GROWING GAP

MINNESOTA’S TEACHER RECRUITMENT & RETENTION CRIZES

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**KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Teacher Shortage**
- More than half of Minnesota superintendents report an “extreme teacher shortage” in math and science, and nearly half identified a teacher shortage in special education.
- More than half of all teachers change schools in their first five years. More than 15 percent leave the profession after the first year, blaming poor facilities and working conditions, stress, professional isolation and other factors.
- Retirement in high-demand subjects will hit rural districts hardest. Of the 80 chemistry teachers who retired between 2002 and 2006, 10 of them left southwest Minnesota schools. Of 485 math teachers who retired between 2002 and 2006, 51 retired from east central Minnesota and 42 from northeast Minnesota schools. In Earth and space science, 10 of the state’s 56 retirees came from east central Minnesota schools.
- Urban schools report using alternative teacher licensure at twice the rate of principals from small rural schools. Slightly more than half the urban school principals surveyed felt alternative licensure has been a “very effective” strategy compared with only 28 percent of rural principals.

**Costs of Teacher Turnover**
- Turnover puts school districts in a costly permanent hiring mode. Recruiting, hiring, administrative processing and professional development among other factors add up to costs ranging from $4,366 per teacher who leaves a school in rural New Mexico to $17,872 in Chicago.
- Teacher turnover and higher recruiting and retention costs uniquely disadvantage rural districts. Turnover reduces the quality of education in small rural schools, which often lose their best teachers to larger, better-paying districts.

**Demand for Math and Science Professionals**
- The 21st century economy requires employees who are well-educated in math and science. Projections to 2012 show employment in science- and engineering-related occupations will increase about 70 percent faster than the overall growth of jobs.
- An expanding high-tech business sector is strongly competing with the education system by paying top dollar for skilled science and math graduates, reducing the pool of potential math and science teachers.
• According to the state Department of Employment and Economic Development, starting pay in 2006 for biological scientists was $73,000 a year, for chemists $61,000 and for physicists $91,000. Adjusted for inflation, these professions saw at least a 15 percent salary increase since 2000. The average beginning teacher in Minnesota earns $31,456 and overall average is $50,450. Adjusted for inflation, a beginning teacher's salary has risen 2 percent since 2000 while the overall average has dropped 2 percent.

Mentoring
• To retain teachers and curb the costs of teachers leaving the profession, Minnesota must take the lead in initial orientation and ongoing mentoring of new teachers. One study found that the five-year national teacher retention rate of 56 percent jumped to 88 percent with a comprehensive program of new school induction and mentorship.

• Though most Minnesota schools offer mentoring programs, they are often underused after the school year starts. The Minnesota Department of Education should create a mentoring network that is effective in all districts – big and small, rural and urban. Teachers who get quality mentoring and induction programs generally are happier and more productive.

• Mentoring should follow the Mankato model, providing experienced teachers on a rotating basis to teacher preparation colleges for extensive work with undergraduates, graduates and faculty as well as extensive mentoring and induction in the home district.

Teacher Pay
• As teacher pay in Minnesota continues to lag behind inflation. Our schools are at an extreme disadvantage in hiring new teachers. For our schools to stay competitive, we should raise all teacher salaries. In addition, we should examine whether schools should offer incentives for high-demand subject areas.

Recruitment
• Increase recruitment of teachers from other professions by using paraprofessionals and alternative licensure. No district, however, should rush inadequately trained teachers into classrooms.
INTRODUCTION

Undereducated Minnesotans.

It’s a phrase that would have chilled our parents and grandparents. Minnesotans expect an excellent public education system – topflight teachers, administrators and staff; outstanding curriculum; nation-leading graduation rates. It’s an expectation as old as Minnesota, rooted in our immigrant tradition of hard work, sacrifice and the drive to get ahead.

Without exception, we place great stock in education. Pioneer immigrants set aside township land for schools, sometimes building them even before churches. Minnesota grew on their foresight and investment.

Today, Minnesota’s increasing economic and population concentration in the Twin Cities metropolitan area presents a new set of educational challenges. The rural-urban divide grows greater, but our educational goal – to make Minnesota’s next generation of students the smartest, best-educated and most adaptable ever, no matter where they live – hasn’t changed.

Are we up to the challenge?

