



Curt Johnson of Education Evolving

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : John Adams, David Broden, Janis Clay, Don Fraser, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Curt Johnson, Dwight Johnson, Lucas Johnson, Randy Johnson, Verne Johnson (chair), Sallie Kemper, Sean Kershaw, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Clarice Mitchell, Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter.

Summary of Discussion: Curt Johnson, of Education|Evolving, describes a "perfect storm" of difficult challenges in the preparation of Minnesota's workforce for 21st century jobs. To meet those challenges, he calls for a change in the way students are assessed both for their completion of courses and ultimately for their resulting postsecondary credentials. He proposes that the traditional system of awarding credits for completion of courses be replaced by a model based entirely on the documentation of proficiency with respect to clear, well-defined measures for each area of study. Those measures should reflect the higher order intellectual and analytical skills necessary for success in the array of jobs the modern economy produces. Such a significant innovation will require the pioneering efforts of a few willing institutions and the participation of regional employers. Failure to change the way we assess our postsecondary students will likely result in the state's losing an important competitive advantage, its heretofore highly ranked workforce.

Introduction of the Speaker.

Curt Johnson has been a colleague for nearly 30 years of Education|Evolving and its parent, the Center for Policy Studies, a Minnesota non-profit, non-partisan policy design organization.

Johnson co-authored, with Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen and education researcher Michael Horn, the provocative 2008 book *Disrupting Class*. This book explains why even the best-managed schools will be disrupted by changing learning models and how both traditional public schools and the chartered sector can respond. The authors argue for the effectiveness and economics of personalized learning. Johnson has also co-authored three books on urban public policy issues, most recently *Century of the City*, published in 2008. With columnist Neal Peirce, he has co-written many widely published articles on a broad range of public policy issues over the past twenty-five years.

Born in the Atlanta area, Johnson grew up in Texas and has lived in Minnesota since 1972. He has been president of Hibbing Community College, Inver Hills Community College and Minneapolis Community and Technical College, executive director of the Citizens League, a policy adviser and chief-of-staff to former Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson, and Chair of the Metropolitan Council. He earned a BA in history from Baylor University and a PhD in Education at the University of Texas.

Among his responsibilities at the Center for Policy Studies, Johnson chairs the Working Group on Postsecondary Education. The group, formed last fall, has about a dozen active members, including John Adams and Dan Loritz from the Civic Caucus. As the final report of the working group is nearing completion, Civic Caucus sought Johnson's current appraisal of Minnesota's postsecondary education.

The problem.

Johnson cited the following education challenges facing the state:

- In Minnesota, most jobs that pay well require more education than high school.
- Graduation rates, even for high school, are too low.
- Completion rates for college degrees or certificates both lag demand and seem misaligned with demands for workers.
- Too much of higher education is supply-side driven; what's offered is what educators want to provide.
- Costs of providing postsecondary education have risen relentlessly, and the *de facto* Minnesota policy of higher tuition, evolved over past decade, lacks a proportional response in financial aid.
- Postsecondary students too often value only the graduation credential as a presumed ticket to the workplace, not the education itself.
- Employers often use postsecondary credentials as filters when hiring, even though the credentials reveal nearly nothing about what the applicants actually know and can do.
- Minnesota's modern comparative advantage providing employers a better-prepared workforce, long tied to its investments in education, may be slipping away.
- The only growth in Minnesota's workforce seems to be from population groups whose educational attainment has been poor. Even with higher than average unemployment, there is now serious talk about future labor shortages.
- The middle class is shrinking.
- Those with a sophisticated education and a creative bent have soaring life prospects. However, less educated people, who might formerly have gone to work in a manufacturing plant across town, are faring far worse.

Johnson called the situation "a classic perfect storm-all of these forces, most of them malevolent, all of them disturbing, all emerging at the same time." The challenge, he added, is "What do you do about it?"

The goals.

Johnson said if future Minnesotans are to be prosperous, they will need higher order intellectual and analytical skills; they will need to be able to communicate clearly, solve problems and work in teams. Even for manufacturing or technical jobs, serious higher-level training is already a must.

