

Summary of Meeting with Curt Johnson, Education|Evolving

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, April 10, 2009

Guest speaker: Curt Johnson, managing partner, Education|Evolving

Context of the meeting: The Civic Caucus has tried to keep abreast of significant education policy developments in the Minnesota Legislature. Today we're learning more about a proposal to allow new schools to be created within the jurisdiction of existing school districts.

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Marianne Curry, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Dan Loritz, and Tim McDonald

A. Welcome and introductions--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Curt Johnson**, managing partner, Education|Evolving. A native of Texas, where he received his Ph.D. in education from the University of Texas, Johnson was serving as president of Minneapolis Community College in Minneapolis in 1980, when he was selected as executive director of the Citizens League. Later he served as policy adviser and chief of staff for Governor Arne Carlson and after that, as chair of the Metropolitan Council. He has had a long association with Education|Evolving and also as a national consultant/author of books and feature newspaper articles with columnist Neal Peirce. Johnson co-authored, with Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen and Michael Horn, the 2008 book *Disrupting Class*.

B. Comments and discussion--During Johnson's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

1. An unconventional approach to innovation--Today's discussion for education invites readers to adjust their thinking. It's a cooperative proposal that invites school boards, the administration, and the teachers union to agree in advance. Under this proposal no one is ordered to do anything. It's all about opportunity. Under the proposal advanced by Education|Evolving, innovative, relatively autonomous schools are authorized but may be set up *only* with the consent of the local school board, the administration and the local teachers union.

2. Stimulating zones of innovation within school districts--The vanguard of educational improvement around the nation is now shifting to emerging innovation in new kinds of schools set up within school districts around the county, Johnson said. This is happening across the country, from Boston to Los Angeles, he said. Education|Evolving is working on setting up a national meeting later this year that will, for the first time, bring together in one place the best examples of innovation within school districts.

3. Opening up school districts in Minnesota to more innovation--Johnson has seen plenty of evidence of what he calls "impulse and temptation" but not enough

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action within Minnesota. He then outlined an initiative by Education|Evolving that is being considered by the 2009 Legislature (HF 751 and SF 486). This bill, which is totally voluntary for school districts, would allow new self-governed schools to be established by school districts and be exempt from the same laws as are charter schools. If this legislation is enacted, agreement would be necessary by the local school board and the teachers' union.

Johnson said that a number of legislators have emerged as major champions for a more innovative approach to Minnesota schools; Rep. John Benson, R-Minnetonka and Rep. David Bly, D-Northfield have been key players in the House, with consistent support and cooperation from Education Finance Committee chair Mindy Grieling. In the Senate, Sen. Kathy Saltzman, D-Stillwater has emerged as a major player. Johnson also commended Commissioner Alice Seagren and her staff, as well as the governor's legislative team for their assistance in advancing this initiative.

Johnson said much of the energy and enthusiasm for this bill comes from teachers who declare they want to start and run schools themselves. The authority that a teacher-governed school within a school district must receive was imbedded in a 2005 site management law, but that law only described a *process* and addressed only converting existing schools to a different model. This year's bill spells out what autonomy means: including selection of staff, decisions about what learning model to use, control over money and budget, and how schools are to be judged on performance and achievement. Such schools would be closed if they failed to live up to their agreements. And if a board were to arbitrarily close such a school without cause, the school would have the right to become a chartered school and continue operations – sort of a poison-pill provision to assure good faith agreements. Teachers would continue to be employees of the district, operate under state tenure laws and would continue to be members of the teachers union.

4. Some school districts are ready to go--Considerable support is present in Minneapolis, Johnson said, where the school board, administration, and teachers union are ready to go, with group of teachers ready to propose new self-governed schools. In addition to considerable support from Minneapolis, Johnson said that superintendents in several suburban school districts have indicated their support, as have several superintendents (and teachers) in rural Minnesota, especially in districts enduring declines in enrollment where there is a strong sense of a need for a richer diversity of learning opportunities.

5. Constructively competitive with charter schools--Education|Evolving has been heavily involved in the establishment and spread of charter schools in Minnesota and elsewhere, and continues to support charter schools, Johnson said. A key difference between charter schools and self-governed schools under HF751 is that charter schools can be set up independently without approval of the school board. The new innovative schools would require school board approval.

Education|Evolving is a champion of innovation, whether by chartering or any other mechanism, he said. Innovation, Johnson said, is not merely replicating new things that emerge and work well elsewhere. Innovation is the result of trying something that hasn't been tried before. Education|Evolving likes to think up the next important change in education policy, persuade the Minnesota Legislature to pass a law, get people to try it, and if it succeeds help new models spread around the nation.

6. Possibility of continued drop in school district enrollments--Without the new legislation a serious risk exists, Johnson said, that within six years at least one major urban school district will have lost more than one-half its potential residential enrollments to choice options. The proposed legislation offers an opportunity for local school districts to give their resident students an option for an innovative school environment without going outside the district.

7. Need for non-governmental new schools agency--Both for charter schools and new district schools there is a need for a new non-governmental statewide agency to conduct research, raise funds, and provide technical assistance to new school start-ups, Johnson said. Most funds for such an agency would be raised privately, he said. EE's bills call this new agency NewSchoolsMinnesota.

