



# JOURNAL

A Public Policy Monthly from the Citizens League

 **Citizens  
League**

Common ground. Common good.

Volume 24 • Issue 5  
May 2007

[www.citizensleague.org](http://www.citizensleague.org)

## INSIDE

*This month, the Minnesota Journal focuses on the Minnesota Anniversary Project education question: What can students teach us about how school needs to change so that we see dramatic improvements in student achievement?*



### Students decide if they attend school and learn

Why don't education policy-makers consider what motivates them?

By Kim Farris-Berg

There's a theory advancing quickly in Minnesota education policy and around the nation that heightening graduation standards beyond minimum competencies (like balancing a checkbook and reading the newspaper) will improve student

achievement. A proposal offered by Gov. Tim Pawlenty and approved by the Minnesota Legislature in 2005, for example, requires that students in the class of 2015 and after take algebra I by the end of eighth grade and algebra II and chemistry or physics in order to graduate from

high school. The expectation, it seems, is that students will just do this because adults have mandated it. If students meet this expectation, Minnesota will be right on track with the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and its ambitious goal that all children be proficient in high state standards by 2014.

But will students meet this expectation? In our national dialogue and policy-making about raising student achievement there is, perhaps, some confusion about what schools offer and what students learn. Adults commonly talk about "delivering education" to students, as if students receive education and have nothing to do with whether they learn or not. This mindset makes it fairly easy to base our actions on the idea that there is one effective intervention that will cause all students to reach the state's required proficiencies.

High standards are the intervention of the day, but there's little certainty about how students will react to them. Some young people who are "left behind"—those who quit school altogether or for other reasons are not now learning well (arguably, the youths these



new policies are intending to support)—might find this intervention quite unappealing. In fact, many already do, leading many adults to question if the high standards strategy may further drive up the nation's three-decade standing quit rate of 30 percent.

State legislators are questioning the accountability

system in Washington state, where, as of December 2006, some 32,000 students from the class of 2008 had not yet passed a math test required for graduation. "We've got students who are frankly demoralized," Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire told the Associated Press. "The last thing we need is 49 percent of our tenth graders thinking it's useless to go on, and dropping out of school." California is facing similar student reaction after denying 40,000 diplomas in June 2006 to students who did not pass its test. Parents there have reported physically taking their son or daughter out of state for the last semester to help facilitate graduation.

Confronted with failures like these, states are tempted to try to "game" the accountability system in

*continued on page 4*

2

Connections

3

Viewpoint: Are we failing schools?

6

Hope for students: the University of Minnesota's Hope Study

9

Closing the gap between subject and learner, one teacher's perspective

10

Waiting@exhale

11

The high school of my dreams

# CONNECTIONS

Building a League of Citizens



"Young people, you better plan, you better save, you better invest, you better preserve savings for retirement because you're going to need it," David Walker, Comptroller General of the United States Government Accountability Office, told the audience at a Policy and a Pint® event in April.

Missed David Walker's talk? Go to [www.citizensleague.org/events/pint](http://www.citizensleague.org/events/pint) for links to the audio from the event, along with a slideshow he's been giving around the country, and his recent appearance on the "Colbert Report."

**community connections**  
**calendar** • point • click • engage

[www.pointclickengage.org](http://www.pointclickengage.org)

Looking for public affairs events from the Citizens League and other local organizations? The Community Connections Calendar is your one stop shop for public affairs events in the Twin Cities.

## Welcome Ami Nafzger-Spiess!

The Citizens League is pleased to welcome our new office manager, Ami Nafzger-Spiess. Ami's work ranges from assisting Citizens League Executive Director Sean Kershaw to reorganizing our internal documentations and creating new personnel and finance systems. She started in mid-April and she's already made significant improvements.

Ami brings to the Citizens League more than 13 years of experience in the nonprofit field. She comes from a workforce development background and serves on four boards within the Asian community. After graduating from Augsburg College with a major in Social Work and a minor in Native American Indian Studies, Ami lived in Korea and worked for an NGO that provides post-adoption services for Korean adoptees.

We're delighted that Ami has joined our team. Be sure to say hello when you see her at an upcoming event.

Looking for the results of the April member poll? We've decided to give people more time to answer; in future issues of the *Minnesota Journal*, poll results will be published two months after the poll is announced.

## May member poll

What motivated you most in high school?

- ☐ My parents and family.
- ☐ My school: good teachers, interesting classes, high expectations, etc.
- ☐ My goals: go to college, get a good job, etc.
- ☐ My friends: support, peer pressure, etc.
- ☐ My other activities: theater, sports, volunteering, etc.
- ☐ Something else—tell us!

Go to [www.citizensleague.org](http://www.citizensleague.org) to vote!

## New members, recruiters, and volunteers

**New & Rejoining Members:** Michael Baill, Sanderson and Michelle Bell, Kim Borton, Janna Caywood and Joseph Briggs, Sherry Enzler, Mike and Dawn Erlandson, Molly Grove, Sandra Hull, Julie Jensen and Larry Shelley, Hans and Kelly Kabat, Suzanne Koeplinger, Mike Lopez, Laurie Ohmann, Gregory Strong, Cookie Walker, Peter Warner, Amanda Ziebell-Finley **Firms and Organizations:** Arc Greater Twin Cities, Bailey Nurseries, Allan and Lou Burdick, City Academy Charter School, Cood Strecker Dunphy & Zimmerman Inc, Culligan Water Conditioning Company, Duckor & Associates, Ecumen, Erasmus Limited, HealthPartners, Henschel Consulting, Jefferson Lines, John G. Hoeschler, PA, Lilja Inc, Metropolitan Area Agency on Aging, Minitex Library Information Network, North Central Mineral Ventures, Office of the Legislative Auditor, Park Nicollet Health Services, Port Authority of the City of Saint Paul, RBC Dain Rauscher Foundation, Christine Roberts, Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, Scott County Administration, St. Paul Linoleum & Carpet Co., University of Minnesota Extension Service, Washington County Administration, Way to Grow, Wells Fargo, Workers' Comp Reinsurance Association **Recruiters:** Lee Anderson, Tom Horner, Pohlada Family Business **Volunteers:** Janna Caywood, Cal Clark