Minnesota’s education system is still solid but shows signs of severe stress. In 2007, 101 of the state’s 339 school districts have placed levy increase proposals on the fall election ballot.

An expanding high-tech sector is competing with schools for skilled science and math graduates, reducing the pool of potential teachers. With fewer qualified teachers available at the same time science and math graduation requirements are rising, some schools – rural schools, specifically – are finding it difficult to fill science and math teaching positions. This situation could lead to school districts being unable to offer required courses.

Increasing emphasis on standardized test performance is driving a troubling new set of learning priorities. “Teaching to the test” rather than raising student achievement with high-quality curricula is fast becoming the norm.

Meanwhile, more than half of all teachers change schools in their first five years. More than 15 percent of them leave the profession after the first year, citing a variety of woes including stress and professional isolation. This revolving door of new teachers replacing dissatisfied ones lowers the quality of education while putting districts in permanent hiring mode, drawing resources away from the classroom.

Minnesota 2020 understands the complexities of the education system. We don’t pretend to have all the answers, because challenges vary greatly from school district to school district. However, we contend that a muscular teacher recruitment and retention program will reduce costs, assemble better faculties and produce the smartest, most adaptable and most capable generation of students in Minnesota’s history.
BACKGROUND & PRIORITIES

Minnesota built an education system that is a national and global leader. Our students and teachers are among the best.

Minnesota has the highest percentage of secondary teachers – 86 percent versus 64 percent nationally – who majored in their core subjects.\(^1\) Minnesota has produced the second largest number of National Teachers of the Year – four, second only to California.\(^2\)

Only Singapore significantly outscored Minnesota eighth-graders on a recent “Trends in International Mathematics and Science” study.\(^3\) Minnesota and Singapore ranked first in the world in earth science tests.\(^4\)

In 2006, Minnesota placed first in ACT exam scores among states where more than half the college-bound students took the test\(^5\) and topped the entire nation in 2007.\(^6\) In 2003, 90.8 percent of Minnesotans 25 and older had a high school diploma, the second highest rate in the nation.\(^7\)

But the picture is not completely rosy. In fact, it’s somewhat misleading.

In 2007, 67 percent of Minnesota high school students failed a compulsory state math test.\(^8\) In science, the 2007 ACT test showed only 38 percent of Minnesota students could expect a grade of “C” or better in a college science class.\(^9\) Several minority groups lag significantly below average in all ACT test subjects.\(^10\)

The 21\textsuperscript{st} century job market requires high-quality employees who are adept in math and science. Projections to 2012 show employment in science- and engineering-related occupations will increase about 70 percent faster than the overall growth rate.\(^11\) Most jobs will require quantitative literacy.

Minnesota educators are trying hard to bridge the gap. Academic rigor has increased with algebra required in eighth grade and higher math and science classes offered in high school. In 2008, a new science test will become mandatory\(^12\), while reading, composition and math tests will be required for graduation by 2010.\(^13\)

Curricular support programs try to keep subject interest high. There are science clubs, mathletes and Silent Sustained Reading among others. The STEM program – Science, Technology, Engineering and Math – is a statewide effort to improve student abilities. More than 20 high schools and middle schools received STEM grants in 2006. In 2007, the Legislature approved $3 million to set up Math and Science Teacher Academies throughout the state to provide extra training for teachers in the STEM disciplines.\(^14\)

These programs all offer enhanced curriculum and require more one-on-one interaction between teachers and students.

Unfortunately, overall class sizes are growing while the number of math and science teachers is dwindling. For school districts with more than 1,000 students, the average number of students per teacher increased from 16.2 in 2000 to 16.8 in 2004. School districts with fewer than 1,000 students saw their average student-teacher ratio increase from 10.8 to 13.1.\(^15\)
More than 50 percent of Minnesota superintendents report an “extreme teacher shortage” in physics and chemistry, and nearly 50 percent said there is a shortage in special education.\textsuperscript{16}

