

Interim Education Committee, 4.21.08

**Interim Education Committee
Representative Rae Ann Kelsch, Chair
April 21, 2008**

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee:

My name is Paul Johnson and I am superintendent of the Bismarck Public School District. I have been asked to share my perspective on what might constitute an adequate school program. My approach will be to share what I think we need to do to improve academic achievement, especially for struggling students.

The accountability of NCLB has forced us to confront the fact that we are failing a number of students, even as we are successful with the majority. Approximately 57% of the class of 2008 is proficient in math and 73% proficient in reading, according to the state assessment.

Workforce Requirements

Two months ago, I presented some information to a local service club making the case that to meet its workforce requirements North Dakota has to educate every single student to proficiency.

Briefly, the number of high school graduates is shrinking as ND's population ages. Of that shrinking number of graduating seniors, 20% attend college out of state and will probably stay out of state for awhile. 60% of high school seniors attend college in state. Some of the most qualified professional graduates will end up out of state. 20% of high school seniors enter the military and work force.

Are the students staying in ND the most proficient? Probably not! A significant percent of recent high school graduates who stay in ND are those who don't have options to go elsewhere, either because of lack of resources or lack of academic qualifications. **In order to have a qualified workforce at home, we need to educate every student in ND, especially those who have historically been under-educated.**

Bismarck Approach

What has worked in Bismarck (contributed to increased test scores)

- Our district strategic plan called the Balanced Scorecard which also serves as a continuous improvement and accountability system
- Our investment in formative assessment and data systems along with professional development on using assessment data
- Focused staff development on math, particularly with elementary teachers (who do not have math majors or minors)
- Our teacher mentorship and leadership development programs
- Our experiment in outsourcing curriculum development seems to be working.
- Response to Intervention
- Recruiting quality teachers and administrators

What needs to be improved (contributed to falling or plateau of test scores)

- The lack of a unified system to immediately provide the correct intervention to a struggling student
- Our inability to effectively educate many Native American students
- The percent of disadvantaged students is increasing in some schools
- The lack of resources to provide adequate planning and collaboration time for some schools
- The overwhelming task of streamlining and aligning our core curriculum in the elementary and secondary
- Students entering high school unable to do high school work - more specifically lagging behind in reading and math

My recent recommendations to the Bismarck School Board for increasing student achievement call for maintaining our accountability system and improving our assessment and data systems, establishing a proficiency expectation for high school graduation, aligning district curriculum through outsourcing, consolidating existing instructional specialists into a cross-trained group to assist teachers in the schools, create collaboration time for teachers who currently do not have it, and continue to implement Response to Intervention.

Adequacy Study

My reaction to the preliminary report by Lawrence Picus and Associates is mostly positive. I am surprised that nothing was mentioned about curriculum expectations. Research indicates that the most important predictor of student academic achievement and post-secondary success is the quality of the high school curriculum. My sense is that what is taught throughout classrooms in ND varies widely. How different is Algebra I in one community from the same course in another? Is the same English 10 taught at Fargo North and Divide County? Common sense tells me that more specific and consistent expectations in the high school core curriculum might provide more consistency in high school graduate readiness for work or higher education.

I applaud the emphasis on student achievement and the discussion of the nitty-gritty of improving student performance. I appreciated that the consultants acknowledged the need, and the cost, for professional coaching for teachers and for tutoring for struggling students.

The additional foundation aid recommended by the consultants for coaching and tutoring would be put to good use in our school district.

Recommendations for increased expenditure of state funds

Recommendation #1: Create the conditions for high quality staff and high quality leadership in every school in ND.

Adequately staffing rural school districts will require competitive wages, incentives to work in isolated school districts, orientation and mentorship programs for beginning teachers, and on-going, targeted, effective professional development.

Recommendation #2: Invest in high quality data systems and high quality assessment.

Attaining dependable assessment information, and learning how to use that data to improve learning, is the foundation of school improvement. School

improvement models such as *Professional Learning Communities* and *Response to Intervention* are not possible to implement without constant access to good assessment data. Every school district should have a student information system such as Power School, be using formative assessments such as NWEA MAP and/or Dibels, and have access to a data warehouse from which assessment information for each student may be drawn when needed.

Assessments should be regularly and consistently administered to provide information, over time, for each student.

The state has done a good job in providing a good technology infrastructure in North Dakota. This infrastructure needs to be maintained and continuously improved.

Recommendation #3: The state should have a competence expectation for every high school graduate in addition increasing the credit requirement to graduate.

