

Straight "A"s for Minnesota's Schools

Achievement, Assessment, Accountability

February 1997

Note: *Below is the executive summary of this report.
For a copy of the complete report, please call
the Citizens League at (612)338-0791.*

Executive Summary

Minnesota's students tend to do well - test scores are higher, dropout rates lower, post-secondary education enrollment higher than the national average.

But Minnesota's education system is not working fine for many of its constituents, and we believe that the system can do better - and must do better - for all students. In today's globally-competitive information economy, workers must have more knowledge and more advanced skills than in the past. The state's recent Basic Skills Tests show that too many students are reaching eighth grade without the most rudimentary reading and math skills. The public education system's record with students of color and students in poverty is appalling. And despite the good news of a budget surplus, Minnesota's fiscal future will require the education system to produce better-educated students without substantially more resources.

The 1997 Legislature should concentrate on the following agenda:

- Allocate resources and provide incentives for schools, districts and programs that demonstrably improve student **achievement**.
- Establish a statewide **assessment** system to provide consistent information about student, school and system performance to provide clear **accountability** to students, parents and taxpayers.
- Encourage and reward **innovation** in the structures for delivery of educational services.

The Legislature should be in the business of causing improvement, not doing improvement. The Legislature shouldn't be in the business of managing schools. Education is a decentralized system where the essential activity occurs between teachers and students. Districts, schools and teachers must decide for themselves to do what works. The Legislature should define expectations of performance for the education system, set broad policy and arrange the system in ways that prompt continuous improvement.

Organizations that have improved their quality and productivity offer helpful lessons for those who hope to improve education. The successful organization generally has a focused, unambiguous goal. It has developed reliable, regular information about performance. It has made everyone in the organization accountable for improvement. And it has given the people closest to the action the freedom and encouragement to try new ways of doing things.

Minnesota's education system should do likewise.

In this report, we recommend that the Legislature focus on the goal of improving student **achievement**. *Improved student achievement must be at the core of every public policy related to education*. The top achievement priorities should be to improve reading success among students in grades K-3; improve pre-school readiness among children at risk; improve the achievement of students of color and students in poverty; and improve the achievement of students whose native language is not English. On pages 7 through 11, we recommend specific steps the Legislature should take to support schools' efforts to improve student achievement.

A high-quality student **assessment** and information system is an essential step toward improving the achievement of students and the performance of the education system. On pages 12 and 13, we recommend steps the Legislature should take in 1997 to develop better information about how Minnesota's students and school districts are doing. We emphasize that the state must not only evaluate *students*, but must also evaluate schools, including schools' readiness to serve students of color.

The public rightly expects **accountability**, and restoring the public's trust in the education system is one of the Legislature's pressing challenges. The Legislature and public must be able to answer the question: What are the results the state is getting for its roughly \$5.5 billion annual education appropriation? On pages 13 through 15, we recommend steps to ensure that parents and taxpayers get the information they need, and also recommend steps to hold school districts accountable for ensuring equal education opportunity for all students. We also outline how the Legislature can increase the accountability of the education system in the short-term, as it moves toward more directly linking appropriations with expectations for performance improvement.

Every enterprise should invest some of its own resources in improvement and innovation - as a core activity, not something to be added only when "extra" money is available. This biennium, the Legislature has an additional opportunity for innovation, in the form of a projected budget surplus. On pages 16 through 20, we describe how the Legislature can use new education appropriations on specific, time-limited innovations to improve student achievement.

In a "budget session," education policy will be debated in the context of spending decisions. The central question for debate should be: How must the education system change to improve the achievement of students? And how can the Legislature be assured that its appropriation - the *whole \$6 billion*, not just the margins - will be used to achieve those improvements? We hope this report contributes to the effort to design a system that encourages parents, teachers, principals, and students to continually seek and implement better ways to help students learn.