



Summary of Meeting with John Hamann and Joann Knuth

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, December 5, 2008

Guest speakers: **John Hamann**, president, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), and **Joann Knuth**, executive director, MASSP

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; David Broden, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Dan Loritz, Marina Lyon (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —Today's is one of several meetings the Civic Caucus has been holding with representatives of various interests in education.

B. Welcome and introductions —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **John Hamann**, president, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), and **Joann Knuth**, executive director, MASSP.

Hamann received a BS degree in computer science education from Moorhead State University, taught for four years in Wanamingo and Browns Valley, MN, and returned to Tri-College University and received his Masters and Specialist Degrees. He has held two principal positions, the first in Wyndmere, ND and now for 12 years in Underwood, MN.

Knuth has been MASSP executive director since June 2006. MASSP serves more than 1,300 middle, junior high and senior high school principals. From 1999 to 2006 she was an area superintendent in the St. Paul public schools. Previously she had served as principal of Highland Park High School and Johnson High School in St. Paul. She has BA and MA degrees from University of Minnesota-Duluth, and has completed course work for a Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis.

C. Comments and Discussion —During comments by Hamann and Knuth and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Strong support for early childhood education —Minnesota should provide pre-kindergarten education for all children who need it as well as all day kindergarten for all children, Knuth said. Early childhood education returns \$7 to \$12 of benefit for every dollar invested, she said.

Knuth said that pre-kindergarten years ought to be handled organizationally in the public school system just as are K-12. The delivery of this education should be coordinated with and through

community education and must be developmentally and cognitively appropriate. Pre-K teachers would be certified just as all other teachers are. Non-public schools can provide pre-K education, too, just as they now provide K-12, she said.

Asked about where funding will come from for pre-K, Knuth said that education is key to the state's economic vitality. Lawmakers need to set priorities in a strategic way and fund early education for children of need to insure that all who enter kindergarten are ready for it.

Hamann noted that many public schools already are providing education for 3, 4, and 5-year-olds. Asked about whether funding for high schools would be reduced so that pre-K children could be served, Hamann said the existing formula for distributing state revenue to school districts is confining because pupils of different grade levels are weighted differently. He supports a proposal by Rep. Mindy Greiling and State Sen. Terrii Bonoff to count all students the same, regardless of grade level, as included in their bills.

2. Certain high school tests are misleading —On the question of how well high schools are doing, Hamann said that, overall, high schools are doing very well in Minnesota. Minnesota is 9th in the nation in high school graduation rates (<http://www.edweek.org/media/ew/dc/2008/40sgb.mn.h27.pdf>). ACT scores are above the national average (<http://www.act.org/news/data/07/states.html>).

However, Hamann is greatly disturbed by a new state math test being given to high school juniors to determine whether they will be allowed to graduate. The portion of the math test to determine if they will graduate is called the Graduation-Required Assessments for Diploma (GRAD) test, and it is incorporated into the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) test required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The federal government requires a test, but it's up to each state to design it. The new tests will be enforced beginning with students graduating in 2010 when students need to pass the GRAD part of the tests in reading, writing and math. However, this past year the new math test was given to juniors on a pilot basis. Only 37 percent of students in Minnesota passed the test. In Wisconsin, a state not too dissimilar to Minnesota, 82 percent passed. A common test wasn't given in both states. Instead each developed its own. Knuth said that Minnesota school administrators did not see the test until after it was taken by students.

If the situation doesn't change, Hamann said, school districts will have to provide remedial education for 12th graders so that they'll be able to graduate. Such a situation would mean shifting resources from other legitimate parts of the curriculum.

Hamann has met with the Commissioner of Education, Alice Seagren, and gave the following recommendations to the department for their consideration:

- Create a bank of test questions, indicating which ones are GRAD, MCA or both. Use that bank to create practice tests and get those out to schools.
- Have the GRAD portion and the MCA portion be two separate tests, with the GRAD test being given first.
- Define what remediation would mean to school districts, both in fund needs

and resources (teacher and time).

—Give the tests at the end of the sophomore year to allow time to remediate.

The State Commissioner of Education is aware of what Hamann called a "looming train wreck" and is consulting broadly with educators in the state.

3. A call for federal standards —Hamann said that if tests are going to be given, they ought to follow federal standards, rather than being left up to each state. A Civic Caucus member commented that it appears quite unusual that educators, who value local responsibility and control, should be calling for federal standards. The member inquired why Minnesota shouldn't want to hold its own students to a high standard, regardless of federal requirements. Hamann replied that Minnesota schools are doing a good job now, and that their performance would be clear in any common test applied across the nation. Knuth said that the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) has adopted a position supporting national standards in literacy and mathematics. Other curricular areas would remain under local responsibility and control.

4. Are changes needed?— A Civic Caucus member inquired whether, if the system isn't working, is more money needed or a change in how students are being educated. Knuth said that more money is needed. The coalition of education organizations, PS Minnesota, commissioned a report on our state's public education funding. It expanded the work of an Education Task Force, appointed by Governor Pawlenty, which determined that Minnesota schools are under-funded by \$2 billion per year. Greiling's and Bonoff's bill, the new "Minnesota Miracle," addresses this funding shortfall in a systemic way over time. Knuth replied that education is not a separate entity outside of the political, economic, and social realm. She thinks that education will probably be asked to share in the challenge of balancing the state's budget deficit.