The strategy.

Move the whole postsecondary system from calculating seat time and credits to documenting proficiency.

"Incremental improvement is a losing battle in a high-stakes game," he said. "What Minnesota needs for its system of postsecondary institutions is a real game-changer, a bold move." After much debate in his working group, Johnson said, "the boldest thing we could suggest is that the whole system move from its calculation of time you've spent in courses and the number of credits you've collected to actually documenting your proficiency."

He said documenting proficiency means that for every course and every learning experience, the instructors outline what it is that students will be expected to know and what they should be able to do consistently and effectively in applying that knowledge.

"We're convinced you can take every valuable course there is and document what students should be able to know and to apply and do if they successfully complete that course. We think this would make the most profound change possible," he said.

"It's not a fanciful notion," Johnson asserted. "There are 30 to 40 postsecondary institutions in the country already at work on this. There's already abundant demonstration that faculty, once they understand this opportunity, see it as a chance to reassert their intellectual control over postsecondary standards."

"For a lot of students for whom learning doesn't have intrinsic value, but is just a utilitarian investment in a credential necessary for getting a job, they learn very quickly how to collect credits," Johnson said. Some choose the least challenging courses in order to get the credits and thus the degree. "It becomes much like a game for many students."

Moving to a proficiency-based system implies an obligation for institutions to know more about students and what they're learning along the way. He gave the example of a young woman who was admitted to an elite college after undergoing many tests and much scrutiny. Johnson said the college knew less and less about her every year, so that when she graduated, the school knew less about her than before she was admitted.

"That would be different if the student had to demonstrate proficiency," he said. The proficiency system lends itself to a portfolio approach, where evidence of proficiency is collected over the course of one's postsecondary career to eventually form a very revealing composite of one's actual learning accomplishments.

Make Minnesota a pioneer in changing its postsecondary system.

"Minnesota has consistently been willing to be the first bird off the wire in terms of policy change," Johnson said. "We've been willing to be the pioneer. This is our chance to do the same with our postsecondary system."

He said at least once a decade there's some big blue-ribbon commission studying what we should do with our colleges and universities. The results are usually "promotional reaffirmations of the status quo." The committee hopes this new effort is a departure from those past efforts. "We hope to generate enough discussion about these issues that people will have to reframe the conversation," he said. "It's not about the number of institutions; it's not about the cost; it's about the product, the experience, the validity of the learning that takes place."

Let willing institutions be a model of change.

Johnson said Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) Chancellor Steven Rosenstone has said he wants to move all MnSCU institutions at the same time to this new proficiency model. "While laudable," Johnson said, "that's not the way innovation flourishes."

Even if the odds are long, though, Johnson applauded MnSCU's commitment to start the conversations that could change the system.

"The committee concluded that broad use of the proficiency model would come faster if we let willing institutions be a model of change." Johnson noted there will be several institutions who will step up and say, "We'll move to this and we'll demonstrate that there is a market for it and that it will communicate more clearly to employers what our graduates know and can do."

"Once that happens," Johnson asserted, "the change will begin to disrupt the conventional model. And it will get imitators and it will spread and it will scale up to become the new norm." Even if only one department does it, disruption will occur. It can take root at any point. "We think this has that catalytic power. It is just a matter of getting some people to try. And when they do, the rest will follow. It's a question of who gets out in front," he said. "Leadership can make a powerful difference."

Locally, Johnson said, Concordia University in St. Paul, Anoka-Ramsey Community College and Macalester and Carlton colleges have all expressed interest in the proficiency model. He said community colleges are often more open to this type of change than large universities or liberal arts schools. "Community colleges are more adaptable, more nimble, more open to change."

Adams concurred, "Establishing proficiency is a little easier to do if you're dealing with a diesel mechanic than if you're dealing with a philosophy major."

Change the postsecondary system in fundamental ways or face a decline in the quality of Minnesota's work force.

