



Charles Kyte, Executive Director, Minnesota Association of School Administrators

Friday, June 11, 2010

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle #920, Minneapolis, MN 55437

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; David Broden, Janis Clay (phone), Marianne Curry (phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Jan Hively, Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie (phone), Dan Loritz, John Mooty (phone), Wayne Popham (phone), Clarence Shallbetter, and Bob White

Summary: Great opportunity is present for educational innovation; public expectations of school are high; different groups vary in their sense of need; more quiet consultation should occur; small rural districts might be more open to innovation; federal testing requirements aren't so helpful; many different ideas are likely to surface in 2011, including whether to tap pension funds for current operations (which Kyte opposes) and whether to turn extra-curricular activities over to community organizations.

Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus is meeting periodically with several individuals and organizations in the state concerning possible rethinking and redesign that would maintain quality during a time of severe revenue constraint.

A. Welcome and introductions—Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Charles Kyte, executive director, Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), an organization representing of school superintendents. Kyte has held his current position since July 2000. Previously he served 12 years as superintendent of the Northfield Public Schools and before that eight years as superintendent of the Eden Valley-Watkins Public Schools. He is a former teacher and principal. An Iron Range native, Kyte has a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota-Duluth, a master's from Mankato State University, and a Ph.D in educational administration from the University of Minnesota.

B. Comments and discussion—During Kyte's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Minnesota's Promises report outlined—Kyte reminded the group of a report issued in 2008 by several education organizations in Minnesota, with recommendations on 10 elements of high performance, early childhood, educator quality, academic rigor, family and community involvement

multicultural community, data and research, funding, time, special education and health and wellness. The report is available at: <http://bit.ly/cpJRej> . The report was chaired by Darlyne Bailey, dean, college of education, University of Minnesota, and Kyte, with Kent Pekel, executive director, college readiness consortium, University of Minnesota, as facilitator. The report's recommendations are as applicable today as they were in 2008, Kyte said.

2. An opportune time for innovation—Based on experience over the last 80 years, with innovation coming on the heels of recession, Kyte said that coming out of the 2007-09 recession, the state and nation is ideally poised for enacting innovations. Following a recession after World War II, the big innovation was the automobile assembly line; after the 1930s depression, government re-invented itself with programs such as Social Security; in the early 1980s, following a severe, but not-so-well-known agricultural recession, the big innovation was the movement from smaller (320 acres) to much larger (3,000 acres) farms; and in the late 1980s, coming out of a mild recession, was the innovation in personal computer technology.

3. Innovation requires close collaboration—Innovation in education today can't be accomplished by education alone, he said. There must be close collaboration with other groups.

4. New strategic discussions just getting under way—In various parts of the state, educators and community persons are starting strategic discussions on improving education, with encouragement and support from MASA, he said. Most often when such discussions commence, you will find non-educators—mainly from the metro area—thinking first about cutting administrative expenses and consolidating school districts. But such ideas won't get you past first base in the rural areas, he said.

Among exciting innovations he sees in rural Minnesota is a growing tendency for a blended approach of online learning and classroom learning.

Rural districts are often better equipped to be flexible than are urban districts, he said. It's not unusual for a superintendent in a rural district to teach a class or drive a bus—which is unheard of in the metro area.

5. Cooperation with a technical college in southwestern Minnesota on timing of classes—Some 27 school districts in southwestern Minnesota have gotten permission from the State Commissioner of Education to start fall classes this year on August 24, which is before Labor Day and is opposed by the resort industry and State Fair officials. But these school districts want to align their schedules with that of a technical college in the area which starts school on August 24.

Some resort owners, however, are showing less opposition to pre-Labor Day school. He quoted a conversation he had with a veteran resort-owner in the Brainerd area who noted that resorts have had to change their own schedules to accommodate changing desires of vacationers. It used to be that the resorts insisted on a seven-day reservation, but now they'll happily take three-day reservations for weekends.

There are 800,000 students in Minnesota, of which perhaps 1,000 of them are actively participating in their own state fair exhibits. That small group ought not be determining the calendar for the entire state, he said.

Later in the meeting Kyte said that technical colleges—many of which are largely empty during the day, while serving most of their student body at night—have incentives to work more closely with school districts, which are day-oriented.

6. The changing nature of public attitudes toward schools—Kyte recalled that growing up in Gilbert, MN, everyone largely accepted what the school district required of its students with little question. Later, when he was rearing his own children, parents wouldn't hesitate to contact teachers about their concerns. And today—as he sees his own children rearing their children—parents won't hesitate to send their children to a different school if dissatisfied with what their children are receiving at their current school.

