



# Brenda Cassellius, Minnesota Commissioner of Education

## Early childhood is the most critical issue in education

A Civic Caucus Focus on Competitiveness Interview

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### Present

Dave Broden (vice chair), Brenda Cassellius, Janis Clay, Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Audrey Clay, Pat Davies, Randy Johnson.

### Summary

According to Minnesota Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, early childhood is the most critical issue in education. She says investment in early childhood yields a 16-to-1 return. She believes the state's emphasis on early learning helped boost 2013 national achievement test scores for the state's fourth-graders. In fact, Minnesota fourth-graders ranked first in the country on the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) math assessment. She says the NAEP scores for fourth- and eighth-graders show that the state has made some improvement in closing the achievement gaps between white students and students of color.

She reports that under Minnesota's waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, the state has developed a new accountability system that uses multiple measures to hold *a//*schools accountable, not just those receiving Title I funding. Also, Minnesota now has a state framework for a new, rigorous teacher evaluation system, which she calls "fantastic."

Cassellius calls on school superintendents to take responsibility for kids through age 21 who have not completed high school, since the state provides funding for those students. School districts, she says, should help those students earn postsecondary credentials, certificates or associate degrees while they are earning a high school diploma. She also believes that school districts should take responsibility for all students and not "warehouse" those who are credit deficient in alternative schools.

## Background

Dr. Brenda Cassellius is Minnesota Commissioner of Education, appointed by Gov. Mark Dayton on Dec. 31, 2010. Under her leadership, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) applied for and received a waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, allowing for a better, fairer, more accurate and supportive accountability system. MDE was awarded a \$45 million Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge grant to further develop and strengthen early education efforts. The Department was also awarded a \$28.2 federal Public Charter Schools grant to design and implement high-quality charter schools.

Cassellius was critical in passing new alternative licensure, principal and teacher evaluation laws, increased funding for PK-12 education, legislation ensuring a sharp, statewide focus on every child reading well by third grade, and expanded access to quality early childhood education.

Cassellius has had a 23-year career as a classroom teacher, administrator and superintendent in school systems in Minnesota and Tennessee. Prior to her current post, she was the superintendent of the East Metro Integration District, which includes 10 suburban school districts. Previously, as an associate superintendent in the Minneapolis Public Schools, she led 19 middle and high schools and was responsible for the implementation of the Minneapolis Secondary Redesign, which put the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in all but one Minneapolis high school. As the academic superintendent of middle schools in Memphis, Tenn., Cassellius was responsible for middle school and district reforms that led to accelerated gains and the narrowing of achievement gaps among students.

For much of her childhood, Cassellius grew up in poverty in the public housing projects of southeast Minneapolis, near Prospect Park, and she refers to herself as a "Head Start baby." She credits a summer camp in Waconia that she attended for two weeks every summer with sparking her interest in working with kids. She received her B.A. degree in Psychology and Child Psychology minor from the University of Minnesota and her Master's in Teaching and Specialist in Administration degrees from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. She received her doctorate in 2007 in Organizational Leadership and Policy from the University of Memphis in Tennessee.

## Discussion

**The past 10 years have been very troubling for Minnesota schools.** According to Minnesota Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, Minnesota schools have

struggled financially over the past 10 years. "We kind of stalled for the past decade in Minnesota and even went backwards a bit," she said. "There was a lack of focus on the things that really matter to move achievement forward. We know kids have had to take remedial classes in postsecondary institutions over the last 10 years."

She acknowledged that because of the troubles over the past 10 years, there is a bubble, as former State Economist Tom Stinson calls it, of people employers think aren't prepared for the workforce. An interviewer commented, "We need to do a recall on people who went through the system to help them in some way."

**But the trend is now changing.** "There's a different way we prepare kids now to make them college and career ready," Cassellius said. "We're remedying the need for remedial postsecondary classes now and are trying to get in alignment with postsecondary education."

She said she is working collaboratively with Steve Rosenstone, chancellor of the Minnesota State College and University system (MnSCU), to try to create a seamless prekindergarten-to-age 20 system. "These things have usually been separated," she said. "They have worked in isolation. We're bringing them into one cohesive, coherent educational system, which is very promising."


**Minnesota scores well above the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests.** The NAEP tests are reading and math assessments given every two years to a statistically significant sample of fourth- and eighth-graders in all 50 states. Also called "The Nation's Report Card," NAEP is "a very good barometer of our competitiveness with other states," according to Cassellius.

On the 2013 fourth-grade math assessment , Minnesota students ranked first in the country, with an average score of 253 points out of a possible 500, compared with the national average of 241 points.

On the 2013 eighth-grade math assessment , Minnesota students ranked fifth in the country, with an average of 295 points, compared with the national average of 284.

On the 2013 fourth-grade reading assessment , Minnesota students ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the country, with an average score of 227 points, compared with the national average of 221.

On the 2013 eighth-grade reading assessment , Minnesota students ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the country, with an average of 271 points, compared with the national average of 266.

For more complete information, click for  **NAEP results for Minnesota and the nation and for state-state comparisons** . Scroll down to "See More NAEP Results." This is the U.S. Department of Education official NAEP website.

