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STATEMENT BY THE CITIZENS LEAGUE ON THE PROPOSED EDUCATION DIVERSITY RULE

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PREAMBLE: About our statement

The Citizens League's board of directors struggled with the question of whether our organization should comment on the proposed Education Diversity Rule at all. Many of the arguments have focused on the symbolic questions—do children of color have the right to a good education? is the political philosophy too leftist?—rather than on the substantive but infinitely more boring question: Will this policy, as it is currently drafted, meet the goals it sets out to meet?

After considerable discussion, the League decided that we have an obligation to comment. This is important education policy. The League's body of policy work doesn't allow us to give a simple "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to the proposal before you. But 20 years of studies on education do allow us to comment on some of the specifics, and to focus on what should be the central policy question in the debate: What must be done to improve the achievement of *all* students?

INTRODUCTION: Ensuring that all students learn

In a report published earlier this year, the Citizens League said that "the public education system's record with students of color and students in poverty is appalling." "Appalling" is a strong word, and we chose it carefully. Neither the Board of Education, the Legislature, the citizens of this state nor the education system itself should accept the current level of performance.

Of course, there are many factors in addition to those under the control of schools that determine student learning. It is first and foremost the responsibility of parents to prepare their children to succeed in school. But schools can make a difference. There is plenty of evidence that schools can succeed in teaching challenging students—students of all colors, students from troubled homes or poor neighborhoods, and students newly arrived here from cultures very different from our own. **The state must insist that its schools meet the challenges and not use these problems as an excuse for failure.**

RATIONALE: The purposes of the proposed Diversity Rule

The State Board of Education's proposed Diversity Rule appears to have three purposes:

- 1) to promote learning experiences that are diverse (multicultural, gender-fair, disability aware) in order to enrich the content learned by all students. This is about **WHAT** children are expected to learn.
- 2) to provide evidence of proactive efforts to eliminate education-related disparities. This is about **WHETHER** children learn.
- 3) to promote learning experiences that are diverse (multicultural, gender-fair, disability aware) in order to enable the learning of children from different backgrounds. This is about **HOW** children are taught.

Are these purposes appropriate, and if so, how should the State of Minnesota accomplish them?

WHAT students are expected to learn

Look first at the question about **WHAT** children are expected to learn. Minnesota either has, or soon will have, specific learning expectations for the children of the state. This is the Graduation Rule: not just a list of what students must know and be able to do in order to graduate, but a set of expectations for learning along the way to meet that ultimate goal.

The state has already developed and implemented the basic skills tests for reading and math for grades 3, 5 and 8. The state is now in the process of developing the "high standards" part of the Graduation Rule—the Profile of Learning—and the assessment tools for determining whether students have met the high standards in nine content areas.

But the state hasn't yet put teeth into the Graduation Rule by saying—clearly—how districts and schools will be held accountable for making sure that *all* students meet these learning standards.

The first purpose of the draft Diversity Rule—to promote learning experiences that are diverse in order to enrich the content learned by all students—is appropriate and entirely consistent with the purposes of public education. But it is best accomplished through the Graduation Rule. That is where the policy belongs. The Diversity Rule, in essence, is proposing that students learn to explore ideas from a diverse set of perspectives. The ability to look at problems or issues from multiple perspectives and to integrate perspectives is an essential ingredient to a complete education. In an increasingly complex and plural world, individuals must have these abilities in order to exercise their responsibilities as citizens, build stronger communities and enhance their opportunities to succeed.

Minnesota has recognized the importance of these skills by building them into the Profile of Learning. For instance, in Learning Area 5—Inquiry—students must demonstrate competence in at least two content standards from among a list that includes "history through culture" and "cultures across time." In Learning Area 7—People and Cultures—the content standards include "human geography," "multiple perspectives," and "institutions and traditions in society." In addition to meeting specific content standards in the nine learning areas, each student must include work in multicultural perspectives.

Must the state move ahead to implement these learning expectations? Yes. Should the requirements be stronger? Perhaps. Should some content standards that are now options be made requirements for all students? Perhaps. How will these skills be assessed and how high should the bar be set? All of these questions are important and should be addressed in the context of the Graduation Rule itself.

WHETHER children learn

The second purpose of the Rule appears to be an attempt to hold school districts accountable for reducing education related disparities—which is another way of talking about *whether students learn*.

The Citizens League believes that it is entirely appropriate for the state to hold districts accountable for whether students learn (again, while acknowledging the important contribution of non-school factors to student learning). The state must not only assess the performance of *students*, but must also assess the performance of *districts and schools*, including schools' competence in serving students of color. **This, too, should be part of the Graduation Rule.**

K-12 education is one of the few systems still allowed to be the sole evaluator of its own performance. That must change—and not just with regard to students of color.

But the proposed Diversity Rule is a weak stab at creating accountability for whether students learn. What is proposed is that districts be held accountable for planning—that is, for *trying*—to reduce the learning gaps that pervade our schools.

