than a decade later, we have evidence that the standardized testing programs instituted in response to *A Nation at Risk* produced the same results. Nationally, scores on tests of basic skills have increased at the expense of higher-order thinking and problem solving.<sup>4</sup>

Research evidence on the effects of traditional standardized tests when used as high-stakes accountability instruments is strikingly negative. It would not be far-fetched to say that testing in the past decade has actually reduced the quality of instruction for many students.<sup>5</sup>

After spending a lot of money and imposing a gigantic, burdensome mandate on the schools, what will we know that we do not already know? We already know that the students at Edina High School score better on standardized tests than the students at Minneapolis North. We don't need yet another test to tell us that or to motivate the teachers at North to do better. Forcing every school to use the same test will slightly improve the accuracy of our building rankings, but it will not change the big picture. We already know where our educational failures are and no state test will tell us what to do about them.

The product of education cannot be reduced to a single number; people just do not and cannot use test scores in the ways the promoters of this idea claim or hope.

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Lieberman, "Accountability as a Reform Strategy," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 219-220

<sup>4</sup> Lorrie Shepard, "Will National Tests Improve Student Learning?" *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 72, 1991, pp. 232-238

<sup>5</sup> Lorrie Shepard, op. cit.

**Our tests do not tell us what students know; they tell us which students know the most about the particular questions asked and which students will do the best on future scholastic assignments. Our tests provide valid generalizations about how students stack up against one another. Information about the quality of education is not what our tests provide.<sup>6</sup>**

[I put this quote in bold type because I fear many members of our committee believe that standardized tests do tell us what students know. If the citizens of Minnesota (especially the legislators) knew what Stake is telling us maybe we would not have the current push for state-mandated testing.]

Jaeger pointed out how unrealistic were the plethora of hopes and expectations of legislators who mandated testing programs in states across the nation two decades ago.<sup>7</sup> Many of these same unrealistic expectations, hopes (and promises) are present of the current dialogue.

**It is a gigantic state mandate.** An informing principle of the Citizens League, running through most of its reports and position papers, is that decisions made closer to the people will be superior to decisions made by some detached central agency. Consistent with that position, this education report argues that we should give local school sites more authority to make their own educational decisions and suggests policies to enhance local decision-making. This is to free the local site from the bureaucratic constraints of the district central administration. Yet, the Accountability section of this report, in direct contradiction, wants to move power and decision-making not back to the district central office, but all the way to St. Paul. What the Citizens League is saying in this section is that St. Paul should compel school districts to abandon their own educational testing programs because St. Paul knows better than local educators which of the many tests available is the best one for them to use; St. Paul knows better at what grades to test; and, yes, St. Paul even knows better than local educators what to teach. "As evidence from many studies indicates, when high-stakes are attached to scores, tests exert a strong influence on what is taught, how it is taught, what pupils study, how they study, and what they learn."<sup>8</sup> This report is saying that test item writers in Iowa or Princeton, NJ, know better what should be taught in Black Duck, and every other school in Minnesota, than the local students, teachers and parents. To mandate the test and all of its accompanying structures at a state level is to preclude the parent, student, and teacher from saying, "This is what we call excellence" and substituting "this is what the state calls excellence." With state-mandated testing can a state curriculum and state textbook adoptions be far behind?

This reports recommends a state-mandated test yet it has not examined whether the Iowa tests, or any standardized test, measure educational objectives we want for Minnesota students. (Such an examination would, of course, been impossible in the short time window the committee had.) For example, Romberg and Wilson investigated the alignment of the content of six of the most popular standardized achievement tests with the *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, published by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. They concluded: "The tests do not address any of the four primary standards that the authors of the Standards document hold are the basis for the authentic learning of mathematics: problem solving, communication, reasoning, and connections."<sup>9</sup> (They also found that the 1986, Grade 8, edition of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills had no problem solving items and only 4% of the items measured conceptual knowledge as opposed to procedural knowledge, the lowest of any of the six tests studied.)

