

Summary of Meeting with Joe Nathan

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, December 12, 2008

Guest speaker: Joe Nathan, director, Center for School Change, Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota

Present: Verne Johnson, chair (by phone), Marianne Curry, Bill Frenzel (by phone), Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Dan Loritz, Marina Lyon (by phone, and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--This is another of several meetings the Civic Caucus is conducting on issues of education

B. Welcome and introduction--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Joe Nathan**, director, Center for School Change, and senior fellow, Humphrey Institute, University of Minnesota.

The Center for School Change website is www.centerforschoolchange.org Nathan's email is jnathan@umn.edu. He welcomes reactions/suggestions to his comments.

The Center For School Change works at the school, community and policy levels to help make significant improvements in public education. CSC has and does work with both district and charter public schools.

It was initiated in 1989 with a multi-million grant from the Blandin Foundation. The Annenberg, Bradley, Cargill, Carlson, Frey, Gates, General Mills, Joyce, Minneapolis, Pohlada, Rockefeller, and St. Paul Foundations, along with the Minnesota and US Department of Education, have supported the center's work.

Before coming to the Humphrey Institute, Nathan was an aide, teacher and administrator with the Wichita, Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools. The National Governors Association hired him to coordinate a two-year project, *Time for Results: The Governors 1991 Report on Education*. Twenty-two state legislatures and several Congressional Committees have invited Nathan to testify.

USA Today, *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Detroit News* and other major newspapers have published guest columns he wrote. From 1989 to 2004, Nathan wrote a weekly column for the St Paul Pioneer Press (more than 800 columns). For the last 4 years he has written a weekly column for the ECM Newspaper group. He has appeared on the Today Show, Good Morning America, CBS Nightly News, McNeil Lehrer News Hour, and more than 200 other television or radio programs. He helped start and worked for seven years in a 500 student, k-12 public option that began in September 1971, in St. Paul and still is operating today.

Nathan is married to a St. Paul Public School teacher and father of three children. All three of the Nathan's children attended St. Paul, Minnesota Public Schools, K-12. He served as president of the Horace Mann Elementary School PTA in St. Paul, a board member of the Minnesota PTA, and member of several site councils. He has a B.A. from Carleton College, an M.A. and PhD from the University of Minnesota.

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

Overview: Nathan hopes that people will come away from his comments with a feeling of optimism, and four major messages:

1. The good news is that we do know enough now to close achievement gaps among most students, and to increase overall achievement and high school graduation rates
2. As no single tool is sufficient to build a house, no single strategy is sufficient to produce major gains that we need in public education.
3. Strategies the Citizens League has helped develop and gain support for, such as Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO), public school choice and the chartering approach to public education have produced major gains, as well as some problems.
4. Advocates expect vigorous attacks on programs such as PSEO and the charter approach during the 2009 MN legislative session.

1. There's no mystery to improving educational achievement--We already know enough to bring virtually all low-achieving, disadvantaged minority children up the achievement level of whites, Nathan said. No change in theory is involved, just changes in expectations and practice, he said, citing the work done in Cincinnati Public Schools between 2000 and 2007. As described in an October, 2007 *Star Tribune* column and an *Education Week* column in January 2008, the district

- Increased overall high school graduation rates by 10% and
- Eliminated the graduation gap of almost 20% between white and African American students.

More info available at

www.centerforschoolchange.org/gates-high-schools/gates-cincinnati.html

Cincinnati's progress involved a number of things, including clear, focused, explicit goals, learning from the most effective schools serving low income students, whether district or charter public schools, strong collaboration between schools and other community groups including businesses, universities and others, competition from the charter movement, collaboration with the local teachers union, willingness to hold building principals accountable, focused, ongoing staff development, and some outside funding to help make the above possible.