## Public education: a notion at risk

A new argument for improving public education in Minnesota

by Sean Kershaw

This is *not* a commentary about how schools are failing. Instead, I'm proposing a new conversation about how *we're failing schools*.

The current debate about education policy isn't working, and the Citizens League has played a role in this dysfunction. The conversation is intellectually and rhetorically worn out, out of touch with facts and common sense, destined for mediocrity—and devoid of purpose. It's been a generation since the release of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, which raised concerns about our educational outcomes, and we're simply not making enough progress. This conversation is only going to get harder in the future when a smaller percentage of Minnesotans have formal connections to our schools as we currently define them.

In a knowledge-based global economy, failure to resolve this issue puts Minnesota's long-term quality of life and our ability to compete economically with other regions in jeopardy. Schools need to change, perhaps radically, but if "public education" is only about the public structure and funding of schools, we're going to remain trapped in this unproductive debate a generation from now still wondering why our democracy and our economy are at risk.

It would be more productive (and hopeful) to have the Citizens League lead a new conversation about the fundamental democratic purpose of education, and the role that *all* institutions—including businesses, nonprofits, communities, and families—should play in achieving this purpose. I predict our next education policy breakthrough will result from a conversation about the meaning of public education in all institutions, and *not* a new state statute about school structure or funding.

### The ideal

As I've said here before, the fundamental public purpose of education is democracy: to create citizens with the knowledge, character, and skills for self-governance. "Public education" doesn't refer only to the

ownership and structure of schools, but more importantly to these civic outcomes. This democratic interest includes our economic interests: there really is no difference between good citizens, good students and good workers.

But schools can't achieve this purpose on their own; they depend on the participation of all other institutions. Whether it's the obvious role of families in supporting students or the role that businesses, community groups and nonprofits play, the civic responsibility between schools and these other groups is reciprocal. The problem is that our policies and governance practices don't recognize or reward this relationship.

### New strategies

The relationship between families and schools offers one example of this problem—and some new opportunities for action.

Teachers and school critics agree that family stability and involvement perhaps matters most in ensuring student achievement. But schools struggle to involve families meaningfully, especially low-income parents, and we can't expect schools to *be* families and parents either.

We need to develop new school governance models that facilitate greater civic involvement and governance with parents. For example, the school closings in North Minneapolis were unavoidable. But I'm not sure which was worse: the use of public hearings to try to talk about this sensitive matter or the lack of alternative means to discuss this issue. And before we got to this point of crisis, should more nonprofit and community resources have been directed to building the civic capacity of families to become involved in schools? This wouldn't change the number of schools closing, but might have impacted which schools closed, and it would have helped to stop the destructive cycle of frustration between families and the district that may lead children to leave the district.

Rather than seeing "education" as exclusively the responsibility of schools, what if *all* institutions were more inten-

tional about their role in education? More than 50 managers from Kowalski's Markets recently discussed their public role in education, both as an organization that employs hundreds of parents and students and as a business that depends on the outcome of schools to maintain a productive workforce. They talked among themselves and with schools about how their practices and internal policies support learning. Managers saw how their deliberate efforts to improve civic governance practices at work had the secondary impact of helping them become better parents at home and better supervisors for students at work.

What if we look seriously at realigning existing resources between schools and community institutions to support these governance goals? Given all of the money that goes to nonprofits to support students on issues like preparation for post-secondary education, how much are these organizations coordinating with each other and schools? I'm sure that efforts like Achieve! Minneapolis and Admission Possible (two groups working to increase the number of students participating in post-secondary education) would benefit from greater coordination of existing nonprofit and foundation resources.

### Minnesota values

Minnesotans care deeply about education. They deserve an opportunity to connect their concern with governance opportunities to do something to improve our educational system, whether that's at home, at work, or in the community. Because ultimately, this isn't a really commentary on schools *or* education—it's a commentary on democracy. And rather than feeling trapped by our current discussion, we should be hopeful and proactive about creating a better one. ●

Sean Kershaw is the Executive Director of the Citizens League, and can be reached at [skershaw@citizensleague.org](mailto:skershaw@citizensleague.org). You can comment on this Viewpoint at: [www.citizensleague.org/blogs/sean](http://www.citizensleague.org/blogs/sean).



## Students decide

continued from page 1

order to make student performance appear better: if not by lowering the standards then putting off the “high-stakes” tests or lowering their passing scores or fudging on the promised “consequences” for failure. In April 2007, trustees in California’s Anaheim Union High School District, as other districts have across the nation, decided that students who don’t pass the

them to stay and learn. Their responses ran the gamut. No single factor influenced all students. Some said school was not challenging enough; others said it was far too rigorous. Some said more structure and discipline were necessary; others said some disciplinary tactics limit learning. To some, smaller classes with one-on-one instruction would have helped. For others, flexible

attends conferences with Nobel Laureates where he’s learning civic engagement and peace-making skills that he readily applies at his own school. He’s also deciding where he’ll go to college this fall. He had gained early acceptance to three schools as of last November. He wants to major in leadership.

