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Learning From Each Other: Better Schools and a Brighter Future

JOE NATHAN, PhD

Recent Minnesota experience shows that it is possible to make rapid, significant improvement in our public schools. Despite the skepticism of some and opposition of others, Governor Perpich's school choice initiatives helped thousands of youngsters, while not producing the chaos opponents predicted. This paper argues that we should build on the success of recent reforms to rethink the roles of parents and students in our schools. While Minnesota has the nation's highest graduation rate and above-average test scores, additional reforms are necessary if we are to continue to make economic and social progress.

But not enough attention has been given to the enormous impact of increasing parent involvement and changing our view of youth.

Some authorities insist that it will take years before any reforms have a clear impact. They argue that governors, legislators, businesspeople and the general public must be both more generous and more patient with the schools. This paper disagrees with pleas for greater patience. There is considerable evidence—both anecdotal and empirical—that the strategies suggested here will have an *immediate*, significant impact. More money can have an impact, but it must be carefully spent. Otherwise there will be no significant improvement in graduation rates or student achievement.

There is a great deal of discussion about the importance of "restructuring" public schools. While there is no agreed upon definition of this term, it often refers to increasing opportunities for teachers and principals to decide how their school will operate, and to establishing new career ladders for teachers. These steps can be valuable, but they are far from sufficient. It is critical to rethink the role of *parents* and *students* themselves as we change the way in which schools operate.

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The actions proposed in this paper are not the only useful steps which states, districts and businesses could take. But they probably are among the most cost-efficient—the strategies which will produce the most improvement for the dollars spent. Expanding high quality early childhood education and increasing the number of minority teachers are examples of other important strategies. But not enough attention has been given to the enormous impact of increasing parent involvement and changing our view of youth. Outstanding, recently developed models are available to guide those who wish to move ahead.

Is Major Reform of Minnesota Schools Necessary?

In his first speech on assuming the chair of the Western Governors' Association, Washington's Booth Gardner departed from his prepared text to tell his fellow governors, "The single most important thing we can do to improve our states' economies is to improve our states' schools." Gardner cited evidence showing that students who complete school are far more likely to live fulfilling, positive, productive lives (1). The National Governors' Association, the Committee for Economic Development and the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy agree: Better schools mean better lives for our citizens (2-6).

The consequences of dropping out of school are staggering.

- Males who drop out are estimated to earn \$414,000 less during their lives than male high school graduates.
- In 1986, the unemployment rate for young adult dropouts from 16 to 24 years old was double that of high school graduates. Those with fewer than 12 years of schooling comprise a large portion of the long term unemployed.
- 23 percent of respondents in a national Gallup Poll with less than a high school diploma were dissatisfied with their personal lives, compared with 14 percent of all respondents and only 6 percent of college graduates.
- Dropouts even tend to be in poorer health (7).

Dropouts represent not only individual, but societal tragedies. Stanford professor Henry Levin identified seven social consequences of failing to complete high school: forgone national income; forgone tax revenues for the support of government services; increased demand for social services; increased crime; reduced political participation; reduced intergenerational mobility, and poorer levels of health (8). But reducing the dropout rate is not enough. The average high school graduate must have stronger academic,

thinking, and problem solving skills to meet economic and social challenges.

Americans are asked to make difficult decisions. Advertisers often try to sell products by playing on insecurities and fears. Selecting political leaders requires evaluating sophisticated, though often general promises. Well-paying, low skilled factory jobs are disappearing, with many corporations transferring such jobs overseas. The U.S. needs more people who can think clearly, write well, and develop innovative products, services, and solutions.

Although Minnesota students traditionally have done somewhat better than the national average, there is plenty of reason for concern. While this state has the nation's highest graduation rate, the number of students who leave prior to graduation has increased during the last two academic years, while the overall number of students in grades 7-12 is decreasing. Official figures (9) show that between 1982-83 and 1986-87:

- the total 7-12 enrollment *dropped* from 362,084 to 332,083
- the number of students dropping out per year *increased* from 7,653 to 9,431
- the percentage of public school 9th graders not graduating rose from 9.27 to 11.29 percent, an increase of more than two percent.

