



# Jon Bacal, Outgoing Director, Office of New Schools, Mpls Public Schools

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

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**Present :** Verne Johnson (chair); Janis Clay, Jim Hetland (phone), Sallie Kemper, Tim McDonald, John Moity (phone), Clarence Schallbetter

***Summary of meeting:*** *Outgoing director of the state's first district new schools office, Jon Bacal discusses with the Civic Caucus what other states and metropolitan regions are doing to develop environments that encourage and support new, innovative schools. He outlines steps Minnesota must take to change its static education system into one where both the chartered and district sectors engage in successful innovation.*

## A. Welcome and introductions.

Jon Bacal is the founding Executive Director of the Office of New Schools at Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS), Minnesota's first school district unit with specific responsibility for new schools. The MPS Office of New Schools recruits, approves, and oversees a growing portfolio of public charter and other autonomous schools aimed at dramatically improving the learning of Minneapolis children.

Before joining MPS, Bacal founded and co-led Hiawatha Leadership Academy in south Minneapolis, a high-achieving, high-poverty charter school. Previously he had founded and led SchoolStart, a nonprofit consulting firm that helped launch 20 charter schools in three states, co-founded St. Paul's Twin Cities Academy charter school, and served as St. Paul Mayor Norm Coleman's education advisor. He is a fourth-generation graduate of Minnesota public schools and of Georgetown University.

## B. Comments and Discussion

Mr. Bacal opened the discussion by quoting article 13 of the Minnesota constitution: *The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools.*

Thus the purpose of public schools is to ensure a strong democratic-republican form of government, he said. It is a system that served Minnesota well for its first century and a half. "I was a second grader when Governor Wendell Anderson was featured on the cover of Time Magazine. That time might have been the apex of the relative position of Minnesota, in the nation and in the world."

## THE PROBLEM

The United States, and with it Minnesota, has fallen rather substantially in rankings of student achievement. In 1990, the country was still #1 in the world in the percentage of the population with a college degree. Now the U.S. ranks in the mid-teens in college completion. We are also near the bottom in high school graduation rates. In math and science, American 15-year-olds trail their peers from almost every other developed nation. The relative school performance of American students, compared to other students, is weak and declines the longer children are in school (4<sup>th</sup> grade vs. 8<sup>th</sup> grade vs. 12<sup>th</sup> grade).

Even as America declines in international rankings, Minnesota is no longer the highest performing American state on many indicators. Minnesota drops lower when its results are disaggregated by ethnicity. Even the state's majority students do not rank as high as they once did. Meanwhile, Minnesota's black and Latino students rank at the bottom of the nation in absolute terms-and lower than their peers in the Deep South. We're no longer a state where people come to Minnesota to learn about our K-12 system-certainly not to learn anything about the education of urban kids.

## THE GOAL

Knowing that our situation now is far from ideal, what do we want to accomplish for Minnesota's K-12 education system? Our goal is, or should be, straightforward: for Minnesota to be a great place to learn, to teach, to start new schools, and to innovate for the purpose of accelerating learning without accelerating costs.

## POTENTIAL AND OPPORTUNITIES

Bacal said he has been fortunate in his current role to lead many study visits to other cities. There are a lot of exciting developments in the field, he said, including the development of citywide and regional "ecosystems" to strengthen K-12 learning. There is not one single answer to the question, "how do we build a better school?" Rather, we need to learn from all the best new school and learning models being tested across the country.

To illustrate his point about the "ecosystem" that nurtures quality K-12 learning, Bacal asked, "What makes Silicon Valley work?" It is a complex environment of people, with a focus on measurable results over rules and process, a critical mass of highly networked human and financial capital; a spirit of openness to risk and taking chances; a sense that occasional failure is okay if it leads to better solutions; and overall, real rewards for ingenuity and high performance and consequences for non-performance. In recent years you have heard local leaders around the country asking how they can become the Silicon Valley of education. However, we haven't heard that question asked much in Minnesota, as there seems to be a considerable lack of urgency as we take comfort in the state's increasingly distant past achievements.

There are other places that are developing a supportive educational ecosystem, he said, in the sense that they promote the development of the human capital, financial capital, quality control, and civic and school system leadership to produce the educational gains required to compete nationally and internationally today.

## **Denver: A model of a dynamic school-improvement ecosystem**

There are a lot of analogues between Denver and the Twin Cities metropolitan area, Bacal said. The metro areas are close in size and the overall state populations are similar.

