



Summary of Meeting with Angela Eilers

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, August 22, 2008

Guest speaker: Angela Eilers , research and policy director, Growth & Justice

Present : Verne Johnson, chair; David Broden, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), John Moaty, Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —Today's meeting is one of several that the Civic Caucus is scheduling to obtain background on key education issues facing Minnesota.

B. Honoring John Brandl —Verne asked for a moment of silence in honor and memory of John Brandl, who died this week. Brandl was the first Civic Caucus speaker about three years ago. The summary of our meeting with Brandl on September 14, 2005, may be found at http://www.civiccaucus.org/Interviews/Brandl_John_09-14-05.htm .

C. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Angela Eilers**, research and policy director, Growth & Justice, a Minnesota-based nonprofit economic think tank. Eilers has been engaged as an educational researcher/evaluator, professor, and advocate of educational policy issues since 1989. Her area of expertise is in reform, implementation, and evaluation of educational issues as they intersect with issues of urban and rural poverty. Eilers holds a Ph.D. and M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a bachelor's degree in political science from Lawrence University. Before joining Growth & Justice, she was part of a multi-institutional team of researchers at Stanford University that examined the implementation of an urban education reform. She was awarded a Bush Foundation fellowship in 2008.

D. Comments and discussion —During Eilers' comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Increase percentage of Minnesotans with post-secondary education —Growth & Justice has a goal of using smart investments to increase the number of Minnesotan's with a post-secondary education by 50 percent by 2020. Eilers said that a high school diploma no longer is sufficient for two earners to make a basic needs budget wage (\$44,000) for a family of four. Currently about one in two high school graduates has received post-secondary education by age 25 in Minnesota, she said. When you factor in those who drop out of high school before graduation, the percentage without post-secondary education is even greater, she said. About one in four persons who enter ninth grade don't graduate with a post-secondary degree, she said. The public expense associated with high school dropouts is a culmination of \$1 million per dropout, she said.

2. We're moving backwards on educational achievement —Growth & Justice is looking first at how well Minnesota is doing in achieving existing K-12 outcomes that have been mandated by the State Legislature. Achieving these outcomes, Eilers said, will be key in determining an adequate base for ultimately increasing by 50 percent the number of students finishing post-secondary education.

The legislatively-prescribed outcomes, she said, are that within five years (by 2013) (a) all 3rd graders will be reading at or above their grade level, (b) all students must pass algebra 1 by the end of 8th grade, and (c) all high schoolers prepared for post-secondary school must have completed algebra II, and chemistry/physics.

Eilers distributed a chart illustrating how well students are doing. The chart entitled "Not on Track," revealed substantial percentages of all children are below expectations, with the highest percentages among non-white groups. For example, the percentage of fourth graders reading below proficiency standards of the National Assessment of Educational Progress was 59 percent for whites, 71 percent for Asian; 78 percent for low income; 80 percent for native Americans, 84 percent for Hispanic, and 88 percent for African-American.

If students are lagging in basic skills in the elementary grades, they're less likely to graduate from high school, let alone be prepared for post-secondary, Eilers said.

3. Identifying which investments work best in improving education —Eilers is preparing a detailed list of options for improving education in Minnesota from pre-natal to post-secondary. Growth & Justice hired seven economists to identify the best options. The options are being ranked according to research findings on how they have worked in various settings and experiments in the past. The findings also have identified a dollar return on investment for each option. The total expense would be about \$1 billion a year. Partial list of options and results:

a. Pre-natal to age 3— A program of prenatal care, with health care access, parent monitoring and home visits for poverty-level families would yield a \$6-to-\$1 return on investment and would cost an estimated \$20 million annually for some 30,000 families in Minnesota. Half-day pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds would yield a \$7-to-\$1 return on investment and cost an estimated \$60 million annually to serve 17,000 poverty-level pre-schoolers.

b. Pre-K to grade 3— Quality half-day preschool, a \$10-to-\$1 return on investment, at a cost of \$6,000 per student for some 8,600 students.

c. K-12 —Increase teacher pay by 10 percent, with increases tied to performance outcomes. Estimated 4-to-1 investment return, with annual cost of \$270 million in Minnesota.

d. Grades 9-12 —Rigorous college-prep curriculum, family advocacy, instructional alignment, and engagement. Estimated \$6.72-to-\$1 investment return, with \$860 million annual cost.

e. Grades 7-12 —Dropout prevention. Estimated \$4.77-to-\$1 investment return.