Moreover, results released in September 1988, show that Minnesota students have dropped below national averages on some college entrance tests. Recognizing the importance of more effective schools, Governor Rudy Perpich urged that the state aim for "96 by 96," i.e. a 96 percent graduation rate by 1996. Major changes are needed if our schools are to achieve this goal.

Parent Involvement

Rationale and Summary of Research

Parent involvement is one of the most praised, powerful and underused school reform tools. Virtually everyone is in favor of it, but parents and educators agree that not nearly enough of it is happening.

Parent involvement can include a variety of steps, including helping students with school homework, supplementing school assignments, volunteering in a school, attending conferences with teachers, disciplining students who misbehave in school, and serving on school or district advisory committees. Parents who work closely with their children's teachers have more successful students. One of the most encouraging findings of recent research is that parents can be taught to be more involved, and that dramatic increases in parent involvement and student achievement can occur with all kinds of parents. Race and income level need not be a barrier (10-12).

Studies summarized by Anne Henderson (10) show that parent involvement

- raises academic achievement.
- improves attitude and performance of children at school.
- helps parents understand and support the work of schools.
- enables parents and children to communicate better.
- builds better school-community relationships.

If parent involvement is such a good idea, why isn't it happening more? There are several reasons. First, many parents report being intimidated by schools. They feel

unwelcome. They have unfavorable memories of their own education and doubt they can be very helpful to their children. Before becoming involved in an Arkansas program to show low income families how they can help their preschool children, one parent explained, "I always knew I could feed and clothe my son, but I never tried to teach him anything because I thought anything I taught him would be wrong (13)." Some parents report that educators call them "pushy" if they suggest development of advisory councils or ask to participate in site-management councils. Moreover, millions of parents are functionally illiterate and can not help their children much. And parents report that teachers often do not give them specific ideas about ways to help their children.

Parent attitude is critical. If parents think the teachers are doing a fine job without them, the parents are less likely to think it important to work with their children. A recent international survey of Chinese, Japanese, and American parents with fifth grade children found that the American parents had a much more positive attitude toward their children's schools than did the Asian parents. The American parents surveyed lived in the Minneapolis area. They held these attitudes despite the fact that their fifth grade children scored far below Asian students on academic achievement tests (14).

The tendency to forget the importance of parent involvement is illustrated in a recent Minnesota report on improving teacher education. A statewide task force produced 20 pages of recommendations without once mentioning ways to help prospective teachers learn how to involve parents in their children's education (15).

A third explanation for limited parent involvement involves recent recommendations for empowering teachers. The push for greater *educator* professionalism has encouraged many people to think of smaller, rather than larger roles for parents. The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession report is an excellent example of this tendency (6). This report is probably the most widely distributed and promoted teacher professionalism report of the 1980s.

A reader will find few references to parent involvement in the Carnegie report. In the six page visionary "scenario" offered by the report, teachers meet with parents to discuss what parents want for their children. But, "the professional teacher runs the school with an Executive Committee of Lead Teachers in overall charge." The committee working to restructure the school is composed of teachers. Teachers select the lead teacher. A model law drafted by a state legislator who was a member of the Carnegie Task Force establishes school site councils which are dominated by teachers, and which may include other people (such as parents) *at the discretion* of the committee. Expanding opportunities for teachers will not necessarily reduce the parent's role, but parents often are left out of discussions about "restructuring schools."

One large study found that educators and parents have very different views of parent involvement. Researchers surveyed more than 3,000 parents and 4,000 educators and learned that everyone favored more parent involvement. The study listed four possible methods: public relations, school support/learning, home support/learning, and shared governance. Public relations included talking with school boards, businesses and other groups on behalf of the school; school support included fundraising and volunteering in the school classrooms or media centers; home support included helping students complete assignments and helping discipline youngsters; and shared governance included serving on

advisory committees with educators. Each of these four strategies was supported by a significant majority of parents. But educators were uncomfortable with parents as advocates or as members of advisory committees (16).

Another reason that parent involvement rarely achieves its potential is that teachers often report frustrating experiences with parents. Most educators can cite parents who refused to help out when asked. Many teachers believe that parents are too busy to help out.