In recent years Denver has seen significant changes though in its K-12 system, where the district and city leadership have come to view high quality and innovative chartered and other public schools as a central means for bringing about dramatic improvement in student achievement levels. There has developed a critical mass of talent, fed by a robust pipeline of dynamic new teachers coming into the environment. These changes have resulted from a very successful bi-partisan, cross-sectoral effort.

What's the key that made Denver move this much, a participant asked—was it competition?

"I'm less confident competition alone creates performance in this environment," Bacal replied. "I think that civic leadership has been critical. In Denver the philanthropic community has identified education as its top priority. The mayor, superintendent, philanthropic and legislative leaders are all involved, and they know that things will need to be started new in order to bring about the necessary changes."

We brought Minnesota philanthropists to visit Denver and they asked if it was possible to get the changes that are necessary by simply improving existing [charter] schools. The Denver leaders shook their heads and said, 'you can get faster results if you start new.'"

Bacal said the Denver experience tells us that a dynamic can be created; that you can optimize the resources a community already has. Colorado in fact is not a high-cost state for education spending. Denver spends about one-third less per student than many urban areas, including the Twin Cities, he said.

## **New Orleans: Creating new**

Before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had one of the worst public education systems in the country. It was both corrupt and educationally inept. Well before the storm, the state created the "Recovery School District," to address the very critical situation, Bacal said. That organization was given control over the New Orleans public school district. Then the storm came.

In the wake of the storm, New Orleans decentralized its schools under state oversight, giving far more autonomy to schools to deal with the conditions at hand in exchange for much higher levels of accountability. The result has been remarkable progress. Today, over 70 percent of the students are enrolled in chartered schools, Bacal said. There was only one such school in 2003.

There is healthy tension in the New Orleans system, he added, in the sense that there are powerful consequences for non-performance. There is a clause in the law that if your school doesn't meet an objective measure of student achievement it will be closed. This has created a system that provides incentives and disincentives for the adult professionals.

Perhaps the key driver in the development of the New Orleans ecosystem has been New Schools for New Orleans (NSNO), that seeks and cultivates talent, capital and ideas for new school incubation, growth and quality. As a result of all these developments citywide performance is improving significantly. Collectively, New Orleans public schools are on a trajectory to pass the state of

Louisiana as measured by average achievement scores. That would be a remarkable turnaround. The reason for it, Bacal believes, is the nurturance of an educational ecosystem and a critical mass of similarly achievement results-oriented innovators.

A guest noted that one of the things you'll see when you walk into a high performing school in New Orleans is evidence of student performance on the wall. The schools are hyper-aware of their own performance measures, and the students are hyper-aware of where they are relative to goals. Teachers and students get high quality test-based data fast. The focus on results pervades the whole system.

There is no central top-down bureaucratic leadership. The recovery district is still in charge, but this notion of the ecosystem illustrates that given the right conditions and support, autonomous on-site management of individual schools seems to produce the positive results that centralized or top-down administration of schools had failed to produce.

### **Rocketship Education: Improving Productivity**

Rocketship Education is a nonprofit charter management organization that has started three high-performing schools serving low-income minority children in northern California. They have been so successful that they've received funding to spread to other regions. What is different about the Rocketship model is improved productivity, Bacal said. They have fewer licensed teachers and pay them more. They make more use of nonlicensed educators and tutors to assist teachers by working with students on lower level learning tasks. Rocketship is an example of a "blended learning" model—25 percent of the week is spent with kids online on computers, helping them master basic skills; the balance of the time involves face-to-face teacher-directed learning.

The blended model and use of non-teacher educators and tutors are not merely ways of improving achievement but also drivers of improving educational *productivity*: more learning per dollar spent. . We need to let Minnesota public schools experiment with similar diverse staffing models, he argued, but it is questionable whether a Rocketship would even be legally possible in this state. Minnesota's educator licensing laws have been so restrictive that, until the passage of alternative certification a few months ago, even top educators from other states were prohibited from teaching in Minnesota (without returning to graduate school first).

### **Changing school districts in Minnesota**

Fewer than 1/10 of 1 percent of American K-12 funding goes into anything that can be remotely characterized as research and development, Bacal lamented. None of the \$10 billion Minnesota spends annually on public K-12 schools is for the purpose of R&D. And as Tim McDonald pointed out last week Minnesota has opened very few chartered schools in the past year—only four.

