



# Minnesota State Senator Gen Olson

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

*August 12, 2011*

**Present:** Verne Johnson (chair), Paul Gilje, Joe Graba, Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (phone), Tim McDonald, Clarence Shallbetter, Kristin Schulte, Wayne Popham (phone)

***Summary of meeting:*** *Minnesota's longest currently serving Republican state legislator and a co-author of the nation's first charter schools law, Senator Gen Olson describes those characteristics that have set Minnesota apart in education policy in the past, and ways that the state can again become a leader. Opportunities for progress in the coming year are discussed, including federal and foundation interests, as well as the 2012 legislative session.*

## **A. Welcome and introductions**

Gen Olson is a Minnesota State Senator from District 33 in the Western Twin Cities suburbs, and is the longest currently serving Republican member of the Minnesota legislature, having been first elected to the Senate in 1982. Olson is currently chair of the Senate's Education Committee. In 1992 Olson was an original author of the Minnesota charter schools law, the first of its kind in the country.

Olson has taught, worked in vocational education administration and the Department of Education, and has served on the Minnetrista city council and as that city's mayor. She was Senator Norm Coleman's running mate in the gubernatorial race of 1998. She served as a member of the Minnesota delegation to the Education Commission of the States. She graduated from Minnehaha Academy High School and the University of Minnesota, with an EdD.

## **B. Discussion**

Addressing the need to innovate our way out of the Minnesota's difficult financial situation, Senator Olson opened her remarks with an example of a successful innovation she helped to bring to fruition. The Minnesota Reading Corps is a timely illustration of the state's successfully taking advantage of an existing federal program, some grassroots energy, bipartisan cooperation and executive leadership to develop an effective and economical public service.

"One thing about this business is you never stop learning," the Senator said, introducing the focus of her conversation this morning, "and I've done some fresh learning even this week." The previous few days she had taken part in the instructor training for the Minnesota Reading Corps, an AmeriCorps program aimed at reading proficiency for all students by the end of third grade. This program, which incorporates a cost-effective means of getting extra reading tutors into the schools, was supported by one of the few provisions in the state budget increased this year-in fact, the program allocation tripled.

Reading Corps tutors are paid a modest stipend for an 11-month service commitment and may qualify for an additional education credit that may be applied toward college tuition. Tutors, who can participate in the program for up to four years, come from a wide range of backgrounds: students, retirees, active classroom parents, and people in career transition.

The Senator said that she had not at first realized how much the program had grown. "I was blown away. The program began with 20 Reading Corps members (tutors) six years ago with a small state contribution matched \$3-4:1 by Federal and private dollars. This year more than 200 Reading Corps members were working in the schools. This week, a joint session of coaches and members in training had 1,200 people in the room, almost 800 corps members (tutors) and 350 coaches (local staff that oversee and work with members). The program has had many more applications than member positions for the coming school year. This growth does not reflect the additional state funding provided for the 2012-2013 biennium. The Minnesota Reading Corps, a key component of the literacy/reading proficiently by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade package in this year's Education Bill, was one of few provisions that received an increase in funding-triple the current level-for a program that works.

The Minnesota Reading Corps is now AmeriCorps' largest program in the state, and I believe in the country. It is funded through Serve Minnesota, an independent non-profit that is funded by state, federal, and private funds. National leaders in AmeriCorps are impressed with the progress measures built into the program and the evidence of growth and proficiency achieved by the students.

### **Minnesota is notable for addressing problems at their root.**

The Minnesota Reading Corp began in 2006 when Senator Olson and Democratic Senator Kathy Saltzman, then in the majority, were working with parents to seek ways to help their children who were struggling readers learn to read.

"The five reading components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, were already in statute as requirements for teacher preparation but were not reflected in syllabi of courses provided in Minnesota's twenty-nine institutions preparing teachers. When you looked at the reasons why children have trouble learning, this-reading-was at the root of it. The focus of much of our effort thus far was assuring that teachers were being prepared with all the tools they need to bring all of their students to reading proficiency by third grade.

"I'm a bottom up kind of person," Olson told the group. "This was a program for digging down and finding solutions. This process has made us different in Minnesota. Instead of adopting the policy of holding third graders back if they haven't achieved proficiency when their reading instruction has been inadequate, we were successful this year in being the first state to add a revenue stream for literacy that pays for results, recognizing reading proficiency and significant growth toward that end.

### **Innovation comes from outside the system.**

"It dawned on me that the way the Reading Corps component of our strategy is an example of a 'disruptive innovation'," Olson said, "because it came in from outside the existing education system. The program has grown only by going to schools that ask for it. There's no marketing effort or public promotion.

"I've been a fan of the disruptive innovation notion. Now with the Reading Corps, it's happening already, right here in Minnesota. They are using scientifically-based reading instruction methods and progress monitoring and achieving results that are catching the attention of teachers. An expression commonly heard is, 'How come we didn't learn that?'"

**Q:** Can you change the education system from within, or do you have to go around it?

**A:** "We're working on that," the Senator replied. "We've been trying to open the system from the outside through chartering, strengthening the role and responsibility of authorities within the current system to improve results for students."