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\textbf{School District Voice: Wabasso} & \\
\textit{“For an open science position (for the 2007-08 school year), I had two fairly high-quality applicants from about 10 applications. One of the two turned down an interview because a better job came along, so I had one candidate left. But that’s just the way it is today. Physics and chemistry positions are extremely hard to fill. So are special education positions, especially the teachers who work with emotional and behavioral disorders.”} & \\
-Ted Suss, Superintendent of Wabasso Public School.\textsuperscript{17} & \\
\textit{Spanish is tough, too. You have to put out every feeler you’ve got to find a Spanish teacher. But with elementary education or social studies, you put out an ad for one day and you get hundreds of applications.”} & \\
The Wabasso School District, about 110 miles southwest of Minneapolis, has 395 students and 32 teachers with one elementary and one secondary school. & \\
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\section*{Teachers}

The number of public school K-12 teachers in Minnesota has remained steady at nearly 56,000, as has the number of annual retirees at about 1,400 and the number of annual new licensees at 11,000. The number of teachers who switch districts or leave the profession entirely within five years has remained steady at 50 percent.\textsuperscript{18}

With more newly minted teachers replacing teachers who retire or move on, keeping them in the classroom is imperative. But it’s no easy task. Stresses pile on new teachers: Moving from college-supported practicum to the classroom is a giant leap, compounded by relocating and coping with an unfamiliar school and community.\textsuperscript{19} Rural school pay is lower than metro pay.\textsuperscript{20} Community support is rarely uniform.\textsuperscript{21}

Professional isolation is persistent. Teachers of specialized subjects, particularly those in the smallest rural schools, rarely have peers in the same discipline. The closest counterpart for a rural high school physics teacher may be 30 miles away.
“Teachers feel overwhelmed those first few days in school. Our school is small enough that we’re not completely isolated within the classroom all day, but in a large school it’s hard to find someone to talk to. It’s even harder if you’re the only science teacher in a small school because you don’t have any peers in your subject to talk to at all.”
-Marlene Schoeneck, Science Teacher, Parkers Prairie High School.22

Teacher retention also suffers under the common practice of laying off all probationary teachers in the spring and hiring most back in the fall, after budgets and enrollment numbers are fixed. Job security is such a worry that many teachers leave the profession rather than endure a continuous routine of being fired and rehired.23

“Budgets are so thin that it’s impossible to keep teachers at the schools for two years without being cut. I know one teacher who has been cut eight years in a row. It’s hard to feel job security. There is no job security.”
-Dawn Koennicke, Second Grade Teacher, Adams Elementary, Fergus Falls Public Schools.24

Turnover puts school districts in a costly permanent hiring mode. Recruitment, hiring, administrative processing, professional development and separation cost $4,366 for each teacher who leaves in rural New Mexico to $17,872 in Chicago.25 The Texas Center for Educational Research calculated that state’s annual loss due to teacher turnover in 2001 at between $329 million and $2.1 billion.26

Teacher turnover uniquely disadvantages small rural districts, which often lose their best teachers to larger ones.

“We hire between 20 and 25 teachers each year. About 50 percent of our new hires are experienced teachers from smaller schools near Moorhead. These teachers want to make more money and have big-city amenities.”
-Ron Nielsen, Director of Human Resources, Moorhead Area Schools 27

FINANCES

Education system shortcomings are cropping up at a time when businesses are demanding more skilled math and science graduates and paying top dollar to get them.28

According to the state Department of Employment and Economic Development, starting pay in 2006 for biological scientists was $73,000 a year, for chemists $61,000, for physicists $91,000. Adjusted for inflation, these professions saw at least 15 percent salary increases since 2000.29
Projections to 2012 show employment in science and math professions will increase 26 percent, far ahead of the 15 percent overall growth. But government underfunding has drastically cut the state’s ability to educate children to the level of quantitative and scientific literacy that will be required for these jobs.

Statewide, the average beginning teacher’s salary is $31,456. The average for all teachers is $50,450. Adjusted for inflation, beginning teachers’ salaries have risen 2 percent since 2000 while the overall average has dropped 2 percent.

While the number of Minnesota students is holding at about 830,000 and the number of teachers has remained steady at about 56,000, school costs continue to rise. Between 2000 and 2004, total operating expenses for public and charter schools increased an average of 18 percent while the cost of employee benefits rose 31.7 percent.

In the same period, special education costs rose 31 percent. They continue to rise by as much as 5 percent a year as 70 percent of districts experience growth in the number of children eligible for special education. In 2004, about 13 percent of public school students received special education services.