Sadly, most educators receive little if any training in how to carry out effective parent education programs. The Washington, D.C.-based Home and School Institute has conducted workshops all over the country for educators on ways to increase parent involvement, and one of the most frequent reactions on evaluation forms is "No one ever showed me how to do this before (17)." This means most educators did not receive training in how to conduct a parent conference; how to show parents ways they can help their children do better in class; what to do over the summer to maintain academic progress, etc. The Institute's director, Dorothy Rich, concludes that, "Educators need to know the research and they need to know how to help parents see themselves as new-style teachers of their children. This training, to date, has not been provided to teachers at either the preservice or inservice level (11)."

Business should but usually don't distribute materials to employees and customers showing them how their children can do better in school. But the Home and School Institute found that in communities where this was done, the benefits were immediate and measurable. Businesses discovered that for the small cost of materials, they received a significant public relations benefit. Moreover, parents reported that they did employ the suggested strategies, and that their students' school performance improved. So it is possible to make progress, with relatively little money.

What Actions Can Be Taken?

Local schools and districts can institute programs which

- (1) provide weekly reports to parents on student progress.
- (2) give parents specific information about how they can help their children do better in school.
- (3) train teachers to conduct more effective parent conferences.
- (4) encourage educators to spend a few minutes calling parents of their students.

Business can

- (1) distribute materials and provide other opportunities for employees to learn how they can help their children do better in school.
- (2) permit employees to leave work occasionally to attend teacher conferences and volunteer in the school.

Governors and state legislators can

- (1) speak out about the importance of parent involvement.
- (2) honor schools and businesses where parent involvement is valued, encouraged, and practiced.
- (3) fund training programs for parents and educators.

Noteworthy Programs

a. *Arkansas* has started a Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY). Preliminary results showed as

much as 33 month gains for four and five year olds after sixteen months of participation. Both parents and children are motivated.

a. *Pennsylvania* developed a state program to encourage parent involvement. The Governor appeared on public service announcements broadcast by television stations throughout the state, emphasizing the theme of "Parents Be a Part of It." The State Department of Education developed materials showing parents and educators how parent involvement could improve student performance. Workshops on parent involvement were held throughout the state for educators and parents. The State Board of Education gives awards to schools which have encouraged parent involvement, and to outstanding parent volunteers.

b. The *Washington, D.C.-based Home and School Institute* has worked with school districts throughout the country to increase parent involvement. The Institute has developed materials which can be distributed by educators and businesses to parents, showing them how to help their children do better in school. Studies done after the Home and School Institute-trained educators show that students involved in their projects show significantly more progress on standardized tests, and major attitude improvements, compared with students in a control group.

c. The Columbia, Maryland-based group *National Committee for Citizens in Education* has spent the last fifteen years helping educators and parents understand ways parent involvement can increase achievement and reduce dropouts. They have published a variety of useful reports and guides.

Viewing Youth as a Resource, Not Just a Recipient of Service

Rationale

In most of the nation's classrooms, teachers talk *at* students. However, considerable evidence shows that most students learn best by "doing" . . . by having at least some "real world" experience and opportunity to experiment. The challenge for educators is finding a way to provide these experiences. We are not talking simply about providing time for young people to volunteer in some school or community group, although such activities can be useful. Instead, the proposal is to change the instructional method in many classrooms, so that educators combine academic work with service to others. This is happening in some places. For example,

- In Ortonville, Minnesota, 13-17 year old students use their school's computers to help their farmer-parents run more efficient farms. The students use "what-if" electronic forecasting programs to determine, for example, whether farmers will get a better return investing \$400 in more fertilizer for fields or better feed for the livestock.
- In a Cedar Rapids, Iowa, public high school students operate a variety of service projects. These include a day care center for children of teachers and students, a "baketeria" which supplies schools throughout the district, and a large garden which supplies fresh vegetables for senior citizens in the neighborhood.
- In St. Paul, Minnesota, 5-8 year olds worked with a volunteer university architect student to design, gather materials for, and build a new playground for their public school. The students' playground cost less than \$10.00. Twelve through eighteen year olds, as part of a course of consumer law, solved 75 percent of the 300 consumer problems adults referred to them.