5. Relevance of NCLB- Knuth said that the goals of NCLB are the right goals, that all children have opportunity to achieve at high levels with quality teachers who hold high expectations for all students. However, in the implementation of NCLB we have seen a "shame and blame" approach. Susan Neuman, who was Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education under the Bush administration when the legislation was implemented, is advocating a broader, bolder approach to achieving the goals of NCLB which includes recognition that children of poverty need extra support in terms of health care, nutrition, early literacy. Schools by themselves cannot close the achievement gap, but need a broader, systemic, approach

6. Is curriculum customized or standardized?—Hamann was asked about the claim by Clayton M. Christensen in his book "Disrupting Class" that public schools aren't sufficiently customizing the curriculum for students and that, consequently, more and more young people are turning to on-line courses, outside the public schools, to receive a customized curriculum. Hamann replied that customization already is going on. In a typical classroom of 20 students, there probably are seven or eight methods a teacher is using, depending upon the individual student.

He also said that schools in southwestern Minnesota, where his school is located, are using computers to implement long distance learning for special classes such as Chinese that a few individual students want but can't receive at their own school.

7. Developing small communities within a larger school —Responding to a question, Knuth said that both Minneapolis and St. Paul already have created small communities within larger high schools. The "4R's" are central to the academic success of students: rigor, relevance, relationships, and results. She believes that relationships are most critical to student success and are a key goal of smaller learning communities, as found in St. Paul, Minneapolis and other districts with large secondary schools. These schools seek to personalize the learning environment.

8. Staying permanently behind or catching up? —A Civic Caucus member observed that at the beginning of each year, at all grade levels, some students are lagging behind and some are way ahead of the rest of the class. There's a challenge to bring some students up to speed and keep others from getting bored. We need high school graduates who are well trained to function as productive participants in the economy, the member said. Another member said that keeping schools from getting too large is very important.

9. Likelihood of a constitutional amendment for a schools-only tax increase?

It was noted in discussion that the Legislature has an almost impossible job to balance a budget satisfactorily in 2009, what with a \$5.3 billion gap between likely revenues and projected expenditures. In response to a question, Knuth said she's not been involved in any discussion suggesting that education might seek a dedicated revenue source from the constitution, as outdoors and arts advocates received in a vote this fall. The outdoors and arts amendment was adopted because proponents were frustrated by some lawmakers' pledges not to raise any taxes, she said. She said she voted for the amendment but doesn't think it would be good policy for the state to follow that approach with other services.

Knuth contended that K-12 education expenditures have declined in recent years as a percentage of personal income.

Turning to school districts raising operating income by referendum, Knuth said that over 90 percent of the state's school districts have levies on their local property tax for some portion of their operating budgets. Because of differences in property wealth among districts, school tax burdens are becoming more inequitable, she said. She'd not like the Legislature—in balancing a tight state budget—to allow expansion of local taxing authority. That would put an additional burden on local property tax payers and create greater inequity.

Knuth highlighted the fact that school districts are finding major increases in health care expenses for employees, plus additional expenses for fuel.

10. Should teachers accept changes in their contracts to help balance the budget? —It was noted that in recent years employees in many private firms have agreed to significant changes in labor contracts to help keep their employers afloat during difficult times. A member inquired whether teachers would accept changes in their contracts to help school finances in the current economic downturn. Hamann and Knuth replied that such a step would be legitimizing the fact that schools have been under funded for many years. Schools can't make more cuts in spending, they said, without significantly impacting the quality of instruction and services, especially in this era of greater accountability. Essential support staff, such as librarians, nurses, social workers and counselors, have been cut already. Minnesota ranks last among fifty states in school student/counselor ratios; for

example, in some of our urban high schools with the most diverse populations, the ratio is 1 counselor for 450+ students. Class sizes are increasing; it is common to have 35 to 40 students in a math or English class.

11. Creative proposals for the future —Knuth highlighted a report published by MASSP entitled "A Bridge to High Learning: A New Vision for Minnesota's High Schools in the Global Information Age." Its vision is that Minnesota secondary schools prepare every student to earn a credential or a degree at a postsecondary educational institution-whether it is a technical school, two- year college, or four-year college or university. This is an ambitious goal, but necessary for maintaining the vitality of our state's economy, according to Knuth. The report details 10 building blocks that provide the framework for transition from schools that focus on postsecondary success for some students, to postsecondary success for all students. (available online at www.massp.org) "Minnesota's Promise: World-Class Schools, World-Class State" is a report developed by a small group of superintendents in partnership with the Minneapolis Foundation and the University of Minnesota that identifies ten strategies for achieving world-class schools. The "essential elements of high performance" are:

- Investment in early childhood education
- Emphasis on high quality teachers and principals
- Rigorous academic standards
- Involvement of parents and the community
- Support and involvement of all cultures
- Good data and research
- Funding that is predictable and sufficient
- Schedules and calendars to help all students reach high standards
- Strong support for special education
- Ensuring that students come to school physically and mentally ready to learn

12. Minnesota budget forecast —A member said that details of the Minnesota Management and Budget's forecast for the upcoming biennium can be found at <http://www.mmb.state.mn.us/doc/fu/08/handout-nov08.pdf>. The forecast illustrates a 9.4 percent drop in revenues and a 1.6 percent increase in spending. Knuth said that the state's education finance policy over the past 8-10 years isn't working. Jobs are needed, and that means education must have the resources to produce a quality future work force.

12. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Hamann and Knuth for meeting with us today.