Meanwhile, all revenue for Minnesota schools increased 2.5 percent a year between 1984 and 2004, when adjusted for inflation and enrollment.

“What happens is we get governors who don’t support schools and we go through some lean years. Then we get a governor who sets education as a priority and we pump money into education, but we never make up for those lean years.”
Koennicke

“Ultimately what we are doing with school financing is hindering us from providing an acceptable education. We need to cut through the fog put out by the governor and make sure we’re meeting the needs of the children across the state in an equitable manner.”
-Mary Beth Blegen, retired Worthington High School teacher, 1996 National Teacher of the Year.

**RECRUITMENT**

The need for teachers, especially in math, science and special education, grows yearly. Accountability-driven demands without commensurate investment increases Minnesota’s vulnerability. In 2010, Minnesota students will need to achieve standardized math, reading, and writing test score that “meets expectations” to graduate. In 2008, the No Child Left Behind national educational policy mandates a science requirement.

To meet these expectations, schools need to provide more one-on-one time between teachers and students. This means schools have to reduce class size and hire more teachers.
Faced with sustainable teacher recruiting and staffing needs, the easiest and most effective community-based teacher development strategy is to “grow your own.” Getting high school students interested in teaching and encouraging them through their college years to teach back home can produce dividends after graduation.

“We’re also looking for money to ‘grow our own.’ We want to offer college for high capacity math and science high schoolers. We want to invest in their college and then they’ll work for us for a minimum of five years, although we’re still working out the details. There’s such a pull to be with your family. We can’t even pull them out of the Twin Cities area. All we can do is grow our own.”

-Keith Dixon, superintendent, Duluth Public Schools.38

“Of our 400 teachers, only 5 percent leave each year. When teachers come here, they stay here. Most are from this area, so they’ll seek us out. We even have generational teachers, where their parents and grandparents taught in the district.”

-Nielsen.39

For rural communities facing a stagnant or declining population base, growing your own isn’t always a possibility.

“It is difficult to know how many high school graduates enter college considering a teaching career and how many actually become teachers, but one university provides a snapshot. In 2004, St. Cloud State University asked incoming freshmen their intended major, then charted those who entered the major and those who graduated that same year. The findings in three high-demand subject areas are revealing.

- Chemistry: 55 indicated an interest,41 51 were admitted to the major and 17 completed the coursework. Seven entered the chemistry teaching program and one completed the coursework.42

- Math: 55 indicated an interest,43 30 were admitted to the major and 13 completed the coursework. Nineteen entered the teaching program and six completed the coursework.44

- Physics: 50 indicated an interest,45 18 were admitted to the major and 11 completed the coursework. Two entered the education program, but no one completed it.46
SCSU awarded 491 undergraduate education degrees in 2004. SCSU’s data suggests high school programs designed to increase student interest in becoming science and math teachers are working, but still fall short of turning that interest into creating more teachers.

Another way to entice students into teaching careers is to make college affordable. The government offers a wealth of student loan reduction programs. The U.S. Department of Education’s Stafford Loan Forgiveness Program for Teachers erases up to $17,500 of debt for math, science and special education teachers who work for at least five years in low-income schools and up to $5,000 for teachers of other subjects. The Perkins Loan Forgiveness plan can wipe out all of a student loan in exchange for teaching in a low-income school or in the high-demand areas of special education, math, foreign language or science.

**School District Voice: Duluth**

“With a declining enrollment and a large number of retirees, we don’t hire many teachers. But with science, math and special ed, you know you’re going to need the teachers soon. What we do is put them in the sub pool and hire them as full-time substitute teachers. That way we keep young people on and invest in them for a long period of time. For example, we have a very senior teacher (in a specialized area) who will be retiring in the next several years. We have a young woman who we want to take over that area, so we keep her on as a sub on the list of teacher employees with the same salary and benefits as a teacher. This year we have three in this plan. It’s not the optimal situation, but it keeps the better young teachers we have here (in Duluth).

-Dixon

Duluth Schools have 10,210 students and 665 teachers in three high schools, three middle schools and 12 elementary schools. Duluth, the seat of St. Louis County, is 140 miles north of Minneapolis.