- In Worthington, Minnesota, high school students study the history and customs of their area as part of English and Social studies courses. The students produce a periodic magazine about the region's history and culture which is distributed locally.

Projects like these, which combine classroom work with community service, were studied by University of Minnesota professor Dr. Diane Hedin. She and colleague Dan Conrad compared attitudes and skills of 1500 students from across the country who had participated in such programs with an equal number of students who were not involved in these courses (18). They identified benefits from "action learning" courses:

1. Benefits to the student. These programs often improve critical thinking and problem solving—the kind of skills which are low in most National Assessment of Educational Progress, Iowa, College Entrance and other national testing programs. They help young people see themselves as positive, contributing members of the society, as people who can make a difference in the world. They help students learn skills which will be critical as adults, such as persistence, cooperative problem solving, independent thinking, etc. Community service programs also can serve as valuable career exploration programs. Seventy seven percent of the participating students said they learned more from these programs than from conventional courses.
2. Benefits to the school. Practical benefits to the school include improved public relations, more school pride and spirit, higher quality program with more direct assistance to students while nurturing their idealism.
3. Benefits to the community. These programs respond to particular local needs, can help bring the community and school together (19).

Peer tutoring programs are among the most powerful forms of youth service. Henry Levin has compared the cost-effectiveness of tutoring with three other interventions (20). In addition to youth tutoring, Levin studied the effectiveness in estimated months of achievement gain in mathematics and reading of using computer-assisted instruction, decreasing class sizes by five to fifteen students, and extending the school day (Table 1). Levin found peer cross age tutoring to be significantly more cost-effective than other proposed reforms.

Combining classroom work with community service is one way to provide new roles for youth. Another valuable approach involves establishment of mentor and apprenticeship programs. There are many benefits to these programs which allow young people to work closely with adults in a variety of professions.

Numerous studies show that most high school students know very little about the vast array of jobs available. They also don't know much about day-to-day responsibilities of different occupations. Most high schools teach career courses. But simply reading and talking about careers isn't enough to help young people make informed decisions.

Some schools have developed "shadow study, internship or apprenticeship" programs. In a "shadow study," students spend a day or two following a person at work. Ideally, students are prepared with a list of things to look for, and a few questions to ask. Students might, for example, look at the different skills the person needs, and the different tasks a person is expected to perform. Students are fascinated to learn that some occupations require getting to work at a certain time, while others leave work time up to the individual.

Table 1. Estimated annual cost to obtain additional month of student achievement per year of instruction.

Intervention	Mathematics	Reading
Longer School Day	\$203	\$87
Computer Assisted Instruction	100	52
Peer Cross Age Tutoring	22	44
Reducing Class Size		
From	To	
35	30	75
30	25	90
25	20	104
35	20	91

In the more successful internships, students have clear responsibilities. They might help research a potential law or investigate a constituent's complaint for a city council member or state legislator. They might assist a day care center teacher or a local television reporter, conduct research for a stockbroker or help prepare cultures for a scientist.

The St. Paul (public) Open School established an internship program in 1973. It found that one person in charge helped the program run more effectively. Parents and community members were asked if they would supervise a student for a set period of time. Gradually the school developed several hundred placements, including photographers, pet store owners, legislators, doctors, restaurant cooks. Many students said their internship experiences had a *powerful* impact on what they did after graduating from high school. In some cases, internships confirmed a job or career which students thought they were interested in. In other cases, students learned they would not be happy in a particular field.

Labeling students makes it easier to justify their failure. Labeling a child "at risk" makes it less likely the child will be seen as an individual; more likely that the child will not do well.

In considering these programs, some people wonder if they should be offered primarily to "at risk" students. One authority included the following students in that group, "School dropouts, chronic truants, underachievers, economically disadvantaged, migrants, non-English speakers, runaways, delinquents, substance abusers, pregnant teens, unemployed teens and those who feel alienated and unconnected to their communities. (21)"

People who have been involved in education over the last twenty years have heard such labels before: "disadvantaged, culturally disadvantaged," etc. There are several problems with such classifications.