The recently passed Education bill lifted the limit on single purpose charter school authorizers, trying to focus the bureaucratic oversight on the authorizers which the Department of Education approves and hold the authorizers responsible for overseeing performance of charter schools. That's been a key change.

"But, as Ted Kolderie is the first to say, not all the charter schools are innovative. The traditional idea of everyone coming together in a room to be lectured to is pretty ingrained."

Olson noted that large systems have difficulty changing: "If you could have seen the people in the room during negotiations over the final legislative package this past session-with key executive and legislative branch negotiators around a big conference table into the wee hours of the morning-and you heard the interaction and could see how things are being done, 'oh my,' you'd ask, 'how can anything change in this system?' "

Yet the system needs to change, especially regarding the finances. "We're on a track that's financially unsustainable."

Fortunately change is possible, she added. There are some schools now that operate on half the money each year that most traditional schools require and are achieving better results.

"We need to penetrate the traditional education system to get real change," she continued. She cited her experience working to improve teacher licensure requirements, which work ultimately had no effect on performance. "Now we do have a stronger cohort of teachers out there, and the education performance needle still isn't moving. There is more work to be done."

### **Bi-partisanship can produce good results.**

A participant observed that a major lesson of the Reading Corps experience is that the program came in during Democrats' tenure, and was grown during the Republicans', showing the value of Senators Olson and Saltzman working together across party lines.

"Education is a prime example of what should be a non-partisan issue," the Senator replied. "I didn't run for this office to play political games. Obviously you've got to know what's going on politically and do some political analysis, but if you can't do something positive, then how is the public interest being served?"

### **The Governor can lead.**

"I must confess I made an appeal to the Governor during the final weeks of negotiations this summer. I walked him through my years with Perpich (I've served with 5 governors) and described how Perpich bucked the norm to do things with real impact like Post-Secondary Enrollment Options and Open Enrollment. And when you look at the legacy of that program, you see it has driven a stronger, more rigorous curriculum in the district schools sector. If the districts didn't want students going off to take college courses somewhere else, then they had to address their own course offerings and linkage to college credit."

Recalling the Perpich approach, the Senator further commented that she observes some similar qualities in Governor Dayton. He supported our literacy "package," signed the bill and has made public comments of support since that time. His willingness to "buck the norm" leads her to believe that we may see similar actions going forward.

### **New approaches may result from the 2012 session.**

**Q:** Do you see technology at the center of what needs to happen?

**A:** It isn't about adding more personnel, the Senator agreed; it's about freeing people up to do a better job. Unfortunately in our current system, with the way we finance, if you don't have enough money you just scale down. That means letting the newly hired teachers go.

That discourages young people, she said. Since the system's incentives prioritize maintenance of the same structures and processes-only less of it-schools need to increase class sizes to meet the rising costs. Yet since they have not been able to achieve the desired goal of personalizing student learning the call is then to decrease class sizes. That model is *Unsustainable*, as the book by Tim McDonald says.

The Senator said that 2012 might bring about more systemic change. "There are two bills coming along, Senator Hann's MNovate bill and my Education Boards bill. There are other options that we need to explore very thoroughly. The point is to open doors around the current system. You get pushback with ideas like these. But we need to recognize that the generation coming into it doesn't have a problem with performance evaluation and increased accountability.

"I haven't got the further specifics on other potential bills right now, but let's keep talking because the work done by Education Evolving and others can help put Minnesota at the forefront. I think the time is right for doing something serious about this. The session won't be long, but we'll be meeting with our staff in the House and Senate soon to see if we can coordinate an effort. The Governor wants more individual bills, which I like."

The Hann MNovate bill would establish a commission to provide leadership for creation of new and innovative models of public schools and schooling. Olson's Education Boards bill would allow school boards to reorganize as education boards.

### **Prospects are good for a Minnesota waiver from NCLB.**

A participant asked about the recent announcement by US Education Secretary Duncan that he would allow state waivers from the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. The participant said it appears

Governor Dayton is open to requesting a waiver, and that the federal government is open to what Minnesota might propose. The Secretary is not interested in just lowering the bar, but if the state can come in with definitions of achievement that are defined differently than NCLB, and if they have mechanisms to assess this, would that have an impact on innovation? What should Minnesota's process be-should the state wait until the commissioner proposes a waiver to react?

"I've never been a fan of the federal government getting into education at this level," the Olson said. "Most of us in Minnesota weren't, both at the federal and state levels, from both parties."

"I've sat on the stakeholders' groups for working on waivers. I'm glad a broader waiver opportunity is coming. Minnesota is not behind in standards. We haven't had low standards."

Might the legislature want to be involved in designing the state's alternate initiative?

"I don't know Education Commissioner Cassellius well enough to know what her process would be. I think though we've been successful in bringing her along on the literacy issue."