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Stake, "The Teacher, Standardized Testing, and Prospects Of Revolution" *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 243-247

<sup>7</sup> Richard Jaeger, "Legislative Perspectives on Statewide Testing," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 239-242

<sup>8</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, "The Implications of Testing Policy for Quality and Equality," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 220-225

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Romberg and Linda Wilson, "Alignment of Test with the Standards," *Arithmetic Teacher*, vol. 40, pp.18-22

### **Disadvantages of high-stakes testing.**

State-mandated testing with highly publicized building and district comparisons result in what is called “high-stakes” testing. The principle reason for opposing state-mandated, high-stakes testing is, as discussed above, that it simply does not work as an engine for educational reform. But beyond the absence of any proven benefit there are many proven disadvantages.

Madaus<sup>10</sup> lists the following:

- High-stakes tests in the upper grades can have undesirable “backwash” or “trickle-down” effects on classwork and on study in the lower grades.
- They tend to encourage undue attention to material that is covered in the examinations, thereby excluding from teaching and learning many worthwhile educational objectives and experiences.
- Scores on them come to be regarded by parents and students as the main, if not the sole, objective of education.
- They are usually carried out under artificial conditions in a very limited time frame.
- They are not suitable for all students and can be extremely stressful for some. In addition, they can negatively affect such personality characteristics as self-concept and self-esteem.
- They are often viewed by students as unfair, since doing poorly on an examination at the end of the year can over-ride a year or more of hard work and achievement.
- They tend to inhibit the development of curricular variety that may be necessary to serve local and individual needs.
- There is often a lack of congruence between course objectives and examination procedures.
- Some kinds of teaching to the test enable students to perform well on the examinations without engaging higher levels of cognition.
- Preparation for high-stakes tests often overemphasizes rote memorization and cramming by students and drill-and-practice as a teaching method.
- High-stakes tests are inevitably limited in the range of characteristics that they can assess, relying heavily on verbal and logico-mathematical areas.
- High-stakes tests can force students to leave school before they have to take the examination - or after failing it

Shepard<sup>11</sup> cites the following as the key findings of the body of research that informs the debate about externally mandated standardized testing:

1. When political pressure and media attention attach high stakes to test results, scores can become inflated, thus giving a false impression of student achievement.
2. High-stakes tests narrow the curriculum.
3. High-stakes testing misdirects instruction even for the basic skills.
4. The kind of drill-and-practice instruction that tests reinforce is based on outmoded learning theory.
5. Because of the pressure to achieve high test scores, more hard-to-teach children are rejected by the system.
6. The dictates of externally mandated tests reduce both the professional knowledge and the status of teachers.

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<sup>10</sup> George F. Madaus, “The Effects of Important Tests on Students,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 226-231

<sup>11</sup> Lorie Shepard, op. cit.



Whom to test? Minneapolis and St. Paul (and all other Minnesota school districts) include those students in their standardized educational testing programs whom they believe will benefit, but the two districts may have different policies governing whom to include. At the present time any such difference is unimportant because each district uses test results only for its own educational purposes. But when we have publicized district and building comparisons it will be important, above all, to "be fair." Thus it will be necessary for the state to mandate pages of regulations which are not necessary today about who must, and who cannot, be included in the state testing. What about special education students, learning disabled, ESL, recent immigrants, students who have been in the district only a few days or weeks, students who are absent on testing day? The state will have to tell the districts in great detail who must be included and who must be excluded and then somehow police compliance in the many hundreds of schools, another state mandate.

#### Negative effects on overall achievement.

. . .the emphasis on basic skills test scores has prompted teaching to the test, (thus) many students spend less time on untested subjects, such as science, social studies, and the arts. The scores, therefore, no longer necessarily indicate students' general achievement. Emphasis on basic skills can also mean that the scores may no longer provide comprehensive assessments of the students' ability, even in the tested subjects, because classwork narrowly oriented toward a test does not heighten students' proficiency in aspects of the subject not tested--analysis, complex problem-solving, and written or oral expression.