First, there is a great deal of research about teacher expectations and student performance. If teachers have high expectations of students, the youngsters are much more likely to succeed than if teachers think students have little chance to complete assignments and do well. Labeling students makes it easier to justify their failure. Labeling a child "at risk"

makes it less likely the child will be seen as an individual; more likely that the child will not do well because of the expectations that are created when the label is applied.

Secondly, *all* youngsters in this society are, in important ways, "at risk." Of course youngsters born into low income families living in dangerous urban housing projects or isolated rural areas face enormous barriers. But suicide is the second leading cause of death among teenagers, and the U.S. has one of the highest rates of youth suicide of any nation in the world. Eating disorders and chemical abuse are wide spread problems in many affluent areas. All youngsters, whether affluent or low income, regardless of race and background, have certain strengths and weaknesses. Almost 20 years ago, Mario Fantini and Gerald Weinstein of the University of Massachusetts argues that virtually all students were in danger of not succeeding because the nation's education system was not set up to build on students' strengths, as well as responding to their weaknesses (22).

Recently the Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools at Johns Hopkins University completed a major study of ways to help "at risk" students. They concluded that, "The most cost-effective and efficient way, of course, (to improve performance and increase learning for at-risk students) would be through comprehensive classroom instructional programs that work for all students, including those at risk (23)."

Changing the way we view youth and giving them the opportunity and responsibility to learn while serving, are central to improving education for *all* students. It's not simply offering youth the opportunity to volunteer for a few hours. We ought to rethink the way schools are organized, and learning opportunities are provided, so that most courses include some opportunity to apply what is being learned, and some chance to learn by helping others.

What Actions Can be Taken?

- Local schools and school districts can develop programs which combine classroom work and community service.
- Colleges of education can offer courses which help prospective and present educators learn how to establish these programs.
- State legislatures can fund training programs.
- Legislators and Governors can praise outstanding programs, visit these programs, and encourage others to adopt the best practices which have been developed elsewhere.
- State Departments of Education can encourage these programs by providing training using outstanding educators as key instructors, and can produce videotapes and booklets about outstanding programs in their own and other states.
- Business can allow students to participate in "shadow studies" and "internships," and encourage employees to occasionally welcome students in such programs.

Minnesota Schools Can Change: The Case of Open Enrollment

Some people wonder if major changes such as those suggested above can be made quickly and if they will have much impact. Experience with open enrollment shows it is possible and that results will be encouraging.

In January, 1985, Governor Rudy Perpich proposed that families throughout Minnesota should have more options about public schools. He recommended that families be allowed to select among public schools in their own and

other districts, so long as the receiving district has room and the movement does not harm desegregation efforts. He also suggested that public school juniors and seniors be allowed to attend colleges, universities, and vocational-technical colleges.

Perpich's proposals represented the melding of three powerful ideas. He stressed expansion of educational opportunity, recognition that there is no one best school for all students, and use of controlled market forces to stimulate improvement among schools.

The Governor's recommendations were widely debated. They were endorsed by groups such as the state PTA, League of Women Voters, Minnesota Business Partnership and elementary and secondary school principals. The Minnesota Education Association, Minnesota Federation of Teachers, schools boards, and school administrators opposed them.

Within three years, his ideas were adopted, and more than a dozen states have passed or are considering legislation based on Minnesota's. When Perpich originally made his recommendations, a statewide poll found Minnesotans opposed them by a margin of 60 to 33 percent. A 1988 poll found opinions had shifted to 62 percent in favor, 34 percent opposed (25,26).

The national press noticed—front page stories appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times*, along with major stories in publications including *U.S. News and World Report* and *Newsweek*.

In 1985, the Post-Secondary Options Act was passed by the Legislature. This allows public school juniors and seniors to take courses in colleges, universities, and vocational-technical institutes. Tax funds pay all tuition, books and materials charges. State funds follow students. If a student spends half time in the high school and half at college, each institution receives half of the state allocation.

Opponents feared that high school students would not do well in college, but in most post-secondary institutions the high school students' grade point average has been as high or higher than the freshman class average.