Nathan also cited as “extremely valuable, a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article by Paul Tough, “What It will Really take to close the Achievement Gap” that appeared in the *New York Time Sunday Magazine*, November 26, 2006 (www.nytimes.com/2006/11/26/magazine/26tough.html) Excerpts from the article:

Referring to the “small but growing number of successful schools like KIPP and Amistad,” Tough wrote

"The evidence is now overwhelming that if you take an average low income child and put him into an average American public school, he will almost certainly come out poorly educated. What the small but growing number of successful schools demonstrate is that the public school system accomplish that result because we have built it that way. We could also decide to create a different system, one that educators most (if not all) poor minority students to high levels of achievement....it is within reach."

The KIPP, Amistad/Achievement First schools “are not racially integrated. Most of the 70 or so schools that make up their networks have only one or two white children enrolled, or none at all...the schools “tend to follow three practices:

- They require more hours of class time than a typical public school.
- They treat classroom instruction and lesson planning as much as a science as an art. Explicit goals are set for each year, month and day of class, and principals have considerable authority to redirect and even remove teachers who aren't meeting these goals
- They make a conscious effort to guide the behavior and even the values of their students by teaching what they call character...the schools are in the end a counterintuitive combination of touch feely idealism and intense discipline.

2. No one tool will do the entire job--Just as is building a house, Nathan said, no one tool will do the job. He highlighted changes in Minnesota that have helped, including post-secondary options, school choice, and charter schools.

3. Minnesota education is at a crossroads--We can continue to expand, improve and refine or we can yield to threats to cut back on progress, Nathan said. He is particularly worried about attacks from many persons in the educational establishment who, he said, would like to discontinue charter schools, post-secondary options and school choice.

4. **Controversy over success of charter schools**--A Civic Caucus member noted recent publicity about a study by the Institute for Race and Poverty (IRE) at the University of Minnesota claiming that charter schools perform worse than comparable district schools on state tests and intensify racial and economic segregation.

(<http://www.startribune.com/local/stpaul/35109429.html?elr=KArksLckD8EQDUoaEygyP4O:DW3ckUiD3aPc: Yyc:aULPQL7PQLanchO7DiUJ>)

- Nathan responded that the study missed a great deal, and presented very questionable information. For example, he pointed out that some of the most effective public schools with African American students in the state are charters like Harvest Prep in Minneapolis, Higher Ground in St Paul, and Tarek Ibn Ziyad in Inver Grove Heights. In legislative testimony earlier this month, legislators learned the following from Eric Mahmoud of Harvest Prep and Bill Wilson of Higher Ground. Legislators were surprised and impressed.

Percentage of African American Students proficient in Mn Statewide reading and math tests, by district

School / District*	%A/A proficient in reading	% A/A proficient in math
Harvest Prep	62%	56%
Higher Ground	53%	55%
Tarek Ibn Ziyad	67%	86%
Mpls district	31%	22%
St. Paul district	38%	29%
Eden Prairie	45%	31%
Edina	50%	40%

(<http://education.state.mn.us/ReportCard2005/index.do>)

* This chart shows, for example, that 62% of African American students at Harvest Prep in Minneapolis are proficient on the Minnesota's statewide reading test, compared to 31% of African American students in Minneapolis, 38% of African American students in St Paul, 45% of African American students in Eden Prairie and 50% of African American students in Edina.

- Minnesota Charters are legally considered districts for accountability purposes, although they do not have the power to levy taxes, as more traditional districts do.

While all the schools have room for growth, Nathan asked – might not there be something valuable to learn, rather than criticism from places like Harvest Prep, Higher Ground and Tarek?

- Nathan also quoted Formerly ST. Paul city council chair Bill Wilson (the first African American chair of the city council) and founder of Higher Ground in St. Paul recently responded at a state legislative hearing re IRE's charges that schools such as Higher Ground and Harvest Prep represent "segregation."

Wilson testified quietly, "I don't know whether Professor Orfield has experience segregation. I have. While a student in Evansville, Indiana, I was bused past 3 schools because of my skin color, to an inferior school, just for people like me. That's segregation.

"Giving low-income people the power to decide for themselves among various schools – including ours is not segregation. It's giving low income people, and people of color, the kind of power to make decisions that wealthy white people have had for many years."