Indeed, since about 1970, while test scores on basic skills have improved, scores on assessments of higher-order thinking skills have declined in virtually all subject areas. Many observers, including the National Research Council and the National Councils of Teachers of English and Mathematics, argue that the overuse of multiple-choice basic skills tests has actually corrupted teaching practices. Aspects of the subjects that are not tested--especially higher-order thinking and performance skills--are left untaught.<sup>12</sup>

Teaching the subject or teaching the test. When tests are high stakes there are, by definition, great pressures on teachers to have students do well on the test since that is how they will be judged. Teachers and students respond to these pressures in ways that are appropriate and in ways that are inappropriate. Ideally, teachers will teach the subject; that is, improve students' skills and knowledge in the attributes measured by the test. (Hoping, of course, that the tests actually do measure knowledge we want students to have, which itself is questionable; see above). For many, an unfortunate but more parsimonious approach to raising scores is to "teach the test." There are many ways to do this: having students memorize the answers to the actual items on the test, having students work on retired or sample forms of the test instead of teaching the subject, and providing instruction in test-taking skills (testwiseness) are examples. Teaching the test raises test scores without improving students' achievement or knowledge and is educationally undesirable, even if it makes the averages look better.

One survey of math and science teachers suggests that such test preparation practices are more common in predominantly minority classrooms. Among classes where more than 60 percent of the students were members of minority groups, the survey found, about three-fourths of teachers reported teaching test-taking skills and beginning test preparation more than a month before the test. In classes with few minority students, by contrast, about 40 percent of teachers said they employed such practices. Likewise, a separate survey of upper-elementary teachers found that those with more disadvantaged students were twice as likely as those teaching

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond and Carol Ascher, "Accountability Mechanisms in Big City Schools," *ERIC Digest*, April 1991

wealthier students to report giving practice tests and practicing with old versions of mandated standardized tests.<sup>13</sup>

High-stakes testing creates great incentives to teach the test; everyone is rewarded (or escapes punishment) with higher test scores: teachers and school administrators use the higher test scores to tout how much better they are doing and politicians can brag that the higher scores show that their tough reforms have improved education.

Compounding this problem is the question of who is going to teach the subject. The Iowa Tests, which this report says should be administered to all high school juniors, is, whatever else it is called, one big reading test. Yet, formal reading instruction ceases in the seventh or eighth grade for most Minnesota students. So, how will Minnesota high school students be prepared for taking the Iowa Tests in Grade 11? There will be great temptations to teach the test in this situation.

Test security is a closely associated problem. Hardly a week goes by without an article in *Education Week* recounting a testing scandal in some high stakes testing state; teachers giving test items to students prior to testing, principals encouraging poor students to be absent on testing day, etc.

Test security is not a problem in Minnesota currently because our standardized tests are used for educational improvement and are not high stakes. When we start using these tests for "accountability," thus making them high stakes, the schools, and the state in particular, will need to implement new procedures and be especially concerned about test security. One of the first things we would have to do, of course, is take the tests away from the teachers. Those preparing our children to "pass" the test cannot know what's on the test! Most high-stakes states have elaborate regulations relating to the handling and administering of tests which are not unlike the regulations governing the handling of classified material in the military; many new mandates. Yet the items will inevitably get out.

Some will remember the recent national uproar when it was discovered that every state which had state-mandated every-pupil testing using commercial standardized test had scored above the national average. This was aptly dubbed "The Lake Wobegon Effect." Nationally marketed standardized tests (such as the Iowa Tests) are typically revised only every six or seven years. In investigating the Lake Wobegon Effect it was found that while indeed, half the students were placed in the below average, and half in the above average groups when the new test revision was normed, it was only a few years before students in every state were scoring high enough to bring every state average to "above average." Teachers are not dumb, you cannot keep test items which are being administered to many thousands of students secret for long.<sup>14</sup>

Using tests inappropriately for purposes they were not intended. The Iowa tests, for example, are designed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and to show how they compare with other students. They are not designed to evaluate school programs or school effectiveness. (Re-read again the Stake quote on Pg. 2). Joe Nathan, deplored such misuse of paper-and-pencil tests when this was a hot topic earlier.<sup>15</sup>

Standards. Generating average test scores for individual districts and buildings will immediately raise the question of standards. What's "passing?" "What's good enough?" "What should the state expect?" Standard-setting is at best a very difficult task. Some would say it is an impossible task.<sup>16</sup> This report does not address the question of standards, but it seems to me that to call for state-mandated testing carries with it an obligation to speak to what we are going to do with the test results once we get them. The report is silent on this.