Cassellius pointed out that Minnesota scores higher in both math and reading at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels than any of the other four states in the region: South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin.

**Minnesota's 2013 NAEP scores showed some improvement in achievement gaps.** Cassellius said the NAEP scores showed achievement gap closures in the fourth grade reading assessment. "We closed gaps by 10 points since 2009," she said. "That's a 25 percent gap closure within four years."

She pointed out that in fourth-grade math, Minnesota's black students scored fourth highest among black students nationwide in 2013. She called that "huge movement," since their scores in 2011 ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the nation.

In eighth-grade math, Asian students gained nine points over their 2011 average score. And eight percent more Asian students scored as proficient this year.

Cassellius said the gap in eighth-grade reading grew between white and black students, which she called "very discouraging." "These are students who have had 10 years of disinvestment in our public schools," she said. "It's been very, very stagnant for them." She noted that in the last three years, there has been much more focus on early learning than on older students.

**In math and science, Minnesota students score internationally among the top in the world.**

Cassellius said results of the 2011 Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) show that Minnesota students score near the top, with only China and Massachusetts ranking higher. And Minnesota scores well above the TIMSS national average. (Minnesota and eight other states competed in the TIMSS testing as countries.) Click for [state and international comparisons of 2011 TIMSS results](#).

**Using sample testing, as the NAEP and TIMSS assessments do, is better than testing every child at every school.** Cassellius said we should trust teachers to do daily assessments of every student all year. "I don't think we need to give five tests to each kid every single year to get the information we need as policymakers to make the best decisions for students," she said.

**Minnesota's waiver from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the federal accountability system for schools that receive Title I funding, means *all* schools are now held more accountable.** Title I schools receive extra federal funding, based on high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families, to help ensure that all children meet state academic standards. Under NCLB, Title I schools were held more accountable than more affluent schools, she said.

Under Minnesota's new NCLB waiver, Cassellius said, "Every school must pay attention. Minnesota's new accountability system measures growth, how fast kids are growing and closing achievement gaps, proficiency and high school graduation rates. The scores are reported in the press. It's making a difference."

She said with the NCLB waiver, the MDE has created three regional centers of excellence to support the schools that are struggling the most. Among the lowest performing five percent of schools, known as "priority schools," 78 percent improved their multiple measurements rating in 2013. Among the 10 percent of schools with the largest achievement gaps, known as "focus schools," 71 percent improved their scores in 2013 and made progress in closing their gaps.

"We've never seen that type of growth before," Cassellius said. "We've thought systemically about the kind of support teachers need to do their jobs better, especially in rural Minnesota, where they can't afford teaching specialists. We've created teams of folks who coach and co-teach with teachers at the school and help do strategic planning. They help the teachers implement the programs they want to implement. We are support to them, helping them do what they want to do to help their kids."

**Minnesota was awarded a federal Race to the Top grant, which provided \$45 million for early learning.** Cassellius said it was used to start a program of early learning scholarships in 2011 and a Parent Aware System to measure pre-kindergarten program quality.

**The 2013 Legislature appropriated \$485 million to fund a variety of initiatives:** all-day kindergarten and 4,000 more pre-K school scholarships; help with the special education subsidies

paid by school districts; and paying back the schools for past borrowing of state education funds the state had used to help balance its budgets. "We're now paying our schools, not borrowing from them," she said. "We're making investments."

**The Read Well by Third Grade initiative helped raise fourth grade reading scores in 2013.** In 2011, Cassellius said, Gov. Mark Dayton worked with then-state Sen. Gen Olson (R-Mound), who served from 1993 to 2012, to have a bipartisan Read Well by Third Grade initiative. Dayton's number one priority, according to Cassellius, is that every single third-grader in Minnesota read at grade level. The initiative came with \$50 million for schools to implement it. "We think that's a big reason why we saw our reading scores really climb in fourth grade this year," she said. "In 2013, we rewrote the entire third-grade literacy bill and put some teeth in it. It was a hope document before."

Under the new law, she said, every district must have a literacy plan, start assessing students in grades pre-K to two, and give reports to parents as to whether their kids are reading at grade level or not. If kids are not reading at grade level, the school has to provide intervention to them earlier than in the past.

"We've never done this level of oversight to assure that kids are getting earlier intervention," Cassellius said. "These are fluency tests, comprehension, vocabulary and phonics awareness." The schools get additional funding per student if they meet the third-grade requirement and additional dollars if students improve their scores from third to fourth grade. Over \$50 million goes out to schools for this program.

**There is strong bipartisan support for education and we must stay on the things that matter:** early childhood; all-day kindergarten; maintaining our high standards, which haven't been changed; and making sure every child is reading well by third grade. "We have to get kids in grades eight to 12 ready for postsecondary education or for the workforce," Cassellius said. "They're not ready. How do we intervene now with high schoolers?"

**Industrial art programs are not likely to return to the high schools.** Cassellius said most of the state's efforts have been on early childhood, but the department has been doing some planning on high school to postsecondary alignment. As part of the call to action from the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, she said, things shifted very rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s to the idea that every kid should go to college for four years.