- Nathan pointed out that a study of charters in Minneapolis he conducted several years ago showed 5 of 7 Mpls charters over two years, and 6 of 8 charters in Mpls over one year showed more progress in reading, math or both than district public schools. He pointed out that the IRE study did not look at growth or progress
- Nathan urged Civic Caucus members to read Paul Tough's Nov 26, 2006 *NY Times Sunday Magazine* article cited above. Most of these Tough serve all or virtually all students of color, and that they embody ideas also used by some of Minnesota's most effective charters that were vigorously criticized in the IRE report.

Nathan said the IRE report is often factually incorrect and reflects a bias toward moving inner city students to more affluent communities. Nathan said this works sometimes. Nathan noted that neither the recent IRE report nor the Star Tribune story about it cited data from the Minnesota Department of Education report on the Minneapolis to suburban choice program showing that

- For the most recent year in which data are available, students staying in Minneapolis made more progress in reading at every grade level measured than did those who went to the suburbs

- For the recent year in which data are available, students who went to the suburbs and students who stayed in Minneapolis made similar progress in math
- 62% of students who participated in this program have withdrawn within one year.

Nathan asked, "Is this the kind of program we want to rely on entirely to close the achievement gap, or should we also try to replicate much more successful programs?"

5. Key characteristics for success--Nathan outlined key characteristics of schools exhibiting significant student achievement:

- Small in size
- Clear, formal, explicit objectives that are understood by everyone
- Involving the students in some kind of community service
- Partnerships with community institutions, such as universities
- Accountability for results
- Strong development of character in students as well as academic

learning

6. Examples of successful schools--Nathan distributed a 68-page booklet, "Smaller, Safer, Saner Successful Schools" authored by Nathan and Sheena Thao of the Center for School Change that describes 22 schools around the country, including City Academy, St. Paul; Minnesota New Country School, Henderson, MN; Northfield Community Resource Center, Northfield, MN; Perham Area Community Center, Perham, MN, and School of Environmental Studies, Apple Valley, MN He singled out a few other schools in the report from elsewhere in the nation:

Frederick Douglass Academy, Harlem, New York City, a grades 7-12 district school with 1,450 students, from which 90 percent graduate within four years, compared to a city-wide average of 50 percent

Withrow University High School, Cincinnati, OH, a district public school with no admissions requirements with more than 700 students, about 90 percent of whom are African-American and about half are low income. Test scores and graduation rates at this school top many suburban schools.

KIPP Academy, Bronx, New York, with 250 students, grades 5-8. KIPP schools, including one in Minneapolis that started in 2008, are free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools with a track record of preparing students in underserved communities for success in college and in life, according to the KIPP website. The Minneapolis school, at 1601 Laurel Avenue, is partly supported by the Pohlada Family Foundation.

Nathan also cited Minnesota's pioneering Post Secondary Enrollment Options Law (PSEO). This law allows high school juniors and seniors to take college courses while still in high school, with state funds following them, paying their tuition, lab and book fees. CSC research in 2005 found that more than 90% of participating students would do this over again, and thought very highly of the program. Many school districts have responded to the PSEO by increasing the number of AP, IB and College in the Schools courses. CSC research also found that low income students and students of color are underrepresented in PSEO. The "Stretching Minds and Resources: 20 Years of Post-Secondary Enrollment Options in Minnesota," can be found at:

www.centerforschoolchange.org/post-secondary-options-awareness-and-opportunity/index.html

With support from Pohlads, Wallin, and Best Buy Foundations and the University, the CSC has worked closely with a number of community groups to increase the # of students of color and low-income students participating in PSEO. In the last 3 years, there have been double digit increases in participation rates (including almost 50% increase in number of African Americans participating). There is still a lot of work to do but the Center thinks this is a very valuable part of the way to help more low income youngsters afford and be ready for some form of post-secondary education.