Results of the Post-Secondary Options Program have been encouraging. During its first three years, more than 10,000 students have participated. Hundreds of these students had been dropouts; students who left high school in boredom or disgust. Opponents feared that high schools would be drained of students but only about 4 percent of those eligible have taken post-secondary courses, and most took only a few courses. Opponents feared that even if the numbers were not large, participants would include the "best and brightest," leaving less interested students in high school. But about two-thirds of the participants report their high school average grade was "B", "C", or "D." Opponents feared that high school students would not do well in college, but in most post secondary institutions the high school students' grade point average has been as high or higher than the freshman class average. Some feared that mostly affluent students would participate. But many students using the program are the first in their families to attend a post-secondary institution. Some expected the program would take an enormous amount of money away from high schools. But in its first year, despite 3600 students participating, high schools lost only one-tenth of one per cent of their funding. Ninety percent of

the participating students said they were learning more than if they had taken only high school courses, and about 90 percent of the parents said their youngsters were spending more time studying than they had when taking only high school courses (27). The number of participants has grown to 5400.

Post-Secondary Options benefit those who decide to stay in their high schools, as well as those who take courses elsewhere. High schools all over the state have responded to the Post Secondary Options by improving their own programs and by establishing new cooperative arrangements with other high schools or post-secondary institutions (28). The program's success convinced Colorado and Maine to adopt similar programs.

Because of the state's experience with Post Secondary Options, the 1987 Minnesota Legislature passed new laws expanding educator and parental choice among public schools. *High School Graduation Incentives* permit students ages 12-18 who have not succeeded in one public school to attend another public school outside the district, so long as the receiving district has room and students' movement does not have a negative impact on desegregation. Criteria used to indicate lack of success include low test scores or grades, chemical dependency, excessive truancy or expulsion. During the program's first semester (fall 1987), about 1400 students enrolled in the program. Researchers found that "over 50 percent of HSGI students are re-enrolled dropouts." This means that in its first six months, the program helped convince more than 700 young people that they should return to high school (29).

Another related law is called the *Enrollment Options Program*. Parents of children ages five to eighteen may send their children to public schools outside their district of residence if *both districts* approve the transfer. The law was passed late in the 1987 session, limited publicity was provided, and families had to apply during the summer of 1987 if they wanted to transfer. Ninety-five of Minnesota's 435 school districts agreed to participate during the first year. (151 districts, which enroll 49 percent of Minnesota's students, agreed to participate in 1988-89). One hundred thirty seven students used the law to transfer in September 1987, while 435 students are participating in 1988-89. One hundred percent of parents participating in the 1987-88 school year whose children are not graduating said they intend to use the program again the following year.

The 1988 Legislature amended the law so that beginning in 1989, families do not need approval of the district in which they live to transfer to another public school district. Parents offered various reasons for transfers:

"My child needed a more flexible program that allows her to use the community extensively to pursue her many interests. Our home district has very rigid requirements not suited to her needs and abilities."

"The resident district has no auto mech, welding, aviation, slow learning English classes."

"To meet child's needs for more accelerated Art courses."

"Half the distance."

"The new district has a larger school with more learning disabled facilities and teachers."

"My son has been attending the nonresident district for four years. He is Black and this option was open to us. We were *very* satisfied with the nonresident schools. We see a vast difference in quality of education."

Forty four percent of families said the major reason for participation was better curriculum and academics; 26 percent, location (closer to daycare, job or home); 23 percent, more options; 21 percent, social benefits... social problems alleviated; 16 percent, better teaching; 14 percent, more specialized classes; 7 percent, parents attended there; and 7 percent, complete high school or maintain continuity after family moved (30).

These results show it is possible to make big changes in a short time. Minnesota is open to rethinking attitudes. There are several areas in which this is overdue.

Conclusion

Parents, educators, and policy-makers can help make a dramatic difference in our public schools. Existing programs show we can improve student achievement while reducing the number of youngsters who leave school prior to graduation. Tinkering on the edges will have a limited impact. If we are to make major progress, we must rethink the way parents and students are treated. However, models exist which can help guide the way. The examples offered in this article show that improvement is not just a theoretical goal...it can happen. The author is eager to talk with others who are intrigued by these suggestions.

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