

Summary of Meeting with **Duane Benson**
Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Thursday, July 10, 2008

Guest speaker: Duane Benson, executive director, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), Wayne Popham (by phone), and Clarence Shallbetter (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--This is the first of several meetings the Civic Caucus intends to hold over the next several months, providing background on major education issues facing the state.

B. Welcome and introduction--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Duane Benson**, executive director, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF). Benson was executive director of the Minnesota Business Partnership from 1994 to 2003. He served in the Minnesota Senate from 1980 to 1994, and was the Senate Minority Leader for a time. He graduated with honors from Hamline University. Benson was drafted into the NFL and played eleven seasons as a linebacker for the Oakland Raiders, Atlanta Falcons, and Houston Oilers. He continues to own and operate a cattle farm outside of Lanesboro and is active in numerous civic and charitable organizations. Benson is a member of the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities Board of Trustees.

C. Comments and discussion--During Benson's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Purpose of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF)--MELF is a tax-exempt educational organization with the purpose of identifying cost-effective ways of ensuring that Minnesota's children ages prenatal to 5, from low-income or challenged families, are ready for success in school. MELF's website states that the organization "will support programs and initiatives that educate, inform, and empower parents, particularly in Minnesota's fast-growing immigrant communities and other under-served communities."

2. MELF Board of Directors--The MELF Board includes the CEOs of Best Buy, Ecolab, BlueCross/Blue Shield of Minnesota, United Healthcare, the University of Minnesota, Liberty Diversified, Taylor Corporation, United Way, Minnesota Business Partnership, the retired chairman of Cargill, leaders of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, the McKnight Foundation, and others.

3. A temporary, not a permanent organization--Benson said that MELF, founded in 2005, will be discontinued on December 31, 2011. It is funded only with private funds, with a fund-raising objective of \$30 million during its years of existence.

4. Main objective--Governmental jurisdictions are investing in Minnesota now some \$700 million a year on children from pre-natal to age 5, Benson said. In addition another \$1.4 billion is estimated to be spent annually privately via cash or in-kind expenditures (including family-member child care), he said. The current system is characterized by (1) no common vision or shared goals (2) numerous, unaligned collaborative efforts, (3) no single mandated authority to align program and policy, and (4) no statewide mechanism to coordinate across funding streams.

To illustrate his point about lack of overall direction, Benson distributed a chart that MELF has prepared to illustrate how some 25 different parties involved with care and education of pre-school children relate to one another on funding and on collaboration. The chart is an effort to illustrate that no one can make sense of the system today.

MELF's objective, he said, is to prepare a plan for intelligent use of the dollars and to give parents the tools to evaluate and make choices among competing providers, public and private. Currently the system is supply-driven; MELF wants to make it demand-driven, he said.

5. The need--MELF believes that success of the K-12 system depends upon what happens in pre-natal through pre-school. About 50 percent of the children who today arrive at the K-12 system are ready for kindergarten, he said. MELF has a goal of increasing the percentage to at least 85 percent. The vast majority of brain development occurs before a child reaches five years of age, he said.

Benson repeated findings outlined by Art Rolnick, a board member of MELF, in a Civic Caucus interview on January 3, 2008. In that interview, Rolnick reported on a study conducted by the Highscope/Perry Preschool Study in Ypsilanti, MI, which tracked 123 low-income African-Americans over 40 years, beginning when the individuals were three and four years old. For five years in the mid-1960s, teachers worked with the children closely and visited them once each week in their homes. The study demonstrated that the children who received extra attention were more likely to graduate, had lower crime rates, and had a higher income than their peers who didn't participate. Rolnick said the Highscope/Perry study report demonstrated that for every dollar invested, \$17 was returned on the investment. That figure was calculated as money saved because the public didn't have to incarcerate or remediate the formerly at-risk people, and money earned because they got jobs and paid taxes.

6. Projects under way--MELF's latest annual report outlines its major areas of activity:

--A parent aware quality rating system that provides parents with an online system to choose early learning providers based on objective ratings. Some 180 providers had signed up by the end of 2007 to participate in the rating system.

--An early childhood scholarship program was started in St. Paul to assess gains in reading readiness if low-income parents (a) were supported by parenting mentors and (b) were provided with resources to allow them to afford consistent, quality care.

--Pilot projects have been launched in north Minneapolis, two neighborhoods in St. Paul, Wayzata/Plymouth and in Blue Earth and Nicollet Counties. These projects are intended to increase learning readiness among low income families by funding a well-integrated set of best-practice strategies for early childhood education and development.

--An evaluation process has been launched with the University of Minnesota and three other nationally-known evaluators.

7. Distinction between MELF and Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)--A major difference between MELF and ECFE, a program of the Minnesota Department of Education, is that MELF works exclusively with at-risk children, while ECFE, according to Benson, provides the bulk of its support for middle-class families. A Civic Caucus member also noted that Head Start is a long-standing federally-supported early childhood program. Benson said whatever the final outcome of MELF's work, its recommendations will be designed to integrate with ECFE and Head Start, not to be an add-on.

A Civic Caucus member said that two-parent, two-earner middle income families probably regard child care as their No. 1 need, because the child care is making it possible for both parents to work. Ultimately, he said, he's confident that the MELF work will present great value to everyone because of its quality rating system.

Benson mentioned a program in Grand Rapids, MI, known as "Savvy Source", which is somewhat of a model for MELF's efforts.

