



email: <info@JoeErickson.us>

website: <<http://www.JoeErickson.us/>>

Brief Policy Position Statements

Ability Grouping

In general, I am against ability groupings merely on equity grounds. It creates haves and have-nots and will stigmatize children, even at early ages. That being said, there are specific situations in which grouping of a sort may be useful. For example, research suggests that grouping students by mastery level assists students in making smooth progress through various levels of math work by focusing instruction on work that will be productively engaging for learners at various levels of complexity. Of all the basic subjects, math might be the only area in which grouping of one sort or another may be justified.

There may be other specific situations in which ability grouping is justified, but the justification should be empirically based, not merely for efficiency or out of habit.

Charter Schools

Well-managed charter schools can be a helpful alternative form of public education. I don't believe it is productive for the "regular" public schools to demonize the charters or approach the issue as an "us vs. them" issue. All of these children are our responsibility--whatever form of public education their parents choose.

I have observed very productive education at such schools as Minnesota Transitions, A Chance to Grow/New Visions, and Cedar Riverside Community School. They are often successful with children who have been floundering or unsuccessful in "regular" public schools. In general, they serve a very similar role comparable to that of our contract and alternative schools.

Sometimes small grassroots organizers like those who start charter schools are overwhelmed by the administrative detail and complexity of the operation of a modern American school. The result is that some charter school operations have been under-managed and undisciplined. The sponsoring organization of a charter school needs to carefully monitor the school in order to ensure compliance with the school's charter.

Class Size

A tremendous amount of research from various perspectives all point to the centrality of small class size and its role in improving academic and social outcomes. We will need to be vigilant with regards to the budget to make sure we don't let our attention waver on keeping class sizes small.

Community Schools

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of my campaign is my emphasis on community building and community-based learning strategies. I believe we have lost our way in this area and the return to community schools is a good step in the right direction. The return to community schools, while a difficult decision on desegregation grounds, is in nearly every other respect educationally sound. Returning to community schools has the potential of enhancing community connections, parent involvement, school safety, and (to the extent the above mentioned issues are salient) student learning.

Core Curriculum

What is a core curriculum? Nearly 10 years ago, noted educator Ernest Boyer asked that question of hundreds of parents, educators, school board members, and others worldwide and developed a wonderful multicultural approach called the "Basic School." In his book discussing this approach, Boyer outlines several central forms of literacy (textual, numerical, artistic, and social/emotional) and a number of key intellectual domains (the physical world, the social world, etc.) that parents of children from all over the world agreed they wanted their children to possess by grade 6. I believe this approach is one of the most innovative and worthwhile "core curricula" available today.

The Basic School approach is modeled here in Minneapolis at the Downtown Open School, a Minneapolis Public School founded by parents and the district as a downtown learning community. Our local expert is teacher Kristin Sonquist, a teacher at Downtown Open.

Disability Services

One of the most troubling aspects of delivering services to special needs learners is the financial headache it has created for school districts. Many services were mandated by federal legislation (i.e., the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, IDEA), which in theory is good, but the legislation is fatally flawed because it mandates services for our special needs learners, but does not provide adequate funding for those services. This federal funding shortfall affects all learners, because since these services are mandated, they must be delivered. Money for "regular" education is often used to pay for special needs learner mandates. We must all mobilize and contact our federal legislators and tell them that full funding for the special needs mandates must be forthcoming!

Diversity

Diversity is ubiquitous and is a treasure and a gift for Minneapolis Public Schools. Diversity is an important element of any high quality education and should be featured and promoted whenever possible. Diversity does not just include race and ethnicity. It also includes gender, interests, perspectives, attitudes, etc. By imbedding our curriculum with the wisdom of many cultures and perspectives we will enhance our ability to reach all children, especially those children who may not feel included in a more narrow approach.

ESL Programs

ESL (now more commonly called ELL for English Language Learners) is a fact of life for Minneapolis schools. In some schools, upwards of 40% or more of the children speak another language at home. We need to deliver high quality ELL training for our teachers and other support staff to assist these new English speakers in becoming proficient in English (contrary to some right-wing critics, new immigrants desire English proficiency for themselves and their children). The key will be training our teachers to deliver this instruction.

Home Schooling

For several years the district has provided some support services for home schooling parents and it

provides other opportunities such as athletics. I think these are reasonable and should continue. I would prefer these home schooled learners spend at least part of their school week in the presence of gifted scholars and co-learners in our public schools, but if that can't happen, we can provide the kind of support these parents need to deliver high quality learning to their children. One concern I have is the mail-order worksheet curricula--which unfortunately is the approach employed by many home schooling parents.

Magnet Schools

For many years, the magnet programs in Minneapolis Public Schools offered specialized programs to learners that were not available in their neighborhood schools. For example, open education and Montessori education were offered as magnet options. I think it is time to move beyond thinking of open education or Montessori education as marginal or fringe approaches. Schools like Seward Montessori and Marcy Open deliver a great education to ALL children and can continue to do so in the newly configured community schools approach. There may still be a place for limited magnet options, but we need to move beyond thinking of these options as marginal.