Knowing who Tray is today, you might not believe that three years ago at Minneapolis’ Edison High he “felt like a dummy” in most of his classes. He was on his way to dropping out completely. He looked forward to spending his post-graduation days “hanging with the homies,” doing nothing.

When Tray stopped attending school much, his mom challenged him about where he was headed. He decided Oh Day Aki might be worth a try, but his expectations about his ability to graduate weren’t high. The academics were bound to be hard, he thought, no matter what school he attended.

Immediately, Tray found the academics were just as hard at Oh Day Aki as at Edison. But in his new learning environment he was suddenly making progress toward graduation, and he was motivated to stay. At Edison he had maintained a “C to D average,” but in time, at Oh Day Aki, he was earning Bs and Cs. By his senior year he was earning all As and Bs.

Adults commonly talk about “delivering education” to students, as if students receive education and have nothing to do with whether they learn or not.

state’s standardized exit exam can still walk at graduation. In California and elsewhere there’s also talk of granting a non-diploma certificate to students who don’t pass, changing the test, or allowing for evaluation of work portfolios. California settled one of its 2006 exit exam lawsuits by granting special education students an extra year to pass the exam.

If getting underperforming students, including young people who have dropped out, to learn better is the goal of our nation, can the current strategy of increased rigor and rising standards alone achieve that end? What would happen to accountability standards if states approached education policy-making, and educating in general, as if learning was a *voluntary* act? As if learning was something that *students* do, encouraged and assisted by adults, rather than something adults do to students? This might offer a new premise for our discussions and decision making: Do schools motivate students? And how can we improve students’ motivation to learn?

### Appeal to youths’ motivations

Education|Evolving (E|E), a St. Paul-based initiative committed to helping K-12 evolve and meet the challenges, demands, and opportunities of the 21st century, recently examined a handful of studies that asked young people who have either quit school or strongly considered quitting about the factors that influenced them to drop out, and what could have influenced

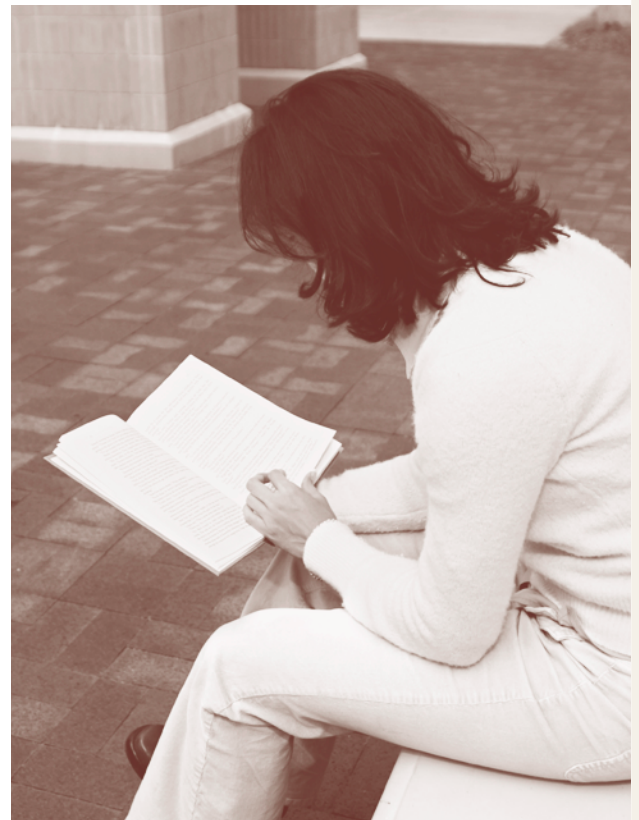
hours and access to resources like counselors and computers would have been more important.

Motivating all of these students in a single school setting would be difficult, if not impossible. But Minnesota is not bound to one way of schooling. Minnesota law explicitly allows for the creation of new schools that are fundamentally different from conventional schools and fundamentally different from each other.

Whether that was the intended outcome or not, Minnesota’s schools can appeal to a variety of motivations. And they do. E|E documented the experiences of five Minnesota young people who were well on their way to dropping out of high school altogether when they found a school that motivated them. Once engaged, they learned better. These youths’ stories suggest that it’s possible, even likely, that the availability of different schools that can accommodate their individual motivations is the very reason why they are attending, learning, and completing school.

### From “nothing” to leadership

Travion (Tray) Allen, a student at Oh Day Aki charter school in Minneapolis, is a self-described math genius who conveys his knowledge to his peers. He



Does Oh Day Aki have a magic motivation formula? For Tray it does. It's really a combination factors. Among them:

- Personal attention and respect from teachers. "My English teacher, Ryan... he'll do house visits... help you understand your work. I've never had that kind of interaction with teachers before. Teachers *know* if students have an understanding/comprehension of [the work]."
- Really knowing his peers. "At Edison, I always felt threatened because [there were] all these people I didn't know."
- A strong commitment to cultural education. Tray, part Chippewa, is learning the Ojibwe language. "Since I got here, I've learned that I'm so much better than I thought I was. I used to think I was like crap. I thought, 'I'm nothing. I can't do anything.' But [through Native American studies] I've realized I'm a good painter, a really good poetry writer. I can sing. I'm a leader."

That's what worked well. For Tray.

When one looks at Tray's story in comparison with the other young people E|E studied, it's immediately clear that the others would not have sought out or thrived in



2003 graduation meant he could build on his success.