Today, unlike the past, there's a much greater concern over doing something about educational quality.

Late in the meeting Kyte returned to this discussion. When he was young, a school system was expected to see that 30 percent of the students were well-educated; 40 percent, literate, and the remaining 30 percent, as much as could be done. Today, he said, schools are expected to see that 40 percent are well-educated; 50 percent are literate, and 10 percent, as much as can be done.

7. Various groups are at loggerheads—But it's difficult to make change today because strong forces are poles apart. Forces trying to drive radical quality reform are at one end of the spectrum, with defenders of the status quo are at the other end. Kyte finds himself trying to work quietly behind the scenes, particularly with Education Minnesota, the state's teachers union. He's currently trying to put together a small group of superintendents, principals, and teachers to come up with an agreed-upon plan for how to deal with under-performing teachers, which probably aren't more than 2-5 percent of all teachers. It's not going to do any good for the teachers union to oppose all changes, he said. He noted that the state will need to develop proposals more acceptable to teachers than a failed effort in 2010 to require teachers to be recertified for tenure every five years.

Minnesota probably has the most powerful teachers union in the nation, he said, because both the Minnesota Education Association and the Minnesota Federation of Teachers have merged. Moreover, the combined organization, Education Minnesota, has been very successful in supporting the election of teacher-friendly school boards. He estimated that about 20-25 percent of school board members in Minnesota have close ties to teachers, either as retired teachers or as family members. A few such school board members are unabashedly spokespersons for the teachers, he contended.

8. Difficulty in energizing veteran teachers—Unlike many other occupations, there's very little that can be done in schools to help renew and energize teachers, he said. For example, higher education grants sabbaticals to veteran professors, but such a benefit isn't available in the K-12 system.

Kyte shared a conversation he had with a person in the private sector who noted that many more opportunities are available in non-teaching occupations for people to advance within the system. You advance in education (other than gaining higher salaries through longevity and post-baccalaureate training) by going into administration, not by staying in teaching.

9. A highly political arena—It's difficult to accomplish change in education because you don't have all that many leaders interested in change. Even among superintendents you have a few who are very progressive, a few that will go along with change, but a very large group that don't want change.

Even when you make a change, opposition can come from surprising quarters. He remembers that while he was superintendent in Northfield, a change was made to produce a more rigorous math curriculum. Within 1 1/2 years a group of parents, including professors at Carleton College, were complaining that the school system was pushing the kids too hard.

10. Impact of a shortage of money—It is interesting that small rural districts might be able to do much better than their larger counterparts in regional centers and in the metro area. You might be paying a veteran teacher around \$80,000 in the metro area, while a teacher with comparable experience might be making only \$51,000 in a rural district.

In fact, it might be the cities that serve as regional trade centers in rural Minnesota will be the hardest hit. In the first place, the small rural districts surrounding those centers never want to be absorbed by the regional trade center district. The rural districts will cooperate with one another, but not with the trade center school district. These rural districts receive certain aids—for large geographic areas and few students, for example, and for certain transportation needs—that aren't available to the larger, more concentrated, districts. In addition, it's unusual for the rural districts to gain from open enrollment. Families in larger cities sometimes opt to send their children to the rural districts because they like that environment for their children.

11. Little chance to modify teacher salary schedules—Responding to a question, Kyte said it is very unlikely that you'll see changes in the basic approach to paying teachers—based on length of service and number of college credits—without support from Education Minnesota. Education Minnesota has effectively teamed with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) which represents many of the non-teaching staff in school districts. In such an environment you'd have the teachers joining SEIU employees in opposing, for example, if you were to suggest allowing private firms to bid for cleaning of school buildings.

12. Incredible dependence of the state on federal money—The federal government is increasingly calling the shots at the level of the State Department of Education, Kyte said. More than one-half the revenue flowing through that department now comes from the federal government, he said. He cited an example where the Department vetoed a change because of opposition from the federal government. He also mentioned the case of a popular principal in Brooklyn Center who has just lost his job because of inflexible federal requirements. See: <http://bit.ly/a2Nctk>

13. Why worry more about pushing under-performing teachers out the front door, when many more are voluntarily fleeing out the back door?—Kyte challenged the assumption that more teachers are leaving the system for other-than-traditional reasons. Many teachers never planned to work more than five or seven years, he said. He went on to say, however, that teaching is not the highly esteemed occupation it once was.