7. Importance of mentoring educators--Responding to a Civic Caucus member who noted that mentors can be very helpful to struggling students, Nathan agreed. He went on to discuss another form of mentoring, that of mentoring educators. The latest project for the Center for School Change is the "Minnesota Leadership Academy for Charter and Alternative Public Schools", which opened this fall in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Education. Each enrollee in the academy has two mentors, a successful business executive and a successful school leader. The academy is described in a *Washington Post* article, December 4, 2008, "7 Habits of Highly Ineffective Principals".
www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/05/AR2008120500863.html

A top executive at a major local corporation noted the importance of making a corporation's goals and means to achieve those goals absolutely clear to new employees, Nathan said. The executive went on to say that a school leader must do more than simply hand a curriculum to a new teacher. The teacher needs to clearly understand the system's goals and expectations at the outset.

8. Customized curriculum versus standardized curriculum--Asked to respond to a recent book, "Disrupting Class", by Clayton M. Christensen, calling for more on-line customized curriculums for students, Nathan replied that many schools are out-of-phase with their youth. Although emerging technology has had many impacts on our culture, many schools still operate in much the same way they did 30-50 years ago. While there are exceptions, many schools still have 28-35 students in a class with a teacher; many schools still have computer labs (Nathan asked if it was appropriate to have a pencil lab – a room where students would go to use pencils?) Nathan believes

technology is under-employed in many schools, to truly customize learning, as well as to enhance and increase what educators can do.

Nathan is impressed with some on-line schools, which are attracting a growing number of elementary and secondary students. However, he has not done a careful study of their impact, and does not know of research comparing how much progress schools make in conventional and on-line schools.

9. Concern over preserving innovation--Nathan said he fears that current budgetary limitations will prompt educators to pressure the Legislature scuttle innovations such as Post Secondary Enrollment Options and charter schools. Nathan said the threat is very serious (reinforced by legislative testimony the following week from the state teachers' union, school boards and superintendents organizations. One or more of these groups are asking for

- * Not permitting any new charters in communities where there is discussion of consolidation or closing schools
- * Moratorium on number of charters
- * Requiring charter directors to be credentialed (describe the success of people like Eric Mahmond and Bill Wilson, who are not licensed administrators, and the success around the country of many other charters who do not have licensed administrators.

- * Some individuals and groups within education are extremely hostile to PSEO, open enrollment and charter public schools. He asked Civic Caucus members who support these programs to contact him.

To illustrate the importance of preserving innovation, Nathan cited an example of a high school student who was supervising 20 McDonald's employees and yet was being treated as a 10-year-old in the student's traditional high school. The student decided to participate in Post-Secondary Enrollment Options, in part because he was treated as an adult. CSC research 3 years ago found that more than 110,000 Minnesota students have used PSEO, and more than 90% of them say they would do it again if given the opportunity. Minnesota school districts have responded to competition from PSEO by creating hundreds of new, challenging courses – AP, IB, College in the Schools, etc. However, some high schools continue to resist PSEO, and have tried to limit it through legislative action.

10. Importance of coalitions--A variety of groups and interests ought to get together to fend off efforts to get rid of innovations, Nathan said. He suggested that groups like the Citizens League, the Civic Caucus, the Leagues of Women Voters, the Chambers of Commerce and other business organizations and groups representing and advocating on behalf of low income families and families of color should work together in 2009.

11. How a governor sets priorities--A Civic Caucus member said a Governor can be besieged with all sorts of corrective actions and needs to identify a few for top priority. Nathan replied with four suggestions:

a. Focus on what works. A Governor ought to urge the state to honor and seek to replicate what is working most effectively in public education, whether in district or charter public schools.

b. Find the revenues. The Governor ought to be open to modest increases in taxes on the people who have the most resources.

c. Honor progress. Money should be invested in those schools that are showing progress. A school aid formula ought not be based only on enrollment. Factors such as attendance, achievement, and graduation rates should be part of a formula.

d. Collaborate with others. Legislators, educators should work with major foundations and social service agencies to explore what they could do together.

Nathan recalled pioneering leadership by Gov. Rudy Perpich, 23 years ago, when he first proposed open enrollment and post-secondary options. Schools should be allowed to dream, carry out the dream, be responsible for results, and allow choice and freedom for students and parents.