**School District Voice: Moorhead**

“We have a very difficult time finding teachers for our Spanish immersion school. We’re not getting enough native Spanish speakers, so we go to South America to get them. We work with an agency that finds the teachers and gets their visas ready. The teachers are limited to working here for three years and we help them get their state license. We do have to pay a fee to the agency, but it’s much less than if we had to find the teachers and get the visas ready ourselves. We have two here each year on the average, and they come from Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and Uruguay, for the most part. We get an excellent teacher who also brings cultural awareness to the district. It’s a popular program in the district.”

-Ron Nielsen, Director of Human Resources, Moorhead Area Schools

Moorhead Area Public Schools have 5,337 students and 336 teachers in one high school, one middle school and five elementary schools. Moorhead, the seat of Clay County, 225 miles northwest of Minneapolis.
Annual teacher retirements in Minnesota have held steady at about 2.5 percent of the total teacher workforce since 2002. Rural districts will bear significantly greater replacement stress. Of the 80 chemistry teachers who retired between 2002 and 2006, 10 left schools in southwest Minnesota. Of 485 math teachers who retired between 2002 and 2006, 51 came from east central Minnesota and 42 from northeast Minnesota schools. In Earth and space science, 10 of the state’s 56 retirees came from east central Minnesota schools.\(^{52}\)

If not for retirement, why do teachers leave?

State surveys point to higher private sector salaries,\(^ {53}\) layoffs and personal reasons such as moving to another state or becoming pregnant.\(^ {54}\) Officials also identify unsatisfactory working conditions, low salaries, the poor public image of teaching and lack of support from administrators and the local community.\(^ {55}\)

A 2005 survey found that of the 3.2 million public school teachers in 2003–04, 84 percent remained at the same school, 8 percent moved to a different school and 8 percent left the profession.\(^ {56}\) Interestingly, 65 percent who took work outside education said the workload in their new positions was more manageable and that they were better able to balance personal life and work.\(^ {57}\)

Some blame low salaries for teacher attrition. One study found that 80 percent of the 1992-93 education graduates nationwide were teaching in 1997. The other 20 percent said they were no longer interested in teaching, were dissatisfied with their salary or had more lucrative offers in other occupations.\(^ {58}\)

Other studies, however, show salary concerns bearing little weight in teachers’ decisions to leave. A 1997 study found the most common reasons for leaving the profession were retirement (27 percent), pregnancy/childrearing (14 percent) and another career (12 percent). Only 7 percent cited better pay or benefits as a main reason for leaving.\(^ {59}\)

Important factors that keep teachers in the classroom include their perception of how well they affect students’ learning, whether they have a free flow of supportive and constructive feedback from administrators and if they have professional development opportunities, including mentoring.\(^ {60}\)

School facilities also play a role in teacher satisfaction. Controlling temperature in the classroom is considered key to both teacher and student performance. The consensus of 17 studies from the mid-1930s to 1997 is that appropriate lighting plays a significant role in student achievement, improving test scores and reducing off-task behavior. Similar research linking good acoustics to good academic performance is consistent and convincing.\(^ {61}\)

On the flip side, many factors can contribute to teacher job dissatisfaction. For example, teachers across Minnesota report having to spend hundreds of dollars of their own money for basic classroom supplies.\(^ {62}\)
A 2002 Minnesota teacher survey revealed frustration with No Child Left Behind’s “accountability” requirements and the increasing use of high-stakes, standards-based testing. NCLB provisions that brand schools as failing if they do not maintain “adequate yearly progress” may perversely discourage hiring and retaining good teachers.

“This focus on testing, it’s like thinking that if you weigh the cow more frequently you get more milk. It falls very hard on teachers. It’s a major stressor.”

-Jeff Powers, Superintendent, Dassel-Cokato Public Schools

Of teachers who left due to job dissatisfaction, many cited inadequate recognition or support from the community and administrators as the main reason. Poor student discipline and motivation were the next most common reasons.

“I don’t think the public understands what it takes to be a successful teacher. The perception is that it’s a nine-month profession, but people are in the building year round. There’s curriculum development, getting ready for the school year, adjusting classes to meet state standards, working before and after class with students who need help, making accommodations for special education students, learning to become mentors and train mentors, corresponding with parents, school conferences, professional conferences. These things don’t happen by themselves.”