Another way to approach this issue is to consider the possibilities that the small learning communities initiatives may provide. These smaller learning communities could be developed as mini-magnets within buildings, providing the same sort of magnet options as the previous generation of magnet schools, but doing so in every neighborhood school.

Middle School and High School Reform

I support the district's efforts to reform middle-level and high schools, including the move for smaller more family-like school groupings I also endorse the expansion of community-based learning strategies such as school-to-work and community service-learning.

Parental Involvement

Perhaps it goes without saying that parent involvement is a crucial element in high learning achievement. But what many teachers and administrators misunderstand is how parents perceive parent involvement. Parent involvement is not just going to PTA and selling raffle tickets. Studies reveal that most parents feel that getting their children to school in the morning, monitoring and limiting TV, serving good meals, etc. is parent involvement--because it is! We need to acknowledge, support and celebrate that sort of involvement, too.

We should also support the kind of deeply engaged parent involvement which is the hallmark of truly remarkable schools--helping with instruction and co-curricular activities, authentic involvement in school governance, fundraising, etc. The community schools model should help more parents to engage in these more intense activities.

Pledge of Allegiance

Students and staff should not be compelled to recite the Pledge, but we could certainly encourage it.

The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag is not (as is often wrongly assumed) a required act of citizenship--that status is reserved for the Constitution alone.

Prayer in School

I see no compelling reason for the public schools to be engaged in mandatory prayer, however voluntary prayer should not be denied or discouraged. This is the right of each participant in our schools.

Profiles of Learning

The profile is a solid idea that is unfortunately dying a slow death due to profound political and strategic errors by the state and huge campaigns of misinformation by conservatives. The Profile may or may not be salvageable, but make no mistake--it started as a good bi-partisan idea which embodied a revolution in how we "show what we know" and in how we teach children. It remains to be seen if the revolution will be rekindled or continue its slow de-evolution.

Resources for Schools

The impending budget cuts that schools again will feel are unconscionable. Schools should be among the first priorities for our state's resources. Schools are not the place to be shopping for bargains.

School Choice

The general public often misunderstands school choice. What the state law promotes is inter-district choice, not intra-district choice. The phenomenal level of intra-district choice enjoyed by MPS parents for many years was an artifact of the district's desegregation efforts. Those days are over due to the twin movements of community schools and transportation cuts. Any remaining intra-district school choice options will be severely limited. Inter-district choice of the sort mandated by state law is still available, however this is used by only a fraction of families primarily due to geographic limitations.

Sex Education

Sex education certainly should remain an option for families, but I think we should still allow for an opt-out option for parents who would prefer to provide their own sex education resources in a manner more consistent with their beliefs and values. If we provide sex education in the format promoted by most knowledgeable sex educators--i.e., values-based and restraint oriented, not just a plumbing approach--I am confident most parents will decide to have their children participate.

Technology Integration

I believe we need to continue to support the authentic integration of technology into our K-12 classrooms as a tool to increase literacy for the modern age. Well-integrated technology can assist children to become more active, self-directed learners. But we must not be fooled to think that technology will be a cure-all. Tools don't make good learners--any more than pencils make good writers. It is the skilled application of the tools that matters, and for that we need training--of teachers and learners. I support targeting resources for training of teachers and others on how to use technology.

Testing

I am passionately opposed to the simplistic high stakes testing favored by some conservatives including both Republican candidates for governor. I think this is wrong-headed and harmful. As Janet Reno said recently, "you don't get the blue ribbon pig by weighing it, you get the blue-ribbon pig by feeding it."

We need to move away from the old-fashioned "factory" model of teaching that treats children like "widgets" on an assembly line. Children need to be treated and assessed like growing human beings.

Carefully prepared diagnostic testing used to help learners and their parents understand their educational strengths and challenges are great, but using simplistic multiple-choice tests to bash children, their teachers and schools is wrong in all sorts of ways, and I support parents and others organizing to get the state to change their mandates in these areas.

Vocational Education

I support both school-to-work and tech-prep curricula. One interesting development in the past few years has been the upgrading of the so-called voc-ed track. When asked to name the sorts of skills necessary to survive in the high tech marketplace, many companies such as Ford and IBM have outlined essentially what we used to call the college-prep curriculum. What this tells me is that if we provide high quality vocational education, we will not be dead-ending these learners because they will be taking a high quality, high expectation curriculum within a vocational framework. If those young people do decide later to go to college, they should be as well prepared as any other motivated student.

Vouchers

I do not support the use of vouchers to support non-public K-12 education. Non-public education is a voluntary choice which brings with it extra financial responsibilities. The parents and learners making that choice must shoulder those responsibilities.