12. Early childhood education important--In response to a question, Nathan said a high priority in Minnesota and nationally is making high quality early childhood available to ALL students from low income and limited English speaking families. It is in the top five issues that need action in 2009.

Nathan's mother was the first Head Start director in Kansas. The 1985 National Governors' Association report that Nathan coordinated urged making high quality early childhood education available for all low-income families. We would be much further along with that recommendation had been carried out. But all early childhood programs are NOT equally effective. Nathan believes one of Minnesota's problems is that we have spread money around on a variety of early childhood programs rather than focusing first on the highest quality programs for low-income families. Moreover, he thinks it is as important for schools to be "ready for students and families" as it is for students to be "ready for kindergarten." He thinks student readiness has received a great deal of focus – school readiness for students and families has received less focus. Both are important. Governor Tim Pawlenty recently appointed Nathan to the state Early Childhood Advisory Committee.

13. Doing more to train and retain top teachers--Its extremely unfortunate that schools must use seniority as a basis for layoffs, Nathan said, when the result is that top-flight teachers are among the first to go. He cited some CSC research about state teachers of the year, which showed 3 of the 20 teachers of the years they surveyed were laid off due to low seniority. He's anxious to work with the Bush Foundation and others who are working to improve the quality of the teaching staff.

14. Re-thinking the need for college--Every high school graduate doesn't need to go to a four-year college, according to research that Nathan cited. He said the Anoka-Hennepin School District is working with Anoka Technical College on the STEP, a great example of helping high school students take applied courses in areas like engineering or nursing that will lead to good jobs without four year college degree.

15. The David Ellis success story--To demonstrate the value of change in education, Nathan discussed the experience of David Ellis, graduate of the Open School in St. Paul, and, subsequently, founder of the High School for Recording Arts. Ellis had a troubled experience as a younger man. Later he started a small recording arts studio that attracted a number of high school dropouts. He set up a tutoring service that evolved into a charter school. Because of mistakes early in life, Ellis could have ended in prison, but he ended up helping himself and countless others through the charter school experience. See <http://minnesota.hsra.org/about/>.

16. Not all charter schools succeed--Nathan readily agreed that some charter schools have underperformed and should be closed, but the charter concept is solidly established and must be preserved.

17. Analysis versus anecdote: One CC member asked if Nathan relied too much on anecdotes, and not enough on hard data. Nathan responded that he tried to find the best available research and share that, as well as help generate useful data. His experience through writing newspaper columns and testifying is that the public often responds best to a combination of anecdote and data. That is what he tries to provide. But he also thinks careful evaluation is vital – including that showing some charters are not succeeding. This is part of the reason he favors replicating outstanding district and charters. He has seen many examples of how this was done, in ways that benefit youngsters.

18. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus Verne thanked Nathan for visiting with us today.

D. Upcoming meetings

Friday, December 19--Jim Bartholomew, Minnesota Business Partnership, on education

Friday, December 26--no meeting

Friday, January 2--Mark Ritchie, Minnesota Secretary of State, on election-related issues

Friday, January 9--Terry Stone, business owner, International Falls, MN

E. Recent website additions:

--Survey and comments by participants on elections:
<http://www.civiccaucus.org/RespSummElectionStructure.html>

--Comments on summary of meeting with Jay Kiedrowski and John Gunyou, former state commissioners of finance:
<http://www.civiccaucus.org/RespSummKiedrowski-Gunyou.htm>

--Comments on summary of meeting with Jim Solem and Nacho Diaz, former staffers, Metropolitan Council: <http://www.civiccaucus.org/RespSummSolem-Diaz.html>

--Comments on summary of meeting with Jeffrey Eppink, energy consultant: <http://www.civiccaucus.org/RespSummEppinckJeffrey.html>

--Comments on summary of meeting with Dee Long, former speaker, Minnesota House of Representatives:
<http://www.civiccaucus.org/RespSummLongDee10-08.html>