

EDUCATION

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND PROSPERITY: THE INDISPENSABILITY OF COMPETITION AND CHOICE IN MINNESOTA K-12 EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Problem

K-12 education in Minnesota faces many problems. Here are four mega-ones.

- Too few Minnesota students are learning enough to adequately support themselves and their families in the future.
- Too few young people are leaving school prepared to contribute to Minnesota's prosperity.
- Too few Minnesota graduates and non-graduates are leaving school equipped to help the United States remain the world's economic powerhouse.
- All with too *many* Minnesotans complacently assuming we're doing better educationally than we really are.

Turning around such dangerous prospects will be hard under the best of circumstances. But to succeed, Minnesota must narrow not just one achievement gap but three.

- As commonly used in Minnesota, the term "achievement gap" refers to uncommonly large gulfs between the academic performances of white students and minority students.
- But there is also the gap between *all* Minnesota students (as well as all American students) compared to *all* students in much of the industrialized world, with young people in many countries routinely learning more across the board.
- And another gap exists between Minnesota and America's *strongest* students compared to the *strongest* students in much of the rest of world, with such young people elsewhere, once again, routinely learning more.



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This report focuses on all three gaps.

Consequences of Not Acting

What are the likely consequences if these gaps are not appreciably reduced? Minnesota will come to be economically less competitive both domestically and internationally. Enormous numbers of citizens won't merely have hard times finding and keeping good first jobs. Rather, the entirety of their work lives will be abridged. This, in turn, will constrain mobility, spur inequality, and deepen class divisions in a state which has never viewed itself as divided so. And while the United States will remain economically powerful, it will become comparatively less innovative and prosperous if these problems fester nationally.

What Needs to be Done?

To suggest that the best antidote to the problems we face is for young and older Minnesotans to learn a lot more may sound like a cliché. But what better routes are there? Trying to do so, however, without allowing greater competition and choice to spur educational improvement will continue proving impossible. Here are three broad proposals to improve learning, each with strengths in narrowing the three achievement gaps undermining Minnesota's future prosperity.

- **Adopt Vouchers.** When it comes to elementary and secondary education in Minnesota and especially the Twin Cities, vouchers represent the single most promising approach for reducing huge achievement gaps between white and many minority students.
- **Significantly Expand Charter Schools.** Charter schools have been one of the most important educational reforms over the last few decades and it's essential for Minnesota to take greater advantage of them, as they offer real hope to many.
- **Significantly Expand Digital Education.** If vouchers will best serve many struggling students, an expansion of digital education has exceptional potential for helping all Minnesota students.

Likely Results

What can be said with confidence about these proposals is they afford young Minnesotans—be they strong students, struggling students, or somewhere between—larger opportunities to be all they can be. Expanded and better-fitting choices will increase their chances of achieving nearer their potential, for both their sake and our state and nation's sake. This is the case because when it comes to intricate organizations—very much including schools and school systems—barnacled obstacles are best cleared, and new roads best discovered, by competition.

THE PROBLEM

Elementary and secondary education in Minnesota face many problems. Here are four mega-ones.

- Too few Minnesota students are learning enough to adequately support themselves and their families in the future.
- Too few young men and women are leaving school prepared to contribute to Minnesota's prosperity.
- Too few Minnesota graduates and non-graduates are leaving school equipped to help the United States remain the world's leading economic power.
- All with too *many* Minnesotans complacently assuming we're doing better educationally than we really are.

Turning around such dangerous prospects and perceptions will be hard under the best of circumstances. Trying to do so without allowing greater competition and choice to spur educational improvement—just as they accelerate improvement in countless other spheres of American life—will continue proving impossible.

Nevertheless and in fairness, even with a fundamental design flaw in which entrenched interests—starting with Education Minnesota—perpetually seek to stymie anything more potent than constricted competition, K-12 education in Minnesota is not without relative victories. A good example is the way in which Minnesota ranked as high as first and second, among all states, in several rankings reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2013. Students and educators here deserve to take some pride.