8. Overcoming protectionist mindsets--Among public and private organizations and providers in Minnesota there's a lot of what Benson called "underbrush" with an "I can do it best" mindset. But he is confident that empowering parents will change the situation. Already, he said, day-care providers in St. Paul are asking what they need to do to receive a four-start rating in the competitive environment.

9. Better success with recent immigrant groups--Looking at the total of all at-risk children and families in the state, Benson said that recent immigrants seem to be seeing the need best and responding best to a new system of parent-based choice. Too many others continue to think almost exclusively of "day care", instead of "early childhood learning", he said.

10. Long term management of the rating system--Since MELF is scheduled to sunset on December 31, 2011, a question was raised where the early childhood rating system will be permanently located. Benson said his preference is for an independent

rating organization, but he has not yet succeeded in that objective. His second preference would be the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and his third preference, the Minnesota Department of Education.

11. Importance of health and human services involvement--Benson highlighted the importance of identifying at-risk children even before they are born, by working with at-risk parents. That's an area of health and services involvement, he said, not public education.

The idea of placing early childhood learning in the Department of Education extends also to the way the Legislature is structured, Benson said. The House has a stand-alone Early Childhood Finance Division, separate from K-12, while early childhood is under the Senate K-12 Education Budget Division.

12. Whether changes in K-12 are needed--In response to a question Benson said MELF's chief interest is on preparing pre-natal to pre-kindergarten children for kindergarten. MELF is not directly addressing the question of whether the K-12 system needs changes to better deal with the children it receives. Benson suggested the Civic Caucus might want to visit with Steve Shank, founder of Capella Education Company, the parent of Capella University, an on-line university, for a discussion on how to change the system. As a member of the board of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, Benson said he is fascinated by the good job that is being done by the on-line universities. Many professors in the state system are moonlighting at the online institutions. Shank's message, Benson said, is that you can't change the system internally. It must be done externally. That's why moving from a supply-driven system to a demand-driven system is so important in pre-kindergarten and, he said, probably in the K-12 system.

13. Big K-12 investment in special education--A Civic Caucus member noted that special education, a big specialty area with its own certification, is receiving an ever larger share of the school budget. A big part of special education, the member said, is working with the children who are not ready for kindergarten when they arrive.

Benson said of the 50 percent who aren't ready for kindergarten, about 20 to 25 percent will catch up by the third grade. The other 20-25 percent can't read in the third grade and ultimately are most likely to drop out of high school.

14. Changes in the nature of the Legislature--As a former minority leader in the Senate, Benson was asked whether he's seen changes in the Legislature since he left in 1994. The big change, he said, is the concentration of power in the leadership. With the caucuses raising lots of money for campaigns, we now see that legislators are more dependent for campaign support on the leadership of their caucus than they are on their constituents. Thus, the power of the leadership is strengthened when it comes to the end-of-session decisions. Most members of the Legislature had no idea what was going on at the end of the 2008 session, he said. The concentration of power in the

leadership is a much bigger concern of Benson's than, say, the role of the precinct caucuses.

15. Possible changes in campaign finance--Benson suggested that possibly campaign finance laws could be changed to require that any donor must be a resident of the district in which a recipient candidate lives.

15. Diminished importance of "natural" legislator coalitions--In response to a question about the significance of party designation of legislators, Benson said that before 1973, when party designation was started, legislators representing common geographical areas or with common interests in issues used such "natural" coalitions much more. Now the natural coalitions are playing second fiddle to the party interest, he said. An exception, he said, is a fairly large natural coalition of legislators, with a membership of 80, that has developed around early childhood learning. That natural coalition is opposed by people on the far right, fearing too much state involvement in parenting, and on the far left, unions, who don't like the extent of non-union labor among early childhood providers.

16. Fear of taking the easy way out on legislation--A Civic Caucus member noted that legislators need a fairly sophisticated approach in dealing with child care, to understand, for example, the nature and implications of overlapping funding and objectives. The member recalled a similar situation with Congress, involving foster care. The temptation of lawmakers is to pass the simplest parts of a proposal, the member said. Thus, he suggested, MELF needs to realize that the Minnesota Legislature, while respecting the need to keep early childhood evaluation independent, might end up handing the responsibility to a party of interest, such as the Department of Education.

A Civic Caucus member said leadership by an enlightened Governor might help improve the legislative product. Benson replied that he is doing his best, now, two years before the next election for Governor, to meet one-on-one with potential candidates to improve their understanding of early childhood learning.

A member suggested that the early childhood movement needs to find a way to differentiate itself from "education", because of the strong correlation of that word with the traditional K-12 system.

17. Dilemma facing legislators--A Civic Caucus member speculated that legislators have a difficult time dealing with the early childhood issue. The existing early childhood system is characterized by comparatively lower pupil-teacher ratios and comparatively lower pay than is present in the K-12 system. Legislators fear the cost implications of placing early childhood into the K-12 system if the result is keeping the pupil-teacher ratios low while increasing salaries to the K-12 level.

18. Possible other thought leaders on early childhood--Asked who might be invited to discuss the early childhood issue with the Civic Caucus, Benson suggested

Robert Ostlund, former superintendent of the Wayzata Public Schools; Art Rolnick of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank; Warren Staley, retired chairman of Cargill and MELF board member, and Rob Johnson, formerly with Cargill and MELF board member. Ostlund, Benson said, has a particularly strong commitment to investing in early childhood learning.

Benson asked Civic Caucus members to suggest foundations that might be open to providing more support for early childhood learning.

19. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Benson for meeting with us today.