Krissy Banks\* goes to Trio Wolf Creek, a distance learning school in Lindstrom. She is motivated by the school's flexible hours and social support. She didn't see school as

an option otherwise; she works 40 hours per week during the third shift at a plastics factory and is expecting a baby in May.

Conventional schools do plenty to motivate some students; just not all students. And it's not reasonable (or even fair) to assume that they

could (just as it's not very reasonable to assume that all adults would be motivated by the same employer).

### Design school as if student motivation matters

Young people have a human and democratic tendency to choose whether they will learn in school based on their own backgrounds and dreams for their future. Before our nation set NCLB's 2014 goal, this truth didn't matter much. Learning was optional, so

motivation was irrelevant. But our nation has now decided that learning is imperative. So we need to think carefully about the limitations of an accountability-requirements strategy for improving student achievement.

While Minnesota can accommodate varying student motivations, the increasing focus on high standards and the very recent state Senate decision to cap the number of chartered schools demonstrate that appealing to students' motivations is probably not playing a central role in education policy debates. Given what students are telling us, and what is obvious from our experiences to date, Minnesota's policy-making ought to at least consider how customization, in addition to high standards, might help us accomplish our goals of helping every child learn and achieve.

*\*The student's name was changed at her request.* ●

Kim Farris-Berg is an independent consultant working with EducationEvolving, where she coordinates the Student Voices Initiative. She recently co-authored, "Staying In: Youth once on the path to quitting school explain why motivation is central to learning and graduating." Download it and other student voices work at [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org). Contact Kim at [studentvoices@educationevolving.org](mailto:studentvoices@educationevolving.org).

These youths' stories suggest that it's possible, even likely, that the availability of different schools that can accommodate their individual motivations is the very reason why they are attending, learning, and completing school.

the Oh Day Aki environment. A variety of environments provide students with positive, customized experiences based on their own motivations. Codie Wilson, a former gang-banger and ward of the state of Indiana moved to Saint Paul to attend High School for the Recording Arts. There, Codie's good grades earned him time in a music recording studio to learn everything about the music industry, including production, which he now does professionally. The school also helped him address past felonies so his



## Hope for the future

The University of Minnesota's Hope Study helps secondary schools to improve student motivation and achievement

by Mark Van Ryzin

Student motivation is a key concern for today's educators, especially in secondary schools. Research has shown that student motivation decreases, sometimes quite sharply, as students enter and progress through secondary school. This decrease in motivation can impact student achievement and lead to delinquency and dropping out.

In searching for an explanation for this decline in motivation, researchers have examined the nature of the school environment and its support (or lack of support) for students' developmental needs, specifically autonomy, belongingness, and competence—the “ABC’s” of student motivation.

If schools could put greater emphasis on encouraging student autonomy, belongingness, and competence, then research tells us that student engagement would increase and students would become more confident, goal-oriented achievers.

In the school context, autonomy refers to the ability of students to exert some control over the process of learning and to make choices according to their own interests and values. Belongingness refers to the feeling of being supported and valued by the teachers and other students. The need for competence is expressed as a need to succeed in relevant ways, on one's own terms, and to be recognized. According to motivational theory, school environments that meet these needs will inspire high levels of motivation and engagement in students; those that do not will depress student motivation.

In addition, students with higher levels of motivation and engagement should, over time, gain a more favorable impression of themselves as achievers and come to believe more strongly in their ability to succeed regardless of the obstacles.

Unfortunately, the traditional secondary school environment can be detrimental to student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. For example,

secondary school classrooms typically offer few opportunities for students to exercise choice, and students often experience more controlling behavior by teachers, both of which reduce perceptions of autonomy.

The transition from one teacher in elementary school to six or more in secondary school can reduce perceptions of teacher support, and students generally have fewer opportunities for interaction and cooperation with their peers, which reduces their sense of belonging.

Finally, the transition to secondary school often implies more whole-class instruction, increased ability grouping, public evaluations, and a greater emphasis on grades and competition.

These changes reduce perceptions of competence by highlighting the difference between those students who get the top grades and those who do not. Public recognition usually accrues only to the highest-scoring students, while high

levels of effort and significant personal gains are less often recognized; thus, many students attempt to reduce the risk of negative comparisons with others by exerting minimal effort or denigrating the value of academic achievement.

In combination, these factors go a long way to explaining the decline in motivation and engagement that researchers have found in secondary school. If schools could put greater emphasis on encouraging student autonomy, belongingness, and competence, then research tells us that student engagement would increase and students would become more confident, goal-oriented achievers.

Interestingly, no easily accessible tools exist to measure students' perceptions of the school environment (or, to use a more familiar term, school culture).

But a study being conducted by the University of Minnesota is giving schools new tools to measure school culture. The Hope Study enables school personnel to assess their culture through the eyes of

their students, by measuring student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence, as well as their resulting engagement in learning and their dispositional orientations toward achievement (i.e., their “hope”).

## Hope and achievement

“Hope” is a construct that reflects a student's belief in him or herself as a success, a problem-solver, and an achiever. By promoting student hope, schools can realize benefits in terms of student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement, and students can gain an increased confidence in themselves as achievers that can benefit them throughout their life.

Research shows that higher-hope students not only set more challenging school-related goals for themselves when compared to lower-hope students, but also tend to perceive that they will be more successful at attaining these goals even if they do not experience immediate success. Higher-hope students have a greater chance of success in college and are more likely to graduate. Finally, higher-hope people report more optimism about life, better physical health, greater levels of happiness, and less anxiety and depression.