Yet as encouraging as news like this was, it must be understood in full context, which is to say an international one, as Minnesota's main economic competitors in coming years increasingly will not be other states but other nations. And when it comes to other nations around the world, Minnesota doesn't rank anywhere near the top in important educational measures. For instance, Minnesota, with more than 10 percent of its students at the advanced level in math, ranks second in that category among the 50 states. That's the good news. The bad news is we nonetheless trail 16 other countries, winding up roughly equal with the likes of Slovenia.¹ Such middling achievement will exact larger and larger costs, year by year.

Put succinctly, a root cause of our educational shortcomings is too much control from above and too little freedom below, as has been the case and basic frame of Minnesota and American schooling for a long time. For just one example, think here of how many schools—entwined in the quicksand of school bureaucracies and *systems*—are slower





than broken abacuses in taking robust advantage of what digital learning has to offer students, be they the strongest or weakest in class.

Talking of root causes, another is what John Bacal, one of the most successful educational entrepreneurs I know, calls a “fundamental public lack of urgency around the education crisis in Minnesota. We’ve had it pretty good for the last fifty years. It’s a ‘Lake Wobegon Effect.’ To most people it doesn’t matter how much data you throw at them, because we’re still above average.”²

Then again, might Minnesota really reflect, or come to profitably reflect, the findings of a recent national survey which strongly suggested that “information about local district rankings increases public support for school choice programs, including charter schools, parent trigger mechanisms, and, especially, vouchers for all students.”³

We can and must do better.

Exactly what to do? The rest of this chapter proposes a number of ideas, all of which are thematically tied together by prosperity-generating principles of competition and choice. In other words again, freedom.

Also basic is recognition that on those occasions when poorly performing institutions change demonstrably for the better, impetus for doing so almost always comes from without, rarely from within. Think, for example, of how the increased importation of Japanese and German cars a few decades ago had much more to do with forcing American carmakers to significantly improve their vehicles than any grand plans they had previously developed on their un-pressured own.

The only way elementary and secondary schools in Minnesota will adequately improve is if smart policies make it possible for real competition to overcome entrenched interests—including but not limited to Education Minnesota—in determining what schools do and how they serve.

If money, or its lack, were at the root of all troubles in Minnesota and American education, we would have run out of problems to overcome a long time ago, as spending per student, in constant dollars, has doubled, tripled, quadrupled and more, depending on what decade since World War II is chosen as a baseline.⁴ The United States currently spends more money per student than almost every other nation in the world—and doesn’t even approach having the academic results to show for it.⁵

It’s also essential to note here that while competition and choice are necessary, they won’t be sufficient unless they are potent and expansive enough to inspire not only strong teaching and rigorous curricula but also disciplined students and demanding parents.

In turn, it's likewise understood that robust competition and choice are impossible unless parents are afforded sufficient information—hard, transparent, and current data—about how area schools and school districts are performing. The same demanding requirement applies, of course, to providing parents with clear and timely information about how their children are progressing academically. Minus such information, parents will be less equipped to choose wisely for their children.

Minnesota suffers not just one achievement gap but three.

As commonly used in Minnesota, the term “achievement gap” refers to uncommonly large gulfs between the academic performances of white students and non-white students. This is accurate as far as it goes, but it is not the only academic separation that threatens our state and nation.

There is also the gap between *all* Minnesota students (as well as all American students) and *all* students in much of the industrialized world. Young people in many other advanced countries routinely learn substantially more.

And then there is the gap between Minnesota and America's *strongest* students and the *strongest* students in much of the rest of world, with young people elsewhere, once again, routinely learning more.

This report focuses on all three gaps and ways of addressing them.

LIKELY CONSEQUENCES OF NOT ACTING

What are the likely consequences if these gaps are not appreciably reduced? As framed most frequently, many men and women—especially those of color—will suffer economically because of their lack of requisite job skills. Likewise, Minnesota will come to be economically less competitive both domestically and internationally. While this is all true, it doesn't adequately describe additional statewide and national dangers, of which the following three clusters are certainties.

- Enormous numbers of citizens won't merely have hard times finding and keeping good first jobs, but the entirety of their work lives will be abridged.
- This, in turn, will constrain mobility, spur inequality, and deepen class divisions.
- And while the United States will remain economically powerful, it will become comparatively less innovative and skilled and, therefore, less prosperous.