The Rule specifies in detail how the diversity plans must be developed, who must be involved, and what must be included in the plans. It requires the plans to be implemented and contains sanctions for districts that fail to comply with the planning and implementation requirements. But the Rule makes districts responsible for evaluating their own performance. It requires the *district* to set its own goals for reducing education-related disparities, decide how its compliance with the plan will be evaluated, and designate the person to conduct the evaluation.

Thus there is virtually no consequence to districts—either positive or negative—for failing to *improve achievement*, as long as the required activities take place. By holding districts accountable for inputs, process and committee membership, the proposed Diversity Rule tells districts that learning is not the real goal—that the real goal is to get the right people together to talk in the right way and assure that they share good intentions. That might feel good, but it won't work.

What the state should hold districts accountable for is seeing that all students meet the graduation standards. Further, regardless of how well districts are doing today on student achievement, they should be accountable for seeing to it that more students meet the standards each year. Continuous improvement should be the goal.

The central problem with Minnesota's education is that the state is not ready to hold districts accountable—to either reward success in achieving the graduation standards, or to intervene to stop failure. If the state is right to set state-wide graduation standards, it is equally right to create effective accountability mechanisms to assure that those standards are achieved. Such mechanisms should assure accountability for the learning of *all* children and for the reduction of learning gaps among various groups of students. Focusing overmuch on process diverts attention from the larger and more important issue—accountability for district and school performance. **Accountability must be part of the Graduation Rule itself.**

Information and reporting are both essential pieces of an accountability system. The Legislature took steps in 1997 to develop better information about how Minnesota's students and school districts are doing. That's a welcome development. The next step is to get this and other important information about school performance into the hands of the public. Legislators, school board members and citizens must be able to answer the question: What are the results the state is getting for its roughly \$6 billion annual education appropriation?

The state should require each school to issue a report annually to the parents of that school, containing information about its students' achievement—using not just test scores, but a variety of other measures such as attendance, drop-out rates, and participation in extra-curricular activities. These annual reports should also include key indicators of each school's readiness to serve

students of color—for instance, the racial/ethnic composition of the faculty, administration and staff, and the extent of the staff's preparation to serve diverse students. These are input measures, to be sure, not measures of results. But we think they are revealing pieces of information that parents and taxpayers have a right to know.

Simply giving people accurate information increases the accountability of the education system. When people have information about quality, providers must deliver quality.

HOW children learn

The third purpose—to promote learning experiences that are diverse in order to enable the learning of children from different backgrounds—will be met if there is genuine accountability for the achievement of all children. **The state doesn't need to—and shouldn't—tell districts and schools how to achieve the graduation standards.** It only must tell districts and schools that they must achieve the standards for all children, and that there will be consequences for both success and failure.

The proposed Rule reflects one—but only one—philosophy and curricular approach to improving achievement among students of color: an explicitly multicultural curriculum. There are examples of other instructional methods—ones that are not explicitly “multicultural”—that show that substantially better learning is possible among all children. For example, Success for All, a reading and math program developed at Johns Hopkins University, has shown that virtually all children, including disadvantaged children, can learn to read by the end of third grade. Another approach, the Core Knowledge Schools pioneered by E.D. Hirsch, has also shown impressive results with at-risk students.

Educators and parents should be free to adopt different curricula and instructional methods that best suit the children in a particular school—choosing from these and many other options including multicultural and culture-specific curricula. The state should permit—in fact, encourage—school sites to differentiate themselves from each other. **Diversity among schools means meaningful choices for parents. As children's educational needs differ, so should education become more diversified in ways that directly respond to those needs.**

There is a role for the state in supporting districts and schools in their attempts to achieve the graduation standards. The standards, combined with accountability, represent the challenge for districts. But districts, like students, need support if they are to meet the challenge. The state should support districts—and districts should empower schools—by permitting much greater freedom to innovate, and by marshaling and disseminating as much information as possible about specific approaches to education that work with students having specific educational needs. These “best practices” should be classroom-tested and supported by hard evidence that they work.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Citizens League believes that state policy makers and citizens alike should expect school districts to ensure that all students learn—and should refuse to accept the education system's current performance with students of color.

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, a nationally recognized expert on education reform, has 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,” according to Nathan. We agree. The state has a legal obligation to provide equal education opportunity. As a matter of civic honor and economic self-interest, we must also improve the quality of that education.

To do that, Minnesota should:

- (1) review the Graduation Rule to ensure that the ability to consider problems and issues from multiple perspectives, to integrate multiple perspectives in developing solutions or responses, and to understand the contribution of culture to human experience are given appropriate weight;
- (2) amend the Graduation Rule to establish consequences to districts for the achievement of the state's graduation standards by all students;
- (3) provide good information to parents and taxpayers on a variety of measures of student, school and district performance; and
- (4) support innovation by encouraging diversification among school programs and by disseminating information about educational best practices.

Long after today's heated debate about the symbolic issues is forgotten—and it will be forgotten—Minnesota's school children will have to live with the decisions the State Board of Education eventually will make. It is the *achievement* of these children we should be concerned about. The Citizens League believes the steps we have outlined will take the state a long way toward ensuring that Minnesota children have the opportunity for a high-quality education.