The Hope Study was first used in 2004 to compare three secondary schools located in the same rural area about an hour southwest of Minneapolis.

School 1 had implemented several innovations designed to increase student perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. School 2 had implemented a smaller set of innovations. School 3 was a traditional comprehensive secondary school.

All three schools had similar student demographics and their staff qualifications were comparable (although the staff at School 3 can be considered superior in terms of traditional measures of quality, such as years of experience and higher educational attainment). Surveys at all three schools were administered multiple times, so longitudinal measures of change could be captured for the same students.

The data indicated that student perceptions of autonomy were highest at School 1, the most innovative school, somewhat lower at School 2, and lowest at School 3. All these differences were statistically significant.



With regards to belongingness, Schools 1 and 2 showed significantly higher levels than School 3, and Schools 1 and 2 also recorded better results with regard to student competence. Finally, students in Schools 1 and 2 demonstrated significantly higher levels of engagement in learning, and student hope in these schools grew significantly over a relatively short span of time (one semester, or about five months); at the same time, hope scores fell slightly for students in School 3.

### A tool for school improvement

Last year, the Hope Study was administered to several schools throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. These schools were a mix of rural and urban, and differed in size and student demographics.

In meetings with school personnel, the Hope Study demonstrated a remarkable ability to enlighten staff and, in some cases, clarify the nature of issues that the schools were having. For example, one school had been experiencing significant turnover and attendance problems, and, combined with flat yearly achievement scores, school personnel were convinced that they were not succeeding. However, tracking hope scores from students over time revealed that those students who stayed in the school were indeed growing

in hope, and in fact were also significantly improving their test scores. The high level of turnover, combined with the traditional practice of comparing test scores year-by-year with no consideration for the changing student population, had obscured the fact that the school was, in fact, succeeding with those student who remained in place. By tracking individual students over time, the Hope Study can provide a more accurate picture of student growth and change.

In another example, a school demonstrated positive results on the Hope Study with the exception of a single measure that was outside of the normal range. After further analysis and discussion with the staff, it became clear that the students' point of contention was the perceived unfairness of the reward scheme that was used to determine who could go off campus for lunch. This scheme, it turned out, was impacting student attitudes and engagement in school. After more discussion, modifications were proposed to reduce the perception of unfairness.

### Next steps

This fall, with the help of the Blandin Foundation, the Hope Study will be expanded to 15 rural Minnesota high schools that are struggling with a significant achievement gap between white and minority students. We will work with these

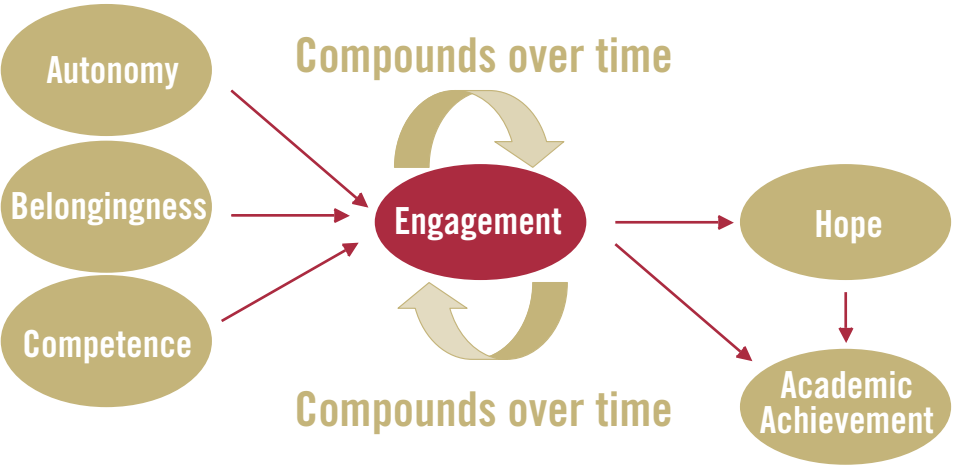
“Hope” is a construct that reflects a student’s belief in him or herself as a success, a problem-solver, and an achiever. By promoting student hope, schools can realize benefits in terms of student behavior, attendance, and academic achievement.

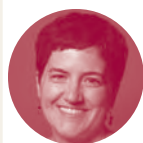
schools to identify the key impediments to their success, devise a plan of action, and obtain the resources needed to close the gap. As a core component of the project, the Hope Study will be used as a diagnostic tool to pinpoint the ways in which the new resources can be most profitably applied.

Regardless of location, demographics, or size, any school can benefit by taking into account students’ perceptions of autonomy, belongingness, and competence. By incorporating proven procedures from successful schools, or by developing home-grown practices aimed at supporting these developmental needs, secondary schools can reverse downward trends in motivation and engagement and show some growth in hope among their students. In such an effort, the Hope Study can be used to assess how changes in the school environment are viewed by the students themselves, since their reaction will ultimately determine whether these changes are successful. ●

Mark Van Ryzin is a Ph.D. student in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He can be reached at [vanr0040@umn.edu](mailto:vanr0040@umn.edu).

## Hope Study Model





### School not 'buena onda' enough to keep one Edison High School student enrolled

Citizens League and Humphrey Institute explore why students are leaving the Minneapolis schools

by Traci Parmenter

The Citizens League recently joined up with a group of Policy Fellows from the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota to explore the question: Why are students leaving the Minneapolis Public Schools?

We're posing this question in a number of different ways, with a variety of students. But the hardest group to find is students who have dropped out of the education system entirely. This is one student's story of why she left high school.