How and why, more specifically, will these results be the case if students continue to be shortchanged, whether by the failure of their schools or by their own refusal to work conscientiously at school? Most elementarily, as long as four-year high school





graduation rates for African American, Native American, and Hispanic students in Minneapolis public schools *remain under 40 percent* (or anything close to it),⁶ it is impossible to imagine men and women of color in the Twin Cities having anything but disproportionate and dispiriting difficulty competing economically, be it early or late in their careers and non-careers. This is especially true of men (of all races), as boys and young men are being outpaced by girls and young women in most educational realms.

This is how Anthony P. Carnevale and a colleague at Georgetown put it from the perspective of potential employers: “Most employers today cannot compete successfully without a workforce that can use solid academic skills in applied settings. Increased interaction with sophisticated computerized machinery requires good technical and reading skills, and writing is frequently the first step in communicating with customers, documenting competitive transactions, or successfully moving new ideas into the workplace.”⁷

Economist Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution makes three self-evident points: (1) income in the United States is less equally distributed than it was several decades ago; (2) income is more correlated with education than it was several decades ago; and (3) income is also more correlated with family structure than it was in the past. Which is further to say, as long as large numbers of students leave school with insufficient reading, writing, computing and other skills, their chances of vocational and marital success, as well as satisfaction and happiness in other parts of their lives, will be depressed.

By no stretch, by the way, does this last stricture apply exclusively to high school dropouts and minorities but instead to great swaths of all kinds of Americans. Consider, for instance, what Paul Peterson of Harvard’s Kennedy School, Eric Hanushek of Stanford University, and Ludger Woessmman of the University of Munich found when they compared the math performance of U.S. high school students with *at least one* parent holding a college degree, to the math performance of *all* high school students, regardless of their parents’ education, in a sample of nations. The three researchers had expected this fortunate group of American kids, in the class of 2011, to be world leaders, but “students in sixteen countries, no matter their parents’ educational attainment, outrank[ed] this more-advantaged segment of the U.S. population.”⁸

Let’s stick with math but add some science. Professor Hanushek, again, as much as anyone in the field, has demonstrated the vital importance of a nation’s competence in math and science in determining its economic success. “There is now considerable evidence,” he has written, “that cognitive skills measured by test scores are directly related to individual earnings, productivity, and economic growth.” But if the relationship between cognitive skills and *individual* productivity (as well as individual incomes) is strong, the relationship, he has found, between “labor force quality” and economic growth for *nations* is likely even stronger. This is the case as a “more skilled society” leads to higher rates of invention, enables companies to introduce improved production methods, and results in faster introduction of new technologies.⁹

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

To suggest that the best antidote to the problems we face is for young and older Minnesotans to learn a lot more may sound like a cliché, but I would only ask: What better routes are there? I can't think of any.

At the risk of too many vehicular metaphors in a tight space, in the search for pothole-free routes so that Minnesota schools get up to speed, the main rule of the road must be replacing bureaucratically pitted streets with freeways. This will lead to more effective methods as well as stronger incentives for reducing gaps by giving teachers greater opportunities to be great as well as better compensated. All this in the service of tailoring specific approaches to the varied talents and needs of specific students. To this end, let me suggest three broad proposals.

1. Adopt Vouchers

When it comes to elementary and secondary education in Minnesota and especially the Twin Cities, vouchers represent the single most promising approach for reducing huge achievement gaps between white and non-white students. Solid research clearly suggests that many low-income and minority students would do better if allowed a chance to attend a private rather than government school. As for what is meant by the often politically charged term “vouchers,” it's nothing more complicated than giving parents the freedom to choose a private school for their children by using all or part of the public funding set aside for their boy or girl's education. Simple enough.

Here are some acutely discomfoting and dangerous National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) results.