"We backed off during the session to the Governor's desire that the Commissioner write the rules, but we've been a legislature that's been pretty engaged. We don't have a State Board of Education, and the power for giving unelected officials authority to write rules that have the force of law should not be taken lightly. We'll want to be involved."

**Q:** The country may be getting ready for an alternative governance structure for education, a participant observed. One of the trends throughout recent years has been the growing centralization of decision-making processes. From the schools to the districts; districts to states; states to federal government. This is a regulatory approach to government and education.

One of the major innovations of the chartering sector was the switch of governance from process control to governance through performance agreement, the participant said. Think of the number of person-hours spent trying to learn and understand the regulations of NCLB. Think about all the regulators and staff-billions of person hours spent trying to understand the regulations. Shouldn't we now switch to outcome-based performance measures, trusting the public to use good information to regulate the schools instead of regulating the schools?

**A:** We do need to be asking what outcomes schools will have, the Senator replied, and what assessments they will use. It's hard to be as 'cut and dried' in your measurements as NCLB is. "I don't know if there are good alternative models out there; if you're trying to cultivate a child's talents and interests it's difficult to know what the appropriate measure should be. That students ultimately demonstrate mastery of a standard can be a rather subjective thing."

### **Improve professionalism by pushing management decisions down to schools.**

**Q:** What can be done to improve the quality of teacher professionalism?

**A:** " I think there are a lot of teachers chafing under the present system. I do believe that the creation of site-based management schools through chartering and Site-Governed Schools has been a significant first step. That was one of the initial options for getting chartering started. It didn't begin that way, and instead we've gotten pushback from the state teacher's organization seeing it as an

encroachment into their domain. I wonder if the times will bring more teachers to the fore that want to be professional, and are committed to their profession, but would welcome greater freedom to innovate their practice and be recognized for the results they achieve."

### **Achievement gap results from low expectations.**

**Q:** The Civic Caucus recently heard that African American students in Minnesota perform at levels lower than states often thought to have much lower proficiency. And, that our large achievement gap is not just the result of particularly high-performing white students. What do you think is the cause of this?

**A:** "To be overly simplistic," the Senator replied, "I'd say we've bought into the discrimination of low-expectations. Students of color are seen as not being able to achieve." This manifests itself in the way students are advised, taught, counseled, routed.

"The schools that work tend to have higher expectations," she continued. "Teach for America is known for emphasizing high expectations. Yet when they approached St. Paul and Robbinsdale as potential partners, they got turned down. Why would people who are trying to raise expectations get turned down?"

The Senator said that many of the students labeled as requiring special education for learning disabilities are "instructional casualties." There are bright kids that get swept into special education classifications and almost never get out, she said. There is a strong incentive in the way the system is set up to classify a student as special education providing incentive to get more money. But you can only spend a dollar once. Since Special Education is a mandate not fully funded, cross subsidies are required from general education funds.

### **Gates foundation brings reform efforts to Minnesota.**

A question arose regarding interest the Gates Foundation has expressed in Minnesota, and in city and state policy. Officials from the foundation have met with the Governor and other state leaders.

"I don't know too much at this point," the Senator said, "but when the Governor and Gates personnel were having their first meeting this spring I was near the Governor's reception room waiting for a bill signing and the Governor came out and asked me to join the meeting. I did have a chance to visit with them briefly. When I left for the bill signing the Governor said that he'd like for me to work with them."

The Gates Foundation is thinking about supporting cities and states that demonstrate a "compact" of supporters for reform. They are asking Minnesota to draft a letter that explains what Minnesota might do to connect the charter and district sectors. This would be the foundation's first attempt to replicate at the state level the compacts it has engineered in nine cities, aimed at identifying and resolving 'issues' in the two sectors to the benefit of both.

There is another angle that such a proposal could take, participants observed. There is a coming crisis in secondary education in non-metro Minnesota. To date the response has been to hold the model of school constant and to change the financing-to reduce costs through consolidation or to add

revenue through aids or excess levies. Yet there are models in the charter sector in Minnesota and elsewhere that show it is possible to maintain educationally and economically viable high schools with only 20 students per grade level. This just is not possible with the conventional district school model.

Senator Olson wondered about the next step for the Gates effort; a participant said he understands a first meeting will be held yet this month to begin planning for a statewide meeting the foundation would like to have late this year. The Senator and participants concluded that the state must not wait to start on a proposal if there is going to be something useful by the next legislative session.

### **C. Conclusion**

Senator Olson agrees with those who feel the system needs to foster more parental involvement. "I'm the 'grandmother of home schooling' and have watched that grow. I don't think I've ever heard of a home school student that had to take remedial courses once they got to college. We have a staff member in the Senate who went from home school to law school, and passed the bar in multiple states.

"Change is coming. Technology is coming. I've reminded the Governor that Dayton-Hudson was a survivor because of 'disruptive innovation.' They created a new division out there called Target with a different brother in charge of it and that's what enabled them to survive discount retailing when so many others didn't. And I think that's what led Ted Kolderie to apply the concept to public education. The day may come when the system as we know it may not exist anymore."

**Thank you Senator Olson for the visit.**