"Talent flexibility is key: we need to remove restrictions in policy on the ability of all public schools, district and charter, to hire and deploy people. Over 90 percent of our students are still in the district system and less than ten percent in charters (25% in Minneapolis). We are clearly not New Orleans," and the district system is not going away. We need to take the handcuffs off districts and all schools to help them get better results faster.

There is a network of about 20 urban "portfolio" school districts working with Paul Hill at the **Center on Reinventing Public Education** (CRPE) in Washington that see themselves more in a venture capital mentality-looking to cultivate and contract with a variety of school providers, giving them autonomy in exchange for accountability, using charter, site-governed and other organizational models for schools-to create a "portfolio" of schools.

Denver is an example of a portfolio district. Minneapolis has started along this path as have New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Baltimore, and others-recognizing we may have more types of schools in a district than just one. Portfolio districts are agnostic about the organizational *type* of schools-in other words, agnostic about who employs the adults. Instead, the focus is on student achievement.

"School districts [or for that matter, charter schools] have no sacred status under the Minnesota constitution," Bacal noted. "They are statutorily created for the purpose of educating children. We need to focus on what kids need, rather on the comfort and convenience of the adults.

Bacal went on to note that the public school system is full of bright and well-intentioned people. But systems don't change easily, and hope springs eternal that things will just work out in the end. But it is difficult now to identify more than a handful of schools in this state, district or charter, working particularly well with black and Latino students. By contrast, there are hundreds of such schools nationally..

It is not clear that it is possible for traditional public school districts, at least as they are currently structured and regulated, to achieve dramatically better results for struggling children.

In other places the change has come from outside providers and "de-bureaucratized," deregulated systems.

### **Status of unions**

There is always resistance to change, Bacal said, yet Minnesota is the first state where a union local is genuinely interested in creating chartered schools. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers received a major grant last year to create a charter school authorizing capacity.

Over the past two years, many states have adopted dramatic K-12 staffing reforms. The current LIFO (last in, first out), seniority-based treatment of teacher lay-offs, that is, the notion of last teacher hired, first teacher fired, is something that has to change. And new teachers do not get paid very much for the extraordinarily hard work that they do. We don't necessarily have environments that reward the people that are in the classrooms doing the hardest work. We have talented people in our schools, in our classrooms, but we don't have the "ecosystem" that attracts, develops and rewards the best and the brightest.

### **How to address changing demographics**

The demographics of Minnesota are changing rapidly across the state. We have seen little real civic leadership in trying to close the gap with black and Latino children, Bacal said. A participant asked Bacal if he were governor, what are the two or three steps he would take to improve schools?

1. Make the performance of children that are falling behind an urgent priority. We're not known as a state that puts a top priority on school performance. And if those results aren't coming there need to be significant consequences. The school needs to adapt the learning needs of students, not vice versa.

2. Focus on results, not process or regulatory compliance

I keep coming back to this results-orientated mindset, a guest said. Something you could do in policy is to make information from state tests available earlier, while school is still in session. It isn't sufficient that we won't get results until August. You need to be able to get results and reflect while it's still fresh in the minds of educators. Work with instructional leaders to use data more effectively; connect students and families to the data to set goals and learn how to use it. Being an instructional leader is a skill set-it is difficult to get someone doing that because that kind of leadership is not valued.

### **C. Closing**

There is one idea that is common to high performing cities that could be improved in Minnesota, he said-it is a sense that we can help children from all backgrounds to learn at dramatically higher levels. There is too often a sense of fatalism in Minnesota about the extent of what schools are able to do. There is lots of evidence from around the country that schools can lead the effort of making up for deficiencies elsewhere in society, and the idea that they can't is poisonous and not worthy of Minnesota.

The notion of focusing on results and not just process is important. There are examples of countries roughly the size of Minnesota that have made transformational progress, he argued. Singapore and Finland are two countries that were not doing particularly well a few decades ago. Finland, after the Iron Curtain fell, had 25 percent unemployment. They were driven by the crisis-they had to change. After radically revamping its K-12 system, Finland is now #1 in the world by age 15 in math, science and reading.

And the change has to be substantial, the chair observed. It will not be sufficient just to make incremental steps inside the existing system.

Thanks to Mr. Bacal for the visit.