4. Analysis of historical data —The best data available are for early childhood learning and development, Eilers said, with data going back to the 1960s.

5. Importance of knitting child care/pre-school with the K-12 system —While it is not essential that child care/pre-school be organized in the same structure with K-12, Eilers emphasized that unity of purpose and program is essential for success.

Eilers cited the Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program, in Chicago, as reported by research done by Prof Arthur Reynolds at the U of M, as the best model for a seamless connection between pre-school and public school. The program provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to economically disadvantaged children from preschool to early elementary school.

6. Under-investment in child care/pre-school —Minnesota ranks 37th among 38 states where data are available on investment in pre-school, Eilers said.

7. Reduced class size most needed in early grades —Reducing pupil-teacher ratios to 15-1 or 18-1 in the early grades yields the best returns on improved education, Eilers said. Beyond third grade the evidence is not as clear. Only reducing class size isn't sufficient, she said. California invested some \$11 billion in reducing class size, but wasn't really successful, because other qualities such as quality training of teachers and intensive instructional focus weren't implemented at the same time.

8. Advantages of tutoring and mentoring —Programs with heavy emphasis on involving adult volunteers, Big Brothers/Big Sisters type programs, and para-professionals to assist in tutoring and mentoring have very good success, Eilers said. A Civic Caucus member mentioned that retired engineers are being encouraged to devote time in schools.

9. What about vocational education? —A Civic Caucus member wondered whether it's appropriate to insist on advanced math courses for all high schoolers. Wouldn't it be better, the member asked, if some students—who might never succeed in higher math—are encouraged to move earlier to a vocational school?

Eilers replied by highlighting the importance of student-motivation in taking high school courses, which, she said underlines the need for volunteer mentors. As well, Eilers added, rigorous math coursework is not only necessary for college preparation but increasingly rigorous math schools are required for an increasing number of occupations and degree programs-vocational as well as professional.

A Civic Caucus member mentioned the positive experience that many persons have with Twin Cities Rise, an organization that helps adults develop self confidence and find suitable vocations.

10. Keys to completion of post-secondary education —Eilers identified major components that are key to a student's completion of post-secondary education, whether a two-year program or some other length:

—Academic preparedness in high school

—Overcoming the social component in families with limited or no history of post-secondary education.

—Lowering financial barriers. Research demonstrates, Eilers said, that providing scholarships to low income students is preferable to reducing tuition for everyone. Tuition increases are often a reflection of the increased cost of doing business (i.e. cost of living increases, health care expense, etc).

11. Critical importance of learning to read in the early grades —A child who doesn't learn to read by third grade is destined to fall further behind, Eilers said. She said she can't emphasize enough the importance of learning to read. Helpers can have the greatest impact here, she said.

12. Recommendations to be forthcoming from Growth & Justice —Eilers said she works with a 25-member steering committee at Growth & Justice. That steering committee will be reviewing the group's final report to be published before mid-October. Eilers and Growth & Justice staff will be distributing the report widely and making numerous public presentations around the region and the state. For those interested in inviting Eilers/Growth & Justice to speak at an event, please contact Growth & Justice at info@growthandjustice.org

13. Future of movement for individualized, computer-based learning —In response to a question Eilers briefly addressed the model of on-line education through such groups as Capella University. That model, she said, can be very expensive. It might be too early to know its potential and limitations, she said.

14. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Eilers for meeting with us today.