NAEP reported these results for eighth grade students who were *reading* at either proficient or at advanced levels in Minnesota in 2013:

- White students 51 percent
- Black students 17 percent
- Hispanic students 21 percent
- Asian students 37 percent

And NAEP reported these results for Minnesota eighth graders who were either proficient or advanced in *math* in 2013:

- White students 71 percent
- Black students 17 percent
- Hispanic students 26 percent
- Asian students 58 percent





What does solid research say about the ways in which vouchers can help low-income minority students in particular?¹⁰

- Twelve empirical studies have examined academic outcomes for voucher participants using random assignment, the “gold standard” of social science. Of these, eleven find that vouchers improve student outcomes—six in which all students benefit and five in which some benefit and some are not affected. One study finds no visible impact. No empirical study has found a negative impact.
- Eight empirical studies have examined vouchers and racial concentrations in schools. Of these, seven find that vouchers move students from more racially concentrated to less racially concentrated schools. One finds no net effect on racial concentration. No empirical study has found that vouchers increase racial concentration.
- A 2012 study jointly released by the Kennedy School at Harvard and the Brookings Institution found that college enrollments for low-income African American students who, years earlier, had won vouchers to attend private elementary schools, were 24 percent higher than a socioeconomically identical group of students who had not won vouchers.¹¹

What’s the main reason why Minnesota, in contrast to a growing number of other states and cities, doesn’t have K-12 vouchers for low-income children? The easy answer has been the unyielding and well-financed opposition of teacher unions in particular and the educational establishment more broadly, resulting in ceaseless pressure on legislators to perpetually vote NO. This is not just the easiest answer, it’s the most accurate. But there is a second reinforcing factor.

The drive for vouchers in Minnesota also has been blocked by the success of other efforts on behalf of educational freedom: cross-district open-enrollments, Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO), home schooling, and most importantly charter schools. Charters, in fact, originated in Minnesota, as did open-enrollments and PSEO. Minnesota families, consequently, already have had more choices than many families in other states. Under these ironic circumstances, it’s not surprising that voucher campaigns in this state have never gained the same public support they have elsewhere.

Nevertheless, two basic facts remain: (1) large numbers of low-income and minority students in Minnesota are doing terribly; and (2) vouchers *unquestionably* could help many of them. At last count, vouchers of one kind or another are the law in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia. Minnesota should join them.

2. Significantly Expand Charter Schools

It's easy to get carried away by the very idea and possibilities of charter schools—roughly akin to Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland taking backyard shows to Broadway—until one sits back and thinks about the 101 very hard things it takes to get one started. Never mind subsequently running a truly excellent school.

I had a conversation a number of years ago with an education official in St. Paul, an old friend from graduate school days, who helped oversee charter schools in Minnesota and who wanted to know why American Experiment had never started one. Beyond not having the dollars and staff to devote to such a project, I said that most people simply don't know how difficult it is to start and run anything as complex as a school. At which point she gave me a grateful hug, as I got the distinct impression she had been working with various applicants who hadn't recognized that fact. Even so, charter schools have been one of the most important educational reforms over the last several decades, and it's essential for Minnesota to take greater advantage of them, as they offer real hope.

While chartering originated in Minnesota in the early 1990s, we are now far from leading the nation in terms of either the number of charter schools or the reasonableness of their regulatory environment—which, thankfully, doesn't mean we don't have some truly outstanding ones. Consider, for example, Hiawatha Academies in South Minneapolis, the Harvest Network in North Minneapolis, and St. Croix Prep in Woodbury, to pick three and unfairly bypass many others.

Specific improvements regarding chartering in Minnesota are suggested in the Recommendations below, but suffice it to say they focus on easing overly restrictive teacher licensing rules. Similar recommendations about licensing are included regarding digital learning—with charter schools, of course, taking greater advantage of digital instruction all the time.

In thinking about charter schools, many people associate them mainly with low-income and educationally struggling students. This is understandable, given the weight of media attention. But students of all kinds profitably attend charters. According to the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, there were 150 of them in the state in September 2013, enrolling over 41,000 students, or about 5 percent of all K-12 boys and girls.¹² By comparison, Arizona, which has taken especially great advantage of chartering, has over 600 charter schools, enrolling almost 190,000 students, or about 17 percent of all public elementary and secondary school students in the state.¹³

It needs to be noted, of course, that many regular “district” schools are excellent places, and if parents choose to keep their children in them for sound educational reasons, wonderful. But if innovation and expanded choice matter, then there should be more charter schools, as they were conceived explicitly in those spirits.