14. An innovation idea that didn't get off the ground—Kyte recalled that he had hoped to accomplish a significant change in a new middle school in Northfield, but he left before having the change to

implement the change. He had hoped that a new middle school could have been four schools in one: first, a middle school, emphasizing the importance of dealing with pupils at a very vulnerable age; second, a more traditional, academically rigorous, junior high school; and third and fourth, two teacher-run charter schools within the school.

Kyte's distinguishing between the term "junior high school" as a rigorous academically-oriented school, and the term "middle school", emphasizing the issue of the special needs of children approaching or in puberty, prompted more discussion about whether schools shouldn't be paying more attention to children's internal needs. One person noted, for example, that Minneapolis has only one counselor in its middle schools for every 729 students.

It's interesting, too, Kyte said, how the age of maturity is changing. He remembers when school dances took place in the 9th grade, but not earlier. Now, he said, he's heard of dances for sixth graders. And at the other end of the spectrum you have 25-27-year-olds who are still trying to find themselves.

In an aside, Kyte said he understand the state of Utah is thinking about making the 12th grade optional.

15. Role of school boards—We've a very strong history of local control of schools and, therefore, keeping school boards as central policy makers. But with strong union influence you need to think of how school boards should function and are functioning, he said.

16. Give more respect for more traditional testing, as against that mandated by the federal government—Responding to a question on testing, Kyte first referred to testing that has been going on for decades at schools in Minnesota. He cited a math test that is given three times a years, with teachers adjusting their approach to individual students based on results of each test. All "Q-comp" school districts are using this testing approach, he said Q-comp is a voluntary program that allows local districts and exclusive representatives of the teachers to design and collectively bargain a plan that meets the five components of the law. The five components under Q Comp include: Career ladder /Advancement Options, Job-embedded Professional Development, Teacher Evaluation, Performance Pay, and an Alternative Salary Schedule

Kyte said state schools are spending something like \$25 million a year to administer tests required by the federal government. He contended the state could produce the same results for about \$5 million, using the long-established state testing program

17. Importance of local business community involvement—Kyte agreed with a member's comment on the importance of close school relationships with the local business community.

18. Interesting development among immigrants—Responding to a comment about the importance of family involvement in education, Kyte said it has been a fascinating experience to see how well Hmong children have done in Minnesota schools. Their parents and grandparents were surprised at the availability of schooling and have provided strong support. That's not the case with some other ethnic communities. This discussion produced a brief mention of the fact that refugees, as distinct from regular immigrants, appear to have major needs because of the emotional trials they endured in coming to this country

19. Outlook for 2011—Kyte isn't yet ready to say that the 2011 session will see a drop in school funding, as others have expected, given a possible \$6 billion budget gap. He agreed that "smoke-and-mirrors" changes have largely been used up. One area—which he hopes the Legislature doesn't touch—is to tap \$120 billion in pension fund reserves. He thinks some additional revenue will come from economic recovery, given the fact that the biennium will run until June 30, 2013.

A reasonable level of new revenue will be needed, he said, along with austerity and efficiency. One possibility is to seriously examine how much from school extra-curricular activities could be taken over by local communities, for example, by community sports clubs, instead of the school's athletic program.

Another possibility is to treat high schools more like college campuses, with students coming and going, but not being at school for a set number of hours, five days a week.

20. Potential of online learning—Responding to a question, Kyte said that 40 per cent of high school learning will be online in five years. More progress might occur in rural districts, many of which will find that certain courses wouldn't be available unless students take them online. The Ada-Borup district in northwestern Minnesota is a good example of the extent of online learning today. There's some poor quality education available on the web that needs to be snuffed out, he said. But with collaboration and good oversight he is optimistic about the future of online learning

21. Changing educational levels of boys and girls—It used to be that we worried that the girls weren't getting an adequate education. Today it's more the other way around, he said. Kyte noted that at some colleges about 65 percent are women students, and only 35 percent, men. That prompted him to mention the case of a Lutheran college that is admitting women who must have at least a 3.9 GPA, be active in several sports, and have demonstrated leadership in community activities, while any young man will be admitted who happens to be Lutheran.

22. Closer relationship with post-secondary?—In light of his comment earlier about school districts in part of the state aligning their time for opening school with that of a technical college, Kyte was asked whether he sees closer relationships with technical colleges in the future. He replied again that the technical colleges are filled at night but are largely looking for students during the day. Technical colleges are different from community colleges, he said, with the latter having perhaps less of an interest in the local school system.

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