Much has been written about the need for students to be ready for something when they graduate from high school. We cannot assume that because students have taken the requisite number of credits, they are competent to be successful at the next level. In fact, feedback from employers and higher education suggests otherwise.

At the risk of alienating many of my K-12 colleagues, maybe the time has come for having a competency expectation before students are awarded a high school diploma. Rather than using seat time and numbers of credits students should be required to demonstrate post-secondary and workforce competencies.

The other alternative is to have a state curriculum and common assessment in core subjects so that if students successfully completed their high school English requirement or their high school math requirement anywhere in ND, one could depend upon the fact that the courses were of the appropriate scope and rigor.

Recommendation #4: Clarity and consistency in the state regarding what students should know and be able to do in the core subjects. State standards and benchmarks must be continually upgraded and matched to workplace and higher education expectations.

We need to be clear on what we expect students to know and be able to do in each school district. We can have the most skilled teachers, optimal class sizes, and the finest materials and equipment, but still have a poor outcome if we are not teaching the right things at the right time and in the right order.

In addition, all students must have guaranteed access to the curriculum through varied teaching methods, enhanced by the appropriate technology, and in a variety of modalities.

In Bismarck, we were so concerned about the relevancy and rigor of our 7-12 English-Language Arts curriculum that we put out a national Request for Qualifications and in a competitive process hired Kaplan K-12 to assist us with creating the most up-to-date local standards. We are contemplating hiring them again to align our K-6 reading-language arts with our secondary curriculum and then to integrate our whole elementary core curriculum. What I mean by integration is matching elementary science, social studies, and language arts standards to gain the maximum efficiency from the school day while providing content in all core subjects.

Perhaps the state should invest in hiring curriculum experts to create curriculum frameworks and end of course assessments for core subjects such as English 9-12, Algebra I and II, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and US History.

We like our autonomy in ND, but the stakes maybe are too high for local control of core subject curriculum expectations.

Recommendation #5: Encourage pre-K education for disadvantaged children.

Background information and language experience is critical to later success in school. Disadvantaged students have to play catch-up once they get to

school. If students had the opportunity to attend language-rich, experience-rich pre-school, research indicates that students would be more ready to take advantage of school.

Recommendation #6: Increase career advising for middle and high school students.

I purposely do not call it career counseling because to have counselors provide career advising is too expensive. We need counselors for other things. Teachers with some training, or even well-educated paraprofessionals could potentially provide career advising. Career advising could consist of creating career awareness, setting career goals, setting academic achievement goals, and helping students to create their high school course of study leading to preparation for post-secondary study for a career.

Recommendation #7: All schools need to have access to expert consultants/coaches in core areas, especially to help with figuring out interventions for struggling students.

Schools need to have access to experts to help teachers figure out which interventions are the most suitable for struggling students. This could be done through Regional Education Associations.

Recommendation #8: Continue to develop and disseminate the Response to Intervention model.

Response to Intervention aims to prevent unnecessary assignment to special education. With RTI, low-performing children are offered intense, individualized academic intervention. Student progress is monitored to see if response to this intervention yields adequate academic growth. This model requires classroom teachers, special education teachers, and reading teachers to work together, in the classroom, to provide the specific instruction students need the instant they fail to thrive academically.

This approach has been found to minimize educational problems later in the academic career in addition to lowering costly special education referrals in the upper elementary grades.

Summary

The Education Improvement Commission has helped create consensus around much needed improvement in our education funding system. They are well on the way toward creating consensus on improvements in our education delivery methods. I support the direction implied by the preliminary report by Picus and Associates.

I think we have underestimated the difficulty of educating every single student to proficiency. This is true not only in ND, but everywhere. We are fortunate in North Dakota to have quality school systems and mostly supportive patrons. The students in most school systems come to school ready to learn. However, twenty to forty-five percent of our students will graduate in 2008 not proficient in one subject or another.

The Legislature should focus on the following areas during this session:

1. Anticipate the difficulty of replacing retiring educators in rural areas. Put in place incentives for teaching in isolated school districts. Provide funds for mentoring for new teachers – possibly through REAs.
2. Make the development of a P-16 database a high priority.
3. Provide the resources for more detailed curriculum content and performance standards and benchmarks for core high school subjects.
4. Provide increased funding for school districts for tutoring struggling students – one idea is to extend the Reading First model with state funds.

Thank you for the opportunity to visit with you this morning.

Bismarck Public Schools Strategy Map