3. Significantly Expand Digital Education

While vouchers will best serve many struggling students, an expansion of digital education has the potential of helping all Minnesota students, as ongoing technological advances make it possible to customize education as never before. Digital learning has been usefully defined as “learning facilitated by technology that offers students an element of control over the time, place, path, or pace of their learning and includes blended or online learning.”¹⁴ I use “digital learning” and “online learning” interchangeably.

Suffice it to say, no level of government, in or out of Minnesota, can point to many successes in improving the quality of education, no matter what amount of money is spent. Yet without indulging in the kind of exaggerated expectations and claims frequently voiced in K-12 circles, taking greater advantage of digital learning does, in fact, promise to help children learn measurably more without demanding that taxpayers spend more.

Political scientists Terry Moe and John Chubb have persuasively made the case that, as opposed to the nature of other education *reforms* which can be stopped by numerous interests at multiple chokepoints, technology is a *force*; one which opponents may slow down if they’re determined but never halt no matter how they might try. Technology’s most pertinent virtue for our purposes is the way in which it can “differentiate learning” (in Moe and Chubb’s words), better enabling students at “vastly different achievement levels to master broad and demanding curricula.” Or as another political scientist, Frederick Hess, has put it, digital learning “creates the opportunity to reconsider what’s feasible.”

This all sounds terrific, but it’s not to say Minnesota is taking as much advantage of such brilliant and new possibilities as are many other states. It’s as if we insufficiently grasp the lessons of this perfect metaphor as told by Minnesota’s Ted Kolderie, who, among other things, is rightfully known as the intellectual godfather of charter schools.¹⁵

Thirty kids climb into a bus in St. Paul and head south on I-35, with a teacher on a mic pointing to various things out the windows as they roll along. Some kid says, “I missed that. I was looking at something else. Can we go back over it again?” “No,” the teacher says, “we can’t stop and do that again.” Another student says, “Gee, this is interesting. Can I explore it a little bit?” “No, we can’t do that,” the teacher answers again. And then a third student says, “I’ve been down this road before. Can’t we go any faster?” “No, we can’t do that either.”

Minnesota’s biggest failure when it comes to taking better advantage of digital learning has to do with two licensing issues. The first pertains to the prohibited use of educational assistants or paraprofessionals—men and women who, while qualified for certain assignments, are not licensed teachers and, therefore, not allowed to “instruct”

students. The second pertains to the requirement that for men and women who are, in fact, effective teachers, Minnesota-issued credentials are the *only* ones that count. As regulatory obstacles go, these are significant.

As for the first issue, overly tight rules around the use of personnel in Minnesota schools make it economically improbable to replicate the kinds of promising, digitally based programs elsewhere in the country which make effective use of paraprofessionals, tutors, and other non-licensed instructors, including parents. Two such schools showing very impressive results are Rocketship Education, which started in California, and Carpe Diem Schools in Arizona. The former, which has described itself as the “leading hybrid charter network dedicated to eliminating the achievement gap,” has been described by John Merrow of the “PBS NewsHour” as having seven of the “top-performing low-income schools in California.”¹⁶ Neither network would be allowed to operate in Minnesota.¹⁷

As for the second regulatory issue, just as Minnesota districts and schools can buy textbooks from anyplace in the country or world, they can also contract with online providers anywhere on the planet, as long as courses are ultimately “taught” by a teacher with an up-to-date Minnesota teacher’s license—and *only* an up-to-date *Minnesota* teacher’s license. This is a very big problem as it precludes taking full advantage of the online teaching talents of the nation and world’s most brilliant men and women, both scholars and others. For instance, while an astronaut with a doctorate in physics—albeit minus a Minnesota teacher’s license—generally would not be allowed to teach Minnesota kids online,¹⁸ there would be no problem for her doing so and inspiring thousands of girls and boys in a majority of other states across the country.¹⁹

None of this is to suggest that the State of Minnesota should be oblivious when it comes to who teaches or otherwise comes in contact with students. Careful background checks are called for, of course. However, it is to suggest that greater weight should be given to whether students are progressing than to whether various checklists get filled out as they have for generations. Focus, for example, should be on what students actually learn, not how long they’re glued to assigned seats. Likewise, focus should be on what teachers know, not how many administrative hoops they’ve jumped through.

