



# Summary of Meeting with Richard Oscarson and Fred Storti

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, October 3, 2008*

**Guest speakers:** **Richard Oscarson**, president, and **P. Fred Storti**, executive director, Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA)

**Present** : Verne C. Johnson, chair (by phone), David Broden, Charles Clay (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Marina Lyon (by phone), Tim McDonald, Jim Olson (by phone), Wayne Popham (by phone), and Clarence Shallbetter (by phone)

**A. Context of the meeting** —Among issues the Civic Caucus is considering for priority attention is education. We've been holding several sessions. Today we're meeting with top officials in the state's organization of elementary school principals.

**B. Welcome and introduction** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Richard Oscarson**, president, and **P. Fred Storti**, executive director, of the Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA). Oscarson currently is principal of Eastview Elementary School, Lakeville, MN. He has spent 22 years as a principal at three different schools. Previously he spent 10 years as a 2nd and 3rd grade teacher. He is an adjunct professor at St. Mary's University.

Storti has been executive director of MESPA since 2002. Previously he had served as principal and as superintendent in urban, suburban and rural schools in Minnesota for 27 years.. He serves as chair of the national association of executive directors of elementary and secondary school principals. He is chair of the Structure Committee for the Alliance for Student Achievement, an alliance of 16 education organizations in Minnesota with the purpose of speaking with one voice on pre K-12 education.

**C. Comments and discussion** —During Oscarson's and Stroti's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

**1. Being principal is the best job** —The principal has the best job in the educational system, Oscarson said, because the principal has the opportunity to be in direct daily contact with children, parents and teachers. He said he personally likes to greet students as they get off the bus at school each morning. He believes teachers are better prepared today than ever. Their jobs are more challenging than ever. Years ago they might have taught all pupils the same, preparing, for example, just one math lesson. Now they might need to prepare four or five different kinds of math lessons, depending upon the nature of the pupils. Parents are experiencing more pressure than ever from their

daily schedules. Referring briefly to the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, Oscarson said the law justifiably has been widely criticized, but it has produced accountability.

**2. State does well on ACT test** —To illustrate that Minnesota schools are doing well, Oscarson said that Minnesota students for the fourth year in a row had the highest average ACT score (22.6) in the nation. The test assesses high school students' general educational development in English, math, reading and science, and their ability to complete college-level work.

**3. School choice options discussed** —Oscarson and Storti outlined options for students to attend schools outside their normal attendance area.

**a. Open enrollment statewide** —Minnesota Statute 124D.03 allows all Minnesota's public school students the opportunity to apply to attend school outside of the school district where they live. More than 30,000 Minnesota students did just that last year. Students must apply to the school district of their choice by January 15 in order to have the best chance of being admitted the following fall. Families generally provide their own school transportation. No tuition is charged.

**b. West metro** —The Choice is Yours is a school choice program for families qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunches who live in the City of Minneapolis. Families apply by January 15 for the following fall in order to have the best chance of being admitted to their school of choice. Through The Choice is Yours, families who enroll receive priority placement at the schools they choose, including magnet schools in the city as well as suburban schools. Families in north Minneapolis may choose schools in the Minneapolis Public School District or in the following suburban districts: Columbia Heights, Hopkins, Robbinsdale, St. Anthony-New Brighton, St. Louis Park or Wayzata. Families in south Minneapolis can choose schools in the Minneapolis Public School District or in the Eden Prairie, Edina, Hopkins, Richfield or St. Louis Park school districts. The state of Minnesota provides transportation to the suburban schools. The Minneapolis Public School District provides transportation to city schools (according to school district policies on attendance zones and walking limits).

**c. East metro** — The East Metro Integration District is comprised of ten school districts that work collaboratively to implement the Minnesota Desegregation Rule. EMID activities are guided by a Multi-District Desegregation Plan developed and submitted by the Multi-District Collaboration Council to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning in June of 2001. The Minnesota Desegregation Rule mandates a partnership between St. Paul, Roseville, South Washington County, South Saint Paul, West Saint Paul, and the North Saint Paul/Maplewood schools. Four additional districts, Mahtomedi, White Bear Lake, Inver Grove Heights and Stillwater, are involved as voluntary members.

**d. Charter schools** —Charter schools are tuition free independent public schools that are open to, and welcome all students no matter ability or need, and are governed and operated jointly by licensed teachers, parents and community members. The Minnesota charter school law, passed in 1991, was first in the nation. According to the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, the state had 143 schools with a total enrollment of 28,000 in the 2007-08 school year.