-Powers

Minnesota superintendents are trying to put adults from wider backgrounds in the classroom. A study found 71 percent of them used temporary licenses and waivers to place teachers. Minnesota superintendents were also more likely to give salary credit for nonteaching experience or pay high-demand teachers above entry level than superintendents in other Midwest states.

Urban schools report using alternative teaching licensure at twice the rate of small rural schools – 60 percent to 32 percent. Slightly more than half of urban schools surveyed rated alternative licensure a “very effective” strategy, but only 28 percent of rural schools who had tried it agreed. Meanwhile, 69 percent of small rural schools “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that alternative routes to teacher preparation boost retention, compared with 86 percent of urban schools.

Minnesota offers several forms of alternative licensure, most designed to fill positions required by No Child Left Behind. In 2006, the state issued 2,059 personnel variances, 98 appeal variances, 23 discretionary variances, 3,617 limited licenses, 1,827 waivers and 272 community expert variances. Most were issued in the metro area, the fewest in west central and central Minnesota.

But alternative approaches that bypass student teaching and mentoring can sometimes breed failure. Lack of adequate preparation has been shown to increase discouragement and teacher burnout. So can asking teachers to teach out of their subject area.
Mentoring: A Cost Effective Solution

If Minnesota wants to attain increased education goals, meet ever-expanding No Child Left Behind requirements and attract and retain quality teachers, it must capitalize on the teaching profession’s strengths while shoring up its weaknesses.

In short, Minnesota must take the lead in creating, expanding and implementing a mentoring and induction program that addresses new teacher needs while harnessing the energy and vitality of Minnesota’s education community. Such a program will produce better prepared teachers who will be less likely to leave the field.

One study found that a comprehensive program of mentorship and new school induction produced a five-year teacher retention rate of 88 percent, far better than the national average of 56 percent. Two other studies showed that beginning teachers who go through two-year induction programs are more likely to produce students who are better readers than those who do not receive this support. Further, their students make gains similar to those taught by classroom veterans.

A quality induction program isn’t cheap – about $13,000 per teacher. But a cost-benefit analysis showed about $21,500 per teacher in savings from reduced turnover.

Almost every school in Minnesota offers mentorship programs of varying quality. Administrators often pair a new teacher before the school year with a buddy who explains forms and procedures, shows how the printer works and where the supply cabinet is. But after classes begin and responsibilities mount, mentorship becomes a monthly affair at best.

A 1998 Minnesota study found that many new teachers were not prepared to work with parents, community agencies or special needs students. But 82 percent of high school teachers who received induction and mentoring assistance said they were likely to stay in the profession compared with 38 percent of those who got little or no such help.

“We have a mentorship program where you’re paired with another teacher and you meet on a regular basis. We talk about things like classroom management and assessment. I will say, though, that I have friends at other schools who started teaching and all they got was a pat on the back and good luck to you and go.”

Brandon Bjerknes, Second Grade Teacher, Northern Elementary, Bemidji Area Schools.

Mentorship programs in Rochester, N.Y., and three Ohio cities that give veteran teachers release time to coach rookies have reduced new teacher attrition rates to less than 5 percent.

Among the many mentorship programs in Minnesota schools, two bear special examination. One is developing in St. Paul; the other has been working in Mankato for nearly 10 years.
Successful Mentoring Model: St. Paul

“We’re working on capturing that new teacher early … On the first day of workshops we pair a new teacher up with an institutional coach who gives them the basic nuts and bolts of teaching in the school. Then we spend a lot of time working with them on their job as professional teachers.

“The idea that a new teacher would know how to handle a class of 44 is obscene. We need help to help them learn. New teachers are often put in the toughest classes. I know of one teacher who had five different classes on three floors in her first year, which is very hard on a teacher.

“We also put teachers with teachers of the same subject area to discuss how the students are leaving the classroom. This is very important — student assessment often gets lost at work. We bring three or four teachers together, compare notes, let’s see what we can do to make ourselves better teachers.

“People who go into teaching are usually not aggressive, but more introverted. If a teacher has an out-of-control class or they make a mistake, they close the door and they’re not talking and then getting through the first quarter is impossible. We combat that by having ongoing coaching, as much as the teacher needs. If we lose them, they shut the door. It’s easy to get lost.”