An epilogue regarding digital education and costs.

Harvard’s Paul Peterson, a Montevideo, Minnesota native, has insightfully argued, “Elementary and secondary education cannot turn the excellence corner, so long as the industry remains labor intensive. The monies that can be reasonably anticipated in the next decade or two will hardly be enough to keep the quality of the system, as currently designed, from eroding further.” “If,” however, Peterson critically continues, “education could become a more capital-intensive industry, one where technological innovation progresses as rapidly as in other sectors of the economy, fewer teachers and other employees would be needed, and each employee could be better compensated.”²⁰





In similar spirit, digital learning makes it possible to weave the efforts of teachers and needs of students as never before. This is a very big deal, given how children have different types of intelligence and learning styles, as well as different starting points and pace. Think of it as true and consistent student-centered education in an age of mass schooling.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

For the sake of focus, the number of broad proposals above has been kept small. More exact ideas for following up on them follow. Please keep in mind that essential in many instances is affording parents unvarnished and up-to-date information about how area schools and school districts—and their own children, needless to say—are performing.

Vouchers

Voucher plans come in many shapes and sizes, especially in regards to what kinds of students and families are eligible to participate, what kinds of private schools are eligible to participate, and the size of vouchers. Over the last generation, neighboring Wisconsin has had more experience than any other state, and Milwaukee has had more practice than any other city, in designing and re-designing voucher programs.

Given Wisconsin and Milwaukee's experience, it makes sense to design our system based on things they have learned. More precisely:

Students in Milwaukee qualify for vouchers if their family's income does not exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty level.

Voucher students in Milwaukee can attend any participating private school in Wisconsin. This includes participating religious schools.

A voucher may not exceed the per-student costs of a private school (including operating expenses and debt service).

More specifically, the maximum voucher of \$6,442 per pupil, based on scales of family income, is a little more than half of what public school students in Milwaukee are allotted.

Recommendation 1: Implement a strong voucher program.

The Minnesota legislature should pass, and the governor should sign, a strong voucher bill, based on the successful Wisconsin and Milwaukee model described above.

Recommendation 2: Start the new voucher program in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

The plan should initially include both Hennepin and Ramsey counties (not just Minneapolis and St. Paul), with expectations of expanding the program to other parts of Minnesota once its potential has been demonstrated.

Recommendation 3: Adjust the value of a voucher for kids with special needs.

Since it's more expensive to educate students with special needs, the size of vouchers for such children should be increased accordingly.

Recommendation 4: Provide a tax credit for contributing to nonprofit scholarship programs.

Minnesota should also adopt, as other states have over the years, a statewide tax credit scholarship program in which individuals and/or businesses receive tax credits for contributing to nonprofit organizations which, in turn, provide private school scholarships.

Recommendation 5: Expand the current educational expenses tax credit to include private school tuition.

If a voucher bill does not pass, legislators and the governor should expand the tax-credit program for (limited) educational expenses, passed in 1997, to include private school tuition as an eligible expense.

Charter Schools

The Minnesota Legislature passed, and Gov. Arne Carlson signed, the nation's first charter school law in 1991, with most states eventually following suit. To the extent the number of Minnesota charter schools has been constrained by state and local policies which favor district schools over charter schools, they need to be fixed. For example:

Recommendation 6: Eliminate the funding imbalance between district schools and charter schools.

Charter schools in Minneapolis currently receive 34 percent fewer dollars per student than do district schools, even though charter schools in the city serve needier students. That funding imbalance should be eliminated.

Recommendation 7: Empower voters to turn all public schools into charter schools.

Voters in each school district should have the option of turning all public schools into charter schools.





Recommendation 8: Give parents the right to convert low-performing schools to charter schools.

Similarly, as is the law in California and other states, parents should have the right to convert a low-performing district school to a charter school if a majority of them so vote. Such options are commonly known as “Parent Trigger” laws.