Minority Students. This report rightly gives a lot of attention to low-achieving students, many of whom are students of color. That state-mandated high-stakes testing has worked *against* the best interests of

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Rothman, "Taking Aim At Testing," *The American School Board Journal*, Feb. 1996 pp. 27-30

<sup>14</sup> Test preparation and security issues, with many examples, are reviewed in some depth in, Jane Canner, "Regaining the Public Trust: A Review of School Testing Programs, Practices," *NASSP Bulletin*, vol. 76, 1992, pp. 6-15

<sup>15</sup> Joe Nathan and Wayne Jennings, "Educational Bait-and-Switch," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 59, 1978, pp. 621-625

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Ellwein and Gene Glass, "Testing for Competence: Translating Reform Policy Into Practice" *Educational Policy*, 1991, pp. 64-78

low-achieving students is documented in research reported by McGill-Franzen and Allington<sup>17</sup>. They show that high-stakes primary grade testing increases the pressure on low-achieving schools to improve their test performance but that these mandates also increase the chances that low-scoring children will be retained in grade or classified as handicapped. They cite the example of one school they studied which was the recipient of several state and national school of excellence awards for score improvement. It turns out that this school retains or transitions nearly 50 percent of its children across the K-2 experience to remove low-scoring students from the test-taking pool. The authors say: “. . . to purposefully use retention in order to mask underachievement and a school’s failure to educate or, conversely, to maximize reported test score gains . . . is egregiously unethical.” Not many Minnesota educators would be so unethical, of course, but it is difficult to underestimate the pressure that the publicized results of high-stakes testing puts on teachers and students and certainly some would fudge the data in this and other ways. At the very least, the state would need to commit additional resources and impose mandates to guard against this and other abuses. McGill-Franzen and Allington say, “. . . in the districts where we collected our data, and we assume in other districts as well, high-stakes primary grade tests are *not* used to improve the quality of schooling for low-achieving children. . .” But they do put them at risk of retention or classification.

**SUMMARY.** State-mandated standardized testing is not a new idea, its old stuff. We have more than two decades of experience with this policy in many other states. Fortunately, therefore, there is a large body of research on the effectiveness and wisdom of this as public policy. I have briefly sampled a bit of that research above. The research I have found shows scant positive outcomes and many negative outcomes harmful to our children. Those advocating this policy, including the Citizens League, legislators and vendors, have an obligation to come forth with the research results, the data, that show state-mandated standardized testing is good for our children and their education. This is such a widely practiced policy that if it is, in fact, good public policy the data showing that must be there. Historically, what has made the Citizens League something more than just another political lobbying organization is that it honors research—the Citizens League is nothing if it does not honor research. State-mandated testing is a profound change in public policy. Until advocates produce research data showing that state-mandated standardize testing is good public policy the Citizens League should withhold its support.

A personal note: So, why do I bother when it seems clear that state-mandated, every-pupil, multiple-choice, standardized testing may be the sexiest, most politically-correct position on education in the legislature this session? (One author I read compared the testing movement to an 18-wheeler whose brakes had failed coming down a mountain road).

Finding myself seemingly the only person in Minnesota opposed to this PC idea, I felt a need to re-examine my own position, how could I be so wrong? So, I ran World Wide Web and ERIC searches on my computer and I spent a day in the stacks at Walter Library searching for research reports and opinion articles about our nation’s two decades of experience with state-mandated testing. In looking through a rather extensive literature I found nothing reporting positive outcomes but many articles of expert opinion and reports of empirical research documenting negative outcomes for student achievement from state-mandated testing. Reinforced in my beliefs, I prepared this report. Someone has to point out that this Emperor Has No Clothes!