-Mary Beth Blegen, St. Paul Public Schools consultant, retired Worthington High School teacher, National Teacher of the Year, 1996.83

St. Paul Public Schools has 40,543 students and 3,489 teachers in 49 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, 7 high schools and more than 45 non-standard enrollment schools.
Successful Mentoring Model: Mankato

“Each year, we take five teachers – two elementary, two secondary and one special education – and we remove them from the classroom for three years. During that time, their classes will be staffed by first-year teachers who are Minnesota State University-Mankato Fellows. During the three years, the mentors work with our teachers and with undergraduates at Minnesota State University-Mankato, Bethany Lutheran College and Gustavus Adolphus College.

“For the universities, they make educational placements for clinical or methods experiences and student teaching. They also hold seminars for the student teachers. For us, they hold seminars for new teachers on topics that are relevant for teachers new to the profession or new to our district. Some of these topics include our assessment program, analyzing data, classroom management, curriculum programs and instructional delivery and more. Some of these seminars are required, some are optional.

“Another role they fill is to help new teachers socialize and get out in the community, such as meeting at a restaurant for dinner or having picnics in local parks. Many of our new teachers have commented on how difficult it is to meet people and get out in a new community.

“The mentors also have a third responsibility, which is a district project usually related to curriculum development.

“This year we have 40 new teachers, including part-time teachers and long-term subs. The mentor program is offered to them all, whether they have no experience or many years of experience. If they’re new to the district, they’re in the program.

“We rotate the mentors, two in one year, two the next and one on the third. The three-year commitment can feel intimidating, but teachers see this as a professional growth opportunity. They get to work with the professors at MSU-Mankato on a variety of initiatives and it benefits us, as a district, by bringing this knowledge back to us. Our school district pays the salary of the teachers in the mentor position. MSU-Mankato picks up the cost of the fellows who take their place.”

-Cindy Klingel, director of curriculum and instruction for the Mankato Area Public Schools.

Mankato Area Public Schools has 7,119 students and 520 teachers in 10 elementary schools, three middle schools and three high schools. Mankato is about 75 miles south of Minneapolis.
Most of Minnesota’s current approaches to recruiting and retaining new teachers, particularly in math and science, aren’t working well enough. Business, policy and political leaders have emphasized the importance of public schools producing a new generation of well-educated adults, especially mathematicians and scientists. Rising standards and expectations require teachers who will demand strong salaries, professional growth opportunities and effective support.

Enhanced math and science curriculum standards will require more math and science teachers. Unfortunately, few candidates are entering the education job pool and few enticements to them are working.

Research strongly suggests that teacher mentoring and induction programs succeed. Teachers who navigate the first year and develop a connection with the community are likely to remain as long-term quality teachers.

The Minnesota Department of Education has launched a program called Schools Helping Schools, which trains mentors to work in their own school and schools in nearby districts. Education Minnesota has eMentoring for New Teachers!, which attempts to connect new teachers with National Board Certified teachers via e-mail.

These are good steps, but Minnesota needs to:

• Provide more money for teachers to reflect both marketplace salaries and the state’s regard for quality education. Consider incentives for teachers in high-demand subject areas.

• Create an effective teacher mentoring network in all school districts – big and small, rural and urban – not the hit-or-miss programs that exist today. Teachers who participate in quality mentoring and induction programs generally are happier and more productive in their jobs. This benefits taxpayers, students, administrators and the community as a whole.

• Mentoring should be based on the Mankato model, with districts providing veteran teachers to teacher preparation colleges for extensive work with undergraduates, graduates and faculty. These mentors should bring their experience to new teachers in the home district.

• Increase recruitment of new teachers from other professions by using paraprofessionals and alternative licensure. However, inadequately trained teachers should never be placed in the classroom.
On Aug. 1, the I-35W Mississippi River bridge in Minneapolis collapsed. Subsequent investigation has exposed a severely stressed state bridge system born of long-term underinvestment in Minnesota’s transportation infrastructure.

Minnesota’s schools are facing a similar challenge. Underinvestment in the face of clear future need is placing extraordinary stress on every element of Minnesota’s schools. Will policy change come only after catastrophic crises, or will Minnesota act on its values, affirming its strong educational traditions?

If Minnesota’s students are to have more opportunities; we must invest in our teachers. A quality mentorship program will do just that. Or we can choose the mediocre path and fail.
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