Recommendation 9: Provide reciprocity to teachers who earned licenses in different states.

Reciprocity for teachers who have earned licenses in other states should be expanded. This is important, in part, because a growing number of charter schools are having trouble finding, recruiting, and hiring the kinds of teachers best equipped to help disadvantaged students make significant academic gains.

Recommendation 10: Allow charter schools to hire talented teachers who don’t have a license.

Charter schools should be allowed to hire talented educators even if they don’t have a teacher’s license, as is the case in states with high-quality charter schools such as Massachusetts and Colorado.

Recommendation 11: Don’t stifle innovation in charter schools with new rules and regulations.

More generally, the basic “deal” undergirding charter schools was straightforward: Government would regulate charters less, while charters, in turn, would be held more accountable for academic performance. It was a new and welcomed way of apportioning autonomy and accountability in public education. Not surprisingly, however, pressures to increase governmental intervention over the last two decades have been stronger than were earlier hopes of keeping government at bay. Given the inevitable creation across the country of bad charter schools among terrific ones, chartering institutions must have the authority to step in to protect children. But that authority must not be permitted to become a backdoor to imposing rules and regulations that have stifled innovation in district public schools.

Digital Learning

Center of the American Experiment already has played a role in strengthening digital education in Minnesota, as two recommendations in a paper we published in January 2012—*Online Learning: A Literal New World of Possibilities for Minnesota K-12 Education*—were subsequently made law. The first had to do with reviewing all pertinent state laws and rules to determine whether they inhibit the growth of digital education. That legislation was passed in 2012. That paper of mine also recommended rescinding the state prohibition against colleges and universities actively informing high school

students and their families of the academic and economic benefits of taking advantage of Post-Secondary Enrollment Options.²¹ That prohibition was partially lifted—covering portions of the state comprising a majority of students—by the 2014 Legislature and then signed into law by Gov. Mark Dayton.

The next two recommendations are pulled directly from a draft report by the K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council, which had been charged by the Legislature to review which Minnesota statutes and rules limit the expansion of digital learning.²² The first recommendation deals with licensing reciprocity and the second with program-specific licensing.

Recommendation 12: Fully implement the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification Interstate Agreement.

Thirty-eight states participate in the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification Interstate Agreement. This allows teachers to receive a teaching license if they have completed a state-approved teacher preparation program from a regionally accredited institution (not just from an institution in the state in question), or have a minimum of twenty-seven months of successful, fulltime teaching experience under a NASDTEC member state’s valid Level II educator certificate. Minnesota is a signatory to this agreement but does not take advantage of what it has to offer. *Minnesota should fully implement this teacher reciprocity agreement, as our state (in the words of the Advisory Council), “has an opportunity to expand its teaching force by qualifying the best prepared and most experienced online teachers, regardless of location of licensure or teacher residence.”*

Recommendation 13: Permit content specialist to be licensed without a school of education degree.

Content specialists should be permitted to become licensed teachers without completing a degree at a school of education. High Tech High in California, for example, has been granted authority by the State of California to train and license teachers so they might effectively teach in the distinctive school. *Minnesota should allow similar routes to classrooms.*

Recommendation 14: Eliminate restriction on advertising Post-Secondary Enrollment Options.

Limitations on colleges and universities advertising their PSEO opportunities should be eliminated.

Recommendation 15: Get out of the way of education entrepreneurs.

Given that digital education is a force, there is no need for state government to spend





much, if any, money or energy inventing novel ways of exploiting it. There are plenty of education entrepreneurs doing precisely that. The most important contribution the Minnesota Department of Education and the rest of state government can make in expanding digital education is to get out of the way.

Likely Results

What are the likely results if recommendations like those outlined in this chapter are adopted either in full or substantial part? It would be wonderfully satisfying to see educational performance of all Minnesota students rise across the board. But that's just not the way education works. If one thing has been learned in decades of perpetual efforts to improve schooling in America, it's that moving achievement "needles" is just about as hard as finding them in haystacks.