Anita, a sweet, shy 17-year-old, came to Minnesota with her mother from Mexico a year ago. She enrolled at Edison High School in Minneapolis. She likes to read and to study and had attended high school in her home town. Yet, after just a couple of months here, she dropped out. She now works in a factory.

When the decision was between earning income to support the family or continuing to pursue her education, work came first.

These days, the outlook for high school dropouts is quite bleak, and it is difficult to see a young person in this situation and not ask why. Anita's main reason for leaving school was simple: her family needs money. When Anita's father left her mother a couple of years ago, her mother decided to come to the United States to work. Anita, the oldest child and the most able to contribute to the family income, came too. She initially enrolled in high school, but when the decision was between earning income to support the family or continuing to pursue her education, work came first.

But her experience as a student here also helped to make that decision easier. With limited English skills Anita enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) courses

at Edison. Makes sense, right? But this was a part of her trouble: in a class with other Spanish-speakers, she often relied on them rather than forcing herself to learn English, slowing her language development. Impatient with her limited language skills, some of her teachers refused to entertain questions in Spanish, even when Anita wasn't sure how to ask them in English. And Anita found herself learning long lists of vocabulary (anyone who has ever taken a language class can relate to this): colors, fruits and vegetables, the seasons. Useful but perhaps not the most engaging or helpful lessons if you are expected to quickly learn how to communicate in sentences, not just words.

"I had trouble paying attention," Anita says. It's no wonder, then, with her mother pressing for income at the same time, that Anita dropped out.

Anita enjoyed school, she had good friends and she didn't mind the bus commute. If she were to return to school she would like to go back to Edison, which she felt had a supportive environment and a strong Latino community.

Asked what educators could do differently to help her stay in school, Anita says the biggest thing would be to have teachers who are "*buena onda*," which roughly translates to "cool." When pressed on this, she elaborated with a typical student's wish list: interesting, approachable, willing to work with students.

Anita wants to return to school to get her diploma, and maybe even to go to college. However, when asked what she would study, or what her hopes for her future are, she draws a blank. It seems that Anita hasn't had many opportunities to dream.

So what can Anita's story tell us about education? First and foremost, in many communities—not just Minneapolis and St. Paul, but in places like Willmar, Worthington, Rochester, and Marshall—we are trying to educate a number of students who are very different from students of the past. This means that schools either have to think differently about curriculum, teacher and staff training, hiring, scheduling,



A student at Edison High School, Anita chose to quit school and go to work to help her family.

and communication—or be willing to accept that the needs of thousands of students will go unmet.

Second, Anita enjoyed school in Minnesota and was willing to take a fairly lengthy commute—about a half-hour each way—to attend Edison. When asked about both traditional public schools and charter schools that would have been closer to her home, she was not swayed to change. Many families care deeply about their neighborhood schools, but Anita is one example of a student who found other things more compelling than proximity. Enrollment trends in the Minneapolis Public Schools seem to support the notion that many families choose schools based on factors other than location.

Finally—and this is nothing new—Anita's story shows how important adult relationships are to students. Anita had very specific memories even from her short period of time in school of teachers who were *buena onda*—and of those who weren't. While adults often focus on structural issues like curriculum standards, scheduling, or small learning communities, for many students, having teachers and other adults who care about them and make school interesting is more important than anything else. ●

Traci Parmenter is a Citizens League member and the COO of Admission Possible, a Twin Cities-based non-profit working with low-income high school students to help them prepare for college. More information about the Citizens League/Humphrey Policy Fellows project can be found at <http://studentsspeakout.ning.com>



# PERSPECTIVES

Expanding Minnesota's Conversation



## An achievement gap worth worrying about

Watching students close the gap between learner and subject

By Betsy Ford

**M**y students have taught me an amazing number of important ideas over my 18 years of urban public school teaching and I am delighted to honor them by sharing some of those ideas outside of the classroom.

The most important is that the endless debate about the achievement gap that so engages politicians, policy makers, and community leaders does nothing at all for us. The debate does not inform us, help us, guide us, instruct us, or strengthen us in any way. It does of course humiliate us and let us know that we are a continuing disappointment to a lot of people we don't know.

Like anyone in such a position over a sustained period (say kindergarten to 12th grade) my students and I, as well as my gallant colleagues, cope variously by opting out, acting out, trying harder, adopting one strategy after another, becoming ill, giving up, pretending it doesn't matter, closing ranks, and crying oneself to sleep at night.

So... what actually happens in my classroom day after day? We survive. And if I am skilled and lucky, learning occurs and we all know more and are better people than when we started.

Here's what my students have taught me about becoming more skilled and inviting luck into our shared space.

A strong, equitable classroom climate is possible but it occurs only when the adult in the classroom—me—trusts, respects, and likes the students because of their fascinating

and maddening diversity, not in spite of it and certainly not as something it is my job to fix or change.

Passionate learning for every student requires a genuine community built through shared tasks and conversations. It is only in such a community that a student can muster the essential courage to fail as well as to articulate, defend, correct, and expand the ideas they bring into the classroom. It is only in such a community that we can address the real differences and conflicts that our many unique

selves bring with us to any genuine debate.

Given that, the single most important first step that I can take academically is to push my students to recognize their core beliefs, the understandings they bring into the classroom with them whether the subject is volume, ecology, or justice. This is where their passion and interest lie and where I can engage those beliefs by holding the class to complex ideas and genuine data. I can begin to invite students to challenge each other and themselves.