Although I have had some experience with educational testing, I claim no special authority in this debate. I do not ask that anyone take any of this on my authority. But I do ask, and the citizens of Minnesota should demand, that decision-makers look objectively at the evidence for themselves and then, if they agree, have the political courage to resist a policy which while oh, so politically-correct, will, in fact, diminish the quality of education in Minnesota.

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<sup>17</sup> Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard Allington, “Flunk’em or Get them Classified: The Contamination of Primary Grade Accountability Data,” *Educational Researcher*, vol. 22, 1993, pp. 19-22

## 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 40 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. *For membership information, please call 612/338-0791.*

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*These statements update the League's positions on key issues. No charge for a copy of League statements.*

|                                                                                                                                   |          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Letter to the Board of Regents at the University of Minnesota:re:General College                                                  | 4-10-96  |
| Regional Challenges and Regional Governance                                                                                       | 4-8-93   |
| Health-Care Access for All Minnesotans                                                                                            | 2-20-92  |
| Testing Health-Care Workers for the AIDS Virus                                                                                    | 12-11-91 |
| Light Rail Transit: The Regional Transit Board's Proposal to the 1991 Minnesota Legislature                                       | 1-24-91  |
| Letter to Legislature from Community Information Committee re:                                                                    |          |
| Financing at the University of Minnesota                                                                                          | 4-07-89  |
| Statement on Changing the Fiscal Disparities Law                                                                                  | 1-15-88  |
| Statement to the Governor & Legislature on Transportation Financing in 1988                                                       | 1-04-88  |
| Statement to Legislative Commission re: Road Financing                                                                            | 10-12-87 |
| Statement to University of Minnesota Regents re: Commitment to Focus                                                              | 7-7-87   |
| Statement to Governor and Legislature on Innovation and Cost Control                                                              | 4-8-87   |
| Selection of a New State Commissioner of Transportation                                                                           | 10-30-86 |
| Letter to Regional Transit Board re: Metro Mobility Price Competition Ideas                                                       | 6-12-86  |
| Testimony to Legislature on Bloomington Stadium Site Bill                                                                         | 2-20-86  |
| Letter to Regional Transit Board re: Policy Committee's Study of Metro Mobility                                                   | 12-6-85  |
| Statement to House Tax Subcommittee on Fiscal Disparities                                                                         | 10-31-85 |
| Statement to Legislature on Preserving Metropolitan Tax-Base Sharing                                                              | 9-6-85   |
| Statement to Legislature & Metro Council on Bloomington Development Proposal                                                      | 8-15-85  |
| Statement to Metropolitan Council on Organized Collection of Solid Waste                                                          | 4-24-85  |
| Statement to Metropolitan Council on Long-Term Care                                                                               | 3-8-85   |
| Statement on Transit Alternatives                                                                                                 | 1-23-85  |
| Statement on Solid Waste Disposal                                                                                                 | 1-21-85  |
| Statement to Tax Study Commission                                                                                                 | 8-22-84  |
| Statement on Light Rail Transit                                                                                                   | 4-6-84   |
| Statement to Legislative Study Committee on Metropolitan Transit                                                                  | 12-15-83 |
| Statement to Governor's Tax Study Commission                                                                                      | 11-22-83 |
| Statement to Minnesota's Highway Study Commission                                                                                 | 9-29-83  |
| Statement on the Metropolitan Council's Proposed Interim Economic Policies                                                        | 8-29-83  |
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| Statement to Metropolitan Council & Richard P. Braun, Commissioner of Transportation on Preferential Treatment in I-35W Expansion | 7-21-83  |
| Statement to Members, Steering Committee on Southwest-University Avenue Corridor Study                                            | 7-19-83  |
| Statement to Commission on the Future of Post-Secondary Education in Minnesota                                                    | 6-22-83  |
| Statement to the Metropolitan Health Board                                                                                        | 6-20-83  |
| Appeal to the Legislature and the Governor                                                                                        | 4-26-83  |
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| Statement to the Minnesota State Legislature Regarding the Reconstruction Project                                                 | 12-14-81 |
| Letter to the Joint Legislative Commission on Metropolitan Governance                                                             | 11-13-81 |
| Statement to Metropolitan Health Board on Phase IV Report                                                                         | 11-4-81  |
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