"Schools dumped their career technical education programs," she said. "To rebuild that programming at the high schools would be very expensive. We will work collaboratively with our community and technical colleges to ensure multiple pathways to careers."

She noted that one way of doing this is for students to enroll at postsecondary institutions through the state's Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program. As of 2012, 10<sup>th</sup> graders can enroll through PSEO, which was previously limited to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. The program allows these high school students to take college classes at any postsecondary institution in Minnesota without paying tuition. Tenth graders are restricted to taking postsecondary technical career training classes through PSEO.

"We fund schools to serve students who haven't finished their high school diplomas through age 21," Cassellius said. "But the K-12 system pretty much drops kids at age 18. I'm trying to tell superintendents, 'You own these kids till age 21. Work with community and technical colleges to get these kids an associate degree, a credential or a certificate, while you're getting them their high school diploma. Merge them and make it more fluid.'"

**The state has little authority over what local schools districts do in terms of program choice, curricular choice and staffing choices.** An interviewer asked what the role of the state and the role of local teacher contracts are in school reform. Cassellius stressed that schools are locally controlled by local school boards. She noted that Minneapolis has historically had a "very progressive teachers contract," which gives the district the ability to "fresh start" schools. A "fresh start" can dramatically reorganize a school's staff and provide extra resources to improve student performance. She said as an associate superintendent in Minneapolis, she helped to "fresh start" Washburn and Edison high schools in 2008. "Sometimes you have to make the tough decisions and the tough calls," she said. "But you do that in collaboration with the unions and the teachers. "

**Competencies are more important than simply what classes a student has taken.** An interviewer asked how education is connecting to the world of work and how it is adapting to new technology and rapid change. "We're not as adaptive as we need to be," Cassellius said. "I'm not sure a high school diploma carries the same value any more. It means I took high school English 1, 2, 3 and 4. But what competencies do I have to do my job when I get out?"

She said MnSCU's Rosenstone is looking at a competency-based approach. He's working with the business community to look at what skills we need for the future and where we are headed. He got bonding money for specialized manufacturing equipment for colleges to teach people the skills they'll need.

**School districts should take responsibility for all their kids and not "warehouse" them in alternative schools.** An interviewer commented that virtually none of the kids at the Hennepin County Juvenile Detention Center go to regular high schools or regular middle schools. Instead, they're going to alternative schools, he said, where he senses there are minimal expectations and very little performance required.

Cassellius responded that in the 2013 legislative session, she tried to reform alternative learning funding by having it transferred into the general fund of school districts, because she thinks districts ought to take responsibility for all their kids. "When they're credit deficient, they go to contract alternative schools and they get warehoused," she said. "Other kids there have issues like behavioral problems and delinquency. It is a significant issue, especially for the Minneapolis Public Schools, where they have multiple contract alternatives." She pointed out that the graduation rates are much higher when you look at the seven large high schools in Minneapolis and don't count in the alternative schools.

**Early childhood is the most critical issue in education .** "Most brain development happens before age five," Cassellius said. The state funds Head Start, the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP),

four-year-old readiness programs, preschool scholarships and Early Childhood and Family Education (ECFE) programs. "Where are we getting the most bang for the buck?" she asked. "There's a 16-to-1 return on early learning. Don't put pre-K against all-day kindergarten; we need both."

**The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has 485 employees, 40 percent funded through the state and 60 percent federally funded, and a departmental budget of \$18 million.** Cassellius said most employees are at the state agency and that many of them are in the finance division, because the agency puts out a \$15.8 billion education budget. Many employees work on food and nutrition and there is a large special education staff. "I've tried to beef up the school support division, the academic division and the curricular division," she said. "That's where we'll be able to support teaching and learning."

**In 2011, the Legislature passed a state framework for a teacher evaluation system to be implemented in 2014.** Cassellius said school districts have to use the new state evaluation system if they can't agree on a local one. "It's much more rigorous than principal evaluation," she said. Both the teacher and principal evaluations require that 35 percent of the evaluation be based on student outcomes. Districts can locally determine what testing they want to use.

Now that the evaluation system is in place, she said, it will take three years to get all of the state's 52,000 teachers evaluated. Thirty percent of Minnesota teachers will be evaluated each year. "We have a fantastic teacher evaluation system now," Cassellius remarked.

She said each district has a teacher committee that must recommend each teacher for renewal to the state Board of Teaching. The committee could recommend that the board not renew a teacher's license. If a teacher does not improve, administrators have the power to decide what to do, all the way up to dismissal and termination. "Administrators have to do their job," she said.

**Open enrollment, consolidation, transportation, increasing diversity, and demographic shifts are big challenges to rural communities in Minnesota.** Cassellius said if a school district can't pass a referendum, parents will drive to another school district that can and enroll their children there. She also said she's very surprised at the growing diversity of students across the entire state.

## Conclusion

"We're on the right track," Cassellius concluded. "We see in the fourth-grade test results that our early childhood efforts are paying off. Also, taking care of the underprepared kids in the bubble is really important work. I think we continue to double down and move forward."