**4. Impact of federal mandates** —A Civic Caucus member inquired about federal mandates in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law and in special education. While focusing on accountability, the law has a punitive aspect for students who already are behind, Oscarson said. Oscarson suggested a growth

model rather than the present MCA model. Millions of dollars are being spent on high stakes testing in NCLB, and the testing isn't all that useful, Storti said.

On the matter of special education, at the time special education was mandated in the 1970s, the federal government promised 40 percent of the financing, Oscarson said, but the last time he looked the actual federal share was about 16-17 percent. State and local financing make up the balance.

**5. Need for national standards** —Currently, under NCLB, each of the 50 states establishes its own agreement with the federal government based on each state's standards. Minnesota's standards are higher than that of many other states, Storti said. He suggested that the federal government could establish national standards for sciences, math and literacy. States could supplement those standards as desired. If you check out other countries such as Australia and the Scandinavian countries, you'll see nationalized curriculums. In advocating national standards, Storti said he was speaking for himself and not stating an official position of MESPA, his principals' association.

A Civic Caucus member inquired about the appropriate role for the federal government, given the major role that states play in education. While states have constitutional responsibility for education, Storti and Oscarson said that the federal government must be involved in setting standards because of the importance of education in a global economy.

**6. Need for fewer, larger, administrative units** -In response to a question about what school districts might do to economize without doing harm to education, Storti said-his opinion, not that of MESPA-that Minnesota could do with fewer school districts. The state has 331 districts, of which 100 have fewer than 800 pupils. But each district has its own superintendent and its own human resources staff along with other central administration. You can keep the same number of individual schools while combining administrative units, he said. The principal is the most critical individual in the school administration.

**6. Need for more resources at the early grades** -Again speaking for himself only, Storti said that more resources need to be placed in the early grades. You can't deny the importance of good education for 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders, he said, but there's no question that investment in early childhood education is key. A Civic Caucus member wondered whether it's a social worker or a teacher that is more important in helping families and pre-school children. Standards are needed for all teachers, public and private, in early childhood, whether in schools or elsewhere, he said.

**7. Need for a year-round school system** -Speaking for themselves, Oscarson and Storti advocated that schools be organized year-round. Students would attend perhaps 10-15 more days than they do now, but there'd be new ways of using resources more efficiently if you were working with a 12-month framework, they said. Storti said education results are better as well. Evidence elsewhere demonstrates that students enrolled in English as a second language programs do better in a year-round environment.

**8. More funding at the center of MESPA legislative program** -The official legislative program of MESPA calls for adequate, sustainable, funding of schools throughout the state, Storti said. In response to a question Storti said that to close the gap between current funding and what is needed to do an adequate job would require about \$2 billion more per year in Minnesota.

**9. No support for a constitutional amendment** -A Civic Caucus member noted that outdoors, water and the arts advocates are seeking preferential funding guarantees via a constitutional amendment on the ballot this fall. Storti and Oscarson said they would not advocate a similar route for education. The Governor and Legislature are responsible for education, Storti said.

**10. Encouraging innovation** -A Civic Caucus member wondered whether school districts will automatically do a better job of innovation in helping students learn, if there are fewer, but larger, administrative units, and if there is more funding.

**11. Challenging responsibilities for teachers** -Teachers today have much more challenging responsibilities than the past, Oscarson said. He cited that much of the day they are involved in what you might call counseling, conflict resolution, and social services. Oscarson is optimistic about attracting competent teachers in the future. He cited the large number of highly respected post-secondary institutions in Minnesota that are producing innovations in education

The group briefly discussed whether teachers unions are supporting or opposing efforts to change.

**12. Addressing additional questions** -A Civic Caucus member raised several additional questions that weren't thoroughly addressed today. It was agreed that we'd include these questions in the first draft of our summary, and give Storti and Oscarson an opportunity to comment on these questions before we distribute the summary more broadly.

**a. Does the focus on standards take away the opportunity for need to focus on the needs of individual students and to apply innovation at the individual student level as well as directed to the overall student population?**

**b. What has happened over the years in the changing role of the teacher?** The teacher role has moved the full spectrum from connecting with the student and parents to only focused on teaching and is moving back—at least as so stated.

**c. What is the importance of the community in education?** In this case community relates to both the ability of the student to develop strong social skills as well as linking the student, parent, and teacher to the broader community.

**d. In terms of a better job of teaching science and math, are schools fully aware of the initiatives in the private sector to make helpers available in these fields?**

**13. Thanks** -On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne expressed sincere thanks to Storti and Oscarson for meeting with us today, particularly because of their suggestions and support for change.