8. Attacking a crisis in rural Minnesota--Additional pending legislation, also crafted by E|E, provides a clear alternative to closing schools in areas of Minnesota with sharply declining enrollment, he said. Without any action to the contrary it is likely that another round of conventional consolidation will occur. This legislation contemplates both planning grants to foster, using the state's joint powers act consolidation of functions like accounting, procurement, pensions, and payroll. But even with such changes, there's still a feeling that rural high schools must mimic large high schools in urban areas. That is not necessary; indeed it is a conceptual barrier, he said. It is possible, using new models that would emerge under the proposed new school legislation, for high schools of 100-300 students to survive economically and thrive educationally. They're simply trapped in the wrong model, now, he said.

9. No great opposition, just the logistics of a difficult budget session--There is broad support for the new schools approach, Johnson said. The biggest problem is simply the politics of a legislative session which is dominated by how to close a multi-billion-dollar gap in the state's budget.

10. We're losing too many kids--The chief motivating force for the new schools initiative, Johnson said, is that too many kids are dropping out of school too early and that too many others are losing interest because they find school to be boring.

11. We're not attracting enough top talent into teaching--The need for new schools is extremely important in attracting more highly-qualified people into the teaching profession, Johnson said. If the best of the best aren't going into teaching, it's because they don't see an opportunity to change things; they're forced to teach in a highly regimented system that doesn't give them flexibility for innovation. The new

schools approach being advanced by Education|Evolving is a way to offer teachers maximum flexibility to teach they way they want to.

New schools might help encourage younger teachers to remain in the field, Johnson said. So many teachers nowadays leave the profession within five years.

12. Reference made to *Disrupting Class*--In response to a question Johnson said he indeed was heavily involved as co-author with Clayton Christensen, Harvard professor, in writing the book *Disrupting Class*, which outlines in detail how individualized learning by computer is rapidly spreading across the nation. Johnson also made mention of *Century of the City*, a book just published by the Rockefeller Foundation, co-authored by Neal Peirce and Johnson.

13. Extra expense with new schools?--Johnson and Tim McDonald, also an associate at Education|Evolving, said that chartered schools often operate at lower expense than traditional schools. Facilities are lower cost and they don't need as many specialists. It's not unusual for properly-designed charter schools to run a surplus, McDonald said.

14. New kinds of motivation for teachers--Teachers who have the opportunity to run their own schools work harder than they ever imagined they would but do so with great satisfaction, Johnson said. He urged people to take note of *Who Controls Teachers' Work? Power and Accountability in America's Schools*, by Richard Ingersoll, professor, Graduate School of Education, The University of Pennsylvania.

A chart prepared by Ingersoll reveals that the rate of teacher turnover varies inversely with the amount of influence teachers have over student discipline and tracking.

15. Giving students an opportunity to act more as adults--Johnson quoted psychologist and author Robert Epstein (*The Case Against Adolescence*) who points to an unfortunate "quarantine" of youth in school between ages 13 and 19. It's a mistake to segregate them during their adolescent years and expect them to be responsible adults when they get out of high school. Think, he said, of how serious youth approach the matter of driver training. They are highly motivated to pass the drivers' test. That's giving them an opportunity to act as adults.

Epstein's research shows that the proportion of "adult attributes" among teens is roughly the same as it is among actual adults. He suggests that teens should be able to test out of adolescence if they can demonstrate those attributes.

16. Contribution by schools of education--Schools of education generally are not in a leadership role when it comes to training future teachers who might have an opportunity to run their own schools, Johnson said. *Why don't they change?* In the first place, schools of education are largely the "cash cows" for universities. The universities need large numbers of enrollees in their schools of education because the expense of

providing education for future teachers is relatively less than the expense of education in many other fields.

A few schools of education, however, are exploring a sort of second track, which teachers interested in running their own schools could follow. Hamline University and Minnesota State University Mankato are in the forefront of change among Minnesota schools of education, he said.

17. Important policy changes in Minnesota--Johnson reviewed significant changes for school choice in Minnesota, beginning in the mid-1980s with giving high schoolers the opportunity to take college courses, continuing on with open enrollment and then to the first charter school law in the nation in 1991. The new schools initiative this year, he said, can open an entirely new chapter on effective schooling. Unfortunately, the national discussion seems to focus more on standardization.

18. Concern about proposed change in the Metropolitan Council--Toward the end of the meeting the conversation shifted briefly to proposed legislation that would put county commissioners on the Metropolitan Council, a move opposed by Johnson, a former chair of the Council. A Civic Caucus member noted that the main allegiance of county commissioners is to the county that elected them. They can't simultaneously represent the county and the metro area. Even if they could reconcile their representation responsibilities, he said, they could not responsibly do both jobs well, given the demands on their time.

In terms of whether the boundaries of the Metropolitan Council should be enlarged, Johnson suggested that voluntary process for enlargement be developed, rather than requiring that additional counties be added. Such a voluntary process could outline the benefits of becoming part of the Council as well as the responsibilities.

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