My students have also taught me that there is no value, absolutely none, in taking my discipline (or any other) and simplifying it. I must trust my subject—whatever it is, no exceptions—to be flexible and strong enough to withstand generations of novices finding many and varied pathways into the material. In other words, I must believe that it is inherently interesting enough to be taught in all its complexity to every student. Simplified subjects are just too smooth, too uninteresting, and too insulting to serve anyone.

I value mastery of the specific skills and particular knowledge the standards movement has identified for each subject—and so do my students—but we understand that such mastery does not occur on a rigid and predictable timetable. We know that every-

one can get there—but at different times and by different paths. We spend way too much time and energy trying to keep to a schedule that never acknowledges our differences or our progress.

So... what actually happens in my classroom day after day? We survive. And if I am skilled and lucky, learning occurs and we all know more and are better people than when we started.

So I have become deeply committed, on behalf of my students, to finding ways to honor that progress. But I want even more than that. I also want to acknowledge my students growing confidence, independence, and ability to decide for themselves the merit of their own work. I want to respect the ability to listen, the courage to change one's mind, and the courage to have a wrong answer. I value a student's willingness to tolerate uncertainty, to lend a hand, and to tell a bully to stop. My students have helped me to understand that intelligence is a complex mix of all these things and that my students walk into my classroom already intelligent. It is my job to honor and guide that intelligence as it encounters and makes sense of my particular subject.

I believe, along with educator and writer Parker Palmer, that teaching is an act of hospitality to the young, a way to introduce students to a subject as one would introduce two friends in the hope that they will forge their own relationship. The achievement gap that matters to me is the one between learner and subject and that is the gap that I watch close over and over again. ●

Betsy Ford, a Citizens League member, teaches 9th- and 10th-grade math at Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis. She is also the mother of Citizens League Policy Associate Victoria Ford.





## Waiting@Exhale

by P.R. Fulford

Breathe in,  
Predestination  
Not designated  
To the right course  
Taking the wrong course  
Traveling along side  
A statued system  
Hindered by its stand still  
Personally,  
Not moving in my direction  
Wanting free  
From a paid logic  
No choice in my change  
Rebellious in all manners of  
Fighting for freedom  
Fighting for second chance  
Fighting for fame and fortune  
Fighting for knowledge  
Fighting for,  
Predestination,  
Breathe out

The track of graduation; the track your tender legs are forced to endure when cute becomes handsome, pretty becomes gorgeous, idea becomes belief, and no reputation is traveling this track on bare feet. This track, which heads off towards the wind down of the summer chaos, giving you coarse outlines of the religion you are soon to pledge your allegiance to. An allegiance that will guide you through your most pivotal years before adulthood; the track bends at your will, but allegiance is the starting point. The track of graduation; or the road which has guided me through five schools, three districts, and too many pledges to count, yes this road has been a weary for the ages.

School itself was my motivation to stay on track. I know if on track I was then the better way of living I could part take in. Ok, I lied. I see it now as peers surrounding me were my earliest motivation to go to school, to stay on track, to graduate, to have that choice, to part take in the better side of living; debt free and rich. Sounds like the perfect American Dream doesn't it? Well, it was until my peers became null and void to my life; it was until I realized I don't live for them but only myself and now school doesn't have the same meaning. The question wasn't "Am I netiquette?" No, the question was now "What's your motivation to stay on track?" For the first two years I was

stagnant, stuck contemplating that very question, drowning my search for the answer with sports, new faces, school activities; all false motivations to stay in school, to stay on track to graduate. Until I came to my senses and saw life and learning for what they are, MINE! I didn't feel comfortable in the school based outline for "How You Must Learn." I was off track until I found my motivation, my motivation to learn.

Breathe in,  
I saw you,  
Motivation  
Hours before we met,  
If hours were years  
I could've cried,  
Dry tears  
Sight so beautiful  
Your sight,  
So beautiful  
Like God Himself,  
Wanted for our union  
Motivation,  
I'm sorry  
For taking this long  
To find you  
Breathe out

Personally, I can categorize my first three years of de-motivation or lack there of I endured while on the track of graduation. First year, freshmen year, the year of hype, hyped by the new environment, hyped by the new faces, hyped by the idea that I am finally grown—somewhat—ok not really, but hyped nevertheless I was. Second year, sophomore, the awakening, the year I began to find myself and realize I'm headed off course if I continue to follow the hype and not follow my own ambitions for success. Third year, the breakdown, I went through three different school systems in the matter of two months, unstable and unsure of my place in this world of education you can say I was. Lost in limbo like, I didn't deserve learning's purgatory if heaven was graduation. Hell was "behind in credits," and I was, going through hell. Imagine being a junior in high school consumed by despair. I had every right to drop out, I felt. I had every right to call it quits, I felt. I had a gift for... No that aint it. I was talented in... No that's not it either so its like to hell with this hell, I'm a write a book on "How Not To Succeed In School"

and get rich, then... No that aint it either. Imagine being a junior and having these and many other vain thoughts stroll through your mind like brain cells; daily; faithfully. I was brain dead to the motivation of education so I searched, looking for that special something that would place me back on track. After countless time spent searching I believe I found my Motivation. Some call it High School for the Recording Arts (HSRA), some call it Studio 4, but I like to call it Hip-Hop High, the one of kind school for success.

HSRA is everything I was looking for in a school. My future aspirations are to be a journalist, public speaker, and a hip-hop artist in my own right. HSRA is doing a great job in my preparation to take on the demands that come with my career choices. The curriculum is up to par.