Johnson said the group came to the conclusion that what we're doing today is not sustainable. "The population groups in the rapidly changing demographic landscape in Minnesota that need some preparation beyond high school show no sign of getting it. If we don't change the system in some fundamental ways, we're not going to have the work force Minnesota has today or will need in future."

Johnson displayed a chart often used by both state economist Tom Stinson and retired state demographer Tom Gillaspy showing a coming labor shortage in Minnesota. "There's no way we can fill the jobs our employers will have if we don't do a better job of preparing everybody in some appropriate way. That does not mean a headlong, obsessive rush to say 'everybody's got to go to college.' Not everybody needs a BA degree. But nearly every job will require some kind of preparation beyond what kids get in high school."

There are multiple explanations for the mismatch, Johnson said. Are employers not paying wages high enough to attract people to certain jobs? Are employers trying to foist off training responsibilities they used to do themselves to the public sector because they're unwilling to invest in someone who might leave and go to work for a competitor? Or aren't we doing things in the right way in educating our work force?

"Proficiency-based assessment is a game-changer," he said. "Transcripts would not show just credits earned by students, but would show what the students can do. It would be an entirely different kind of message to employers, a message about whether people have mastered what they need to be good citizens and worthwhile employees. It's not about how good students are at collecting credits or how long they warmed a seat."

An interviewer commented that the work world operates collaboratively today and very often in teams. However, most new engineers and technicians fail at working on a team, he said. They can do the engineering, but they can't communicate and work collaboratively with their fellow workers. That's the greatest issue for many companies, he suggested. Adams added that young people who are the best students in today's schools and colleges most often work alone and have a negative reaction to working in teams. "There's often nothing done to prepare kids to collaborate either before they get to college or while in college and before they get to professional schools."

In response, Johnson noted that by using a proficiency model, colleges could very easily assess and document those desired skills in a way both students and potential employers could understand.

Foster a better connection between industry and education.

An interviewer noted that industry would like to have a better connection with education. Adams responded that when technical colleges were run by school districts, each technical college had a local advisory committee of employers in the region. There was lots of "back and forth" about what employers needed, what they were getting and how it could be improved.

When the state unified technical and community colleges and universities into the MnSCU system, some of those relationships at the local level went away. That made it harder for employers to convey

what was needed and how that differed from what was being produced. However, Johnson believes that under new MnSCU leadership any relationships that may have been diminished are being rapidly restored.

Recognize that online learning in postsecondary education will be a major factor.

Johnson said online learning in postsecondary education is not a fad; it's an inevitable reality and will be a big factor. "It's the only place with serious growth in postsecondary enrollments."

Places like Stanford and MIT have developed free online courses that get hundreds of thousands of students to sign up, with 20,000 to 30,000 actually finishing. "It's only a matter of time until that way of learning gets validated," he said. One Stanford professor said that having had the online experience, he could never go back into the classroom with only 30 students again. He realized he could have much more impact through the online courses.

"This is bound to expand, bound to get better," Johnson said. "Maybe the online courses will exceed the quality of onsite education. Possibly we'll end up having the best courses in the world online."

Prepare for technology to change the role of teachers.

In response to a question about the impact of technology on the role of teachers, Johnson said, "Some of us predict it will change as technology continues its inevitable disruption of the K-12 system. Teachers are more likely to be called on as planners, facilitators and coaches. Getting to knowledge is not the problem any more. It's understanding what you've encountered, applying wisdom to it, learning to exercise judgment and knowing how to apply it. Further, colleges of education, which are still run as if it's the early 20th century, will have to change as well."

Make changes throughout the whole education system-from preschool through college-to create a more seamless experience for students.

Johnson said the committee recommends that the entire education system change to provide a more seamless experience for students. Now students encounter one system for early childhood learning then switch to another system for K-12 and to yet another system for the postsecondary sector.

"We have a quarter century of experience with Minnesota cracking open the door to allow high school students to take college courses and get the credit to apply toward both high school and college graduation requirements. We need more of that, not less. We need to allow students who can move faster to move faster and students who need more time to have more time. Then time becomes the variable and learning becomes the constant. Moving away from credits and toward proficiency at all levels will allow that to happen."