What can be said with confidence about the proposals here is that, if adopted, they would afford young Minnesotans—be they strong students, weak students, or somewhere between—larger opportunities to be all they can be. Expanded choices will increase their chances of achieving closer to their potential, for both their sake and our state and nation's sake. This is the case because when it comes to intricate organizations—very much including schools and school systems—barnacled obstacles are best cleared, and new paths best discovered, by competition.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson and Ludger Woessmann, “Teaching Math to the Talented: Which Countries—and States—are Producing High-Achieving Students?” *Education Next* (Winter 2011), available at <http://educationnext.org/teaching-math-to-the-talented/>. They also find, “The only OECD countries producing a smaller percentage of advanced math students than the United States are Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and Mexico.” For an unabridged version of this study, see Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson and Ludger Woessmann, U.S. Math Performance in Global Perspective: How well does each state do at producing high-achieving students, Program on Education Policy and Governance Report No.: 10-19 (Harvard University, November 2010), available at http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG10-19_HanushekPetersonWoessmann.pdf.

² Mitch Pearlstein, *Minnesota’s Immense Achievement Gaps: The Untapped Promise of Vouchers* (Center of the American Experiment, May 2014): p. 8, available at http://www.americanexperiment.org/sites/default/files/article_pdf/Promise%20of%20Vouchers.pdf.

³ Michael B. Henderson, William G. Howell, and Paul E. Peterson, “Information Fuels Support for School Reform,” *Education Next* (Spring 2014), available at <http://educationnext.org/information-fuels-support-for-school-reform/>.

⁴ Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About Our Schools—and Why It Isn’t So* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005): p. 9.

⁵ Over the years I’ve seen studies in which the United States spends anywhere from the most in the world per K-12 student to fifth most. Here are two such examples, with the first having the United States first worldwide. “U.S. Spending and Performance vs. the World,’ Average spending per school-aged child,” *Inside USC [University of Southern California] Rossier Online Blog*, February 8, 2011, at <http://rossieronline.usc.edu/u-s-education-versus-the-world-infographic/>. The United States is fifth in this next citation. Julia Ryan, “American Schools vs. the World: Expensive, Unequal, and Bad at Math,” *The Atlantic*, December 3, 2013, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/12/american-schools-vs-the-world-expensive-unequal-bad-at-math/281983/>.

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⁷ Anthony P. Carnevale and Nicole Smith, “Workplace Basics: The Skills Employees Need and Employers Want,” *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (November 2013).

⁸ Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, Ludger Woessmann, *Endangering Prosperity: A Global View of the American School* (Washington, DC: AEI, 2013): p. 52.

⁹ Eric A. Hanushek, “The Economic Value of Education and Cognitive Skills,” in *Handbook of Education Policy Research*, eds. Gary Sykes, Barbara Schneider, and David N. Plank (New York: Routledge, 2009): pp. 43-44, available at <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Hanushek%202009%20HndbEducPolicyResearch.pdf>.

¹⁰ Greg Forster, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice* (The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, April 2013): p. 1, available at <http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/A-Win-Win-Solution--The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.aspx>. This reference applies to the first two bullets.





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¹⁵ Mitch Pearlstein, *Online Learning: A Literal New World of Possibilities for Minnesota K-12 Education* (Center of the American Experiment, January 2012): p. 19, available at <http://www.americanexperiment.org/publications/reports/online-learning>.

¹⁶ John Merrow, “Can Rocketship Launch a Fleet of Successful, Mass-Produced Schools?” *PBS NewsHour*, December 28, 2012, available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education-july-dec12-rocket_12-28/.

¹⁷ Pearlstein, *Online Learning*: p. 13.

¹⁸ Schools can get temporary community expert waivers, but only on a limited basis.

¹⁹ Pearlstein, *Online Learning*: p. 14.

²⁰ Paul E. Peterson, *Saving Schools: From Horace Mann to Virtual Learning* (Cambridge, MA; Belknap, 2012): pp. 231-32.

²¹ Simply put, school districts had pushed for the restriction not wanting to lose portions of student funding to colleges, universities, and other postsecondary institutions.

²² Minnesota K-12 Online Learning Advisory Council, *Removing the Barriers to Digital Learning in Minnesota*: pp. 33, 36.



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