HSRA implements test ready preparation classes that will increase students' scores when taking standardized test. Plus there are the studios available for the artistic mind that attend HSRA, like me. I can now say its was by predestination that I enrolled when I did, avoiding the freshmen hype, the sophomore awakening, and the junior year break down here, at HSRA. I was able to battle my own demons first, get back on the track of graduation, now ready to pursue my American Dream, I want to thank all the schools, those named and not to be named, for the experience because I have been through the fire yet I prevailed and came out on top of the brimstone. But the road I have traveled to get back on track is not for everyone and can be avoided. So my advice for the parents is help your son or daughter find the right school that doesn't prepare them for a test, but prepares them for life and their future.

Breathe in,  
Finally  
The load is lifted  
Off my chest  
Thank you  
For this opportunity  
Breathe out. ●

P.R. Fulford, a senior at the High School for the Recording Arts, is a "God Inspired" artist with a business oriented mindset. He prays one day his message of wisdom, struggle, and empowerment will influence the lives of many.

# The high school of my dreams

A school that treats students as individuals—and as if they matter

by *Emelia Carroll*



As the saying goes, “children are our future.” Not statistics, not baggage; but a hope to make the world better. Every parent’s dream is for their children’s lives to be better than their own. We all have good intentions for the next generation, but as a sophomore at a Minneapolis Public high school, I see that good intentions aren’t enough.

Almost every day, five days a week, 40 weeks a year, I go to Southwest High School (known to the rest of the Minneapolis Schools as the “preppy school”) for a six-hour day, plus a thirty-minute lunch. No matter where we are from, what we did during the summer, or who we are, we instantly find ourselves in the same place, at the same time, bearing the same label, “student”. We enter our classrooms hoping to grab a desk that doesn’t have one leg six inches shorter than the other—or any desk at all. It’s crowded: 30, 35, or maybe 40 students in a class. (This came as a huge shock to me especially; the number of students in my freshman biology class was greater than the number of students in my entire junior high.) We are then expected to turn our attention to one subject for the following

55 minutes, before heading to our next destination and doing the same thing over again. There is, of course, the occasional stop at a rest room where we just might

It doesn’t take a Ph.D. in education to know that every child is different and we don’t suddenly stop being unique when we enter high school. In fact, it seems that

I can dream of a school where classes are small and personal. In this school, students are able to show what they have learned in the way that suits them best.

find a stall with a door, lock, and toilet paper, and there just might be soap in the dispenser (and this is the preppy school).

Each class covers a set curriculum, one from which we rarely stray. One might assume that the goal of learning the material is to enrich our knowledge, provoke a desire to learn more, and give us basic tools that can make life better. However, the students (and the faculty, it seems) easily forget that and have a difficult time seeing past the immediate goal of passing the test. The “test” is the most widely accepted way to measure a student’s knowledge. And perhaps it would be, if every student were the same.

from age 14 to 18, people’s true qualities and talents (and oddities) shine forth. Therefore, it seems counterintuitive that high school students would be put in an atmosphere where they are all expected to learn, memorize and pass a test in the same way. As students, we get the impression that our strengths and personalities are less important than our test results.

In the 21st century, we know much more about the teenage psyche. However, the “passing the test” mentality, and the repetitive, tedious six-hour day system has remained just about the same for decades. It’s obvious that schools need money, and it’s obvious that budget cuts aren’t going to get us that money. But disregarding any financial limits, I can dream of a school where classes are small and personal. In this school, students are able to show what they have learned in the way that suits them best. In this school, the goal of a test is to genuinely evaluate what students know, not to be used as a statistic used to justify a budget cut. In this school, not every day is the same; there are opportunities to try different classes, and perhaps there would be four-day weeks rather than five. In this school, students are treated like individual people—important people.

Perhaps my dream school seems unrealistic, but it shouldn’t be. ●

*Emelia Carroll, a former Citizens League intern, is a sophomore at Southwest High School in Minneapolis.*





## The Minnesota Journal

Publisher – Sean Kershaw

Editor – J. Trout Lowen

Managing Editors – Bob DeBoer and Victoria Ford

The Minnesota Journal (ISSN 0741-9449) is a publication of the Citizens League, a nonprofit nonpartisan Twin Cities public affairs organization, 555 North Wabasha St., Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55102. Phone: (651) 293-0575. Fax: (651) 293-0576. E-mail: [info@citizensleague.org](mailto:info@citizensleague.org). Website: [www.citizensleague.org](http://www.citizensleague.org). Mary Pickard, chair. Articles and commentary are drawn from a broad range of perspectives and do not necessarily reflect Citizens League positions on policy questions. The Journal is published 11 times a year. Periodicals postage paid at St. Paul, MN and additional offices.

Annual subscription rate for nonmembers is \$40 for 11 issues. Orders may be placed at (651) 293-0575 or by mail at the above address.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Minnesota Journal, 555 North Wabasha St., Suite 240, St. Paul, MN 55102.



555 North Wabasha Street, Suite 240  
St. Paul, MN 55102

PERIODICALS

This summer, the Citizens League will be launching the second phase of its Immigration and Higher Education Study Committee. Find out more—and let us know if you are interested in serving on the committee—at [www.citizensleague.org/what/study](http://www.citizensleague.org/what/study). Check out our website at [www.citizensleague.org](http://www.citizensleague.org) for information about these and other upcoming events.

**Citizens League Annual Meeting**  
Save the date for our biggest event of the year. It's your chance to reconnect with old friends, honor active citizens and other civic leaders, and check in on the work of the Citizens League.

**10/24**