

Tom Nelson:

Time is always short in meetings and there'll be four of us there, so I thought I might get a few of my thoughts to you ahead of the 21st.

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We're halfway across a river. We either go on across or we go back.

Minnesota has put choice in law. That's half a strategy. But alone it's not enough.

People can't see that it improves quality in the system. They see kids moving from some schools that exist to other schools that exist.

So Minnesota needs to add the other half. Which means: the opportunity for people to start new public schools, that kids can choose if they want.

If we don't do this, choice erodes. The alternative strategy the Governor was developing dies. We go back to money-and-mandates.

And we have to do one thing or the other in '90. We might not be able to enact the new-schools element of the new strategy in '90. But the push for it has to come in '90.

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Our decision here affects more than just Minnesota.

The national discussion is picking up increasingly on Minnesota. What happens in Minnesota is very likely to determine the future of the choice idea nationally.

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There could be a problem just holding choice, in '90. A bill to restrict options further could generate out of the survey of superintendents by House Research. It's nearly ready; holding while they check some figures about exactly how many kids are moving. They could surprise you with this any time.

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We can talk some on the 21st about how to create different-and-better schools. In a nutshell:

One is to start with an existing, administered school. The other is to start a different school new.

At the moment most policy-strategies are heavily oriented to existing schools. Think how many of the policy ideas start with "Re-": reform, restructuring, revitalizing, etc.

"Site management" is getting a lot of attention, as a reform idea. Its potential is usually exaggerated. It is hard to find cases where the district has delegated much real authority to make meaningful decisions. And even where some authority has been delegated it is hard to find cases where that has changed schooling in ways that are helpful to kids. Site management is mostly about making adults feel better (parents, principals or teachers as the case may be). We should keep at it. But don't expect too much.

So the idea of starting different schools new -- "charter schools" or whatever -- is gaining some respectability. This involves letting somebody (educators, social-service agencies, etc.) organize a new school/program -- usually for at-risk kids. And go basically "on contract" to a local district.

It also means giving them the opportunity to be sponsored by some other legitimate public agency if the local district declines to contract. A bill to let the State Board charter, or sponsor, a school passed the Senate last session.

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Both the teacher unions are trying to think through this "new schools" question, currently.

On the AFT side, Shanker is the author of the "charter schools" idea. (See his "Quest" speech from last August.) The MEA has talked about "school-based school improvement". Mammenga has the responsibility to come up with a strategy.

Both unions -- having taken their members about as far as they can go with job-security and compensation as middle-level civil servants -- want into the area of 'education policy'. They want to move their people to 'professional' status . . . where they can get into a different league re: compensation, working conditions and public support.

Site-based management is superficially attractive. But delegating authority to schools doesn't necessarily mean it will end up in the hands of teachers. Especially in Minnesota, where 'shared decision-making' is such a warm idea, the authority is likely to end up in some mushy committee of teachers, principal, non-teaching staff, parents and others.

I've been taking people from both the MFT and MEA to meetings with people outside education . . . giving them a look at other systems, where the professionals own the business and hire the administrators. And make the key policy decisions. This is beginning to intrigue a few folks. I can tell you more about it.

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The private schools are getting really anxious about where they fit into all this -- or don't.

Initially the positions were reversed. The public schools opposed the choice bill in '85; the private schools sort of liked it. In the years since '85 those positions have been slowly reversing. People in public education see kids coming back to the public schools. Private schools see enrollments going down.

As a result the 'voucher' movement is pressing hard again. The Catholic schools here fired their lobbyist, and new people are developing a new strategy.

In Kansas City the private/parochial schools have a motion before the federal court to order the state to buy space in non-public schools, as the only way for kids in that district to get an integrated education. There is an aggressive push for vouchers in Chicago. There is a lot of pressure on Cavazos and on the Bush administration to advocate that strategy. There's a lot of pressure on the Governor here, I sense.

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Again, Minnesota's example could be decisive. We are gradually working-out a way to involve the non-public schools that is not a voucher system and that escapes the 'voucher' controversy.

We're expanding the use of non-public programs/schools as contractors to the public school system.

The law speaks of "non-sectarian, non-profit, non-public". About six such organizations have had contracts with Minneapolis since the 1960s. They started with drop-outs; then gradually worked back to kids under 16 who'd for all practical purposes quit. Then to junior high school kids. Saint Paul began contracting in 1988. This summer Minneapolis approved the first contract for elementary level at-risk kids.

Some amendments late in the '89 session now make it possible for kids to enroll directly in programs contracted to their district-of-residence, and for the state to pay such programs directly 85% of the total cost. So far no such programs have been started by teachers/educators. But they could be.

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The 'testing' thing is a real mess.

The effort to get some reasonable measure of what kids know and are able to do is frustrated by the tendency of the Business Partnership, the Legislative Auditor and others to refer to it as 'accountability'.

To educators 'accountability' means "Whose fault is it?" "Who gets blamed?" They think schools will get blamed. So in order to avoid being blamed they're forced to suppress measurement. That may even be why the 'objectives' idea has been diverted over into another demonstration: Objectives imply measurement.

We need a 'no-fault' approach to measurement . . . a 'Mayo Clinic' approach, that treats testing as simply diagnosis. We just want to know what's your 'condition'. Later on, separately, maybe we'll talk about who's responsible: your doctor or your ancestors or the driver of the car that hit you or the environment or your own eating habits, or whatever.

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Most of the 'restructuring' discussion is at the moment (mis-?) directed toward governance.

The MEA is very anxious to push through the consolidation program it's been working on since about '85.

Partly this has involved introducing incentives for districts to merge, in the old-fashioned way. (Compulsion, as in S.F. 186 is out; incentives are in.) Partly it has involved creating new, larger educational organizations to which local districts can transfer certain functions without having entirely to disappear.

This has produced a lot of clutter between the level of the local district and the state: ECSUs, education, districts, co-ops, intermediate districts, special groupings for financing new buildings. Ultimately people will want to remove this clutter.

The Task Force on Education Organization, under the Legislative Commission on Public Education, is working on this; or trying to.

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Related to this is the push to get bargaining up to a regional or state level.

The MEA makes no secret of and "makes no apologies" for this effort to become an even-more-dominant teacher union.

The common wisdom is that it won't fly . . . because of MFT opposition or because of the fear it will make teachers even stronger in bargaining salaries, or whatever.

But it's conceivable. Other countries bargain (or set, without bargaining) teacher salaries at the 'state' level. In Germany the teachers are state employees; supplied to the local district (which is responsible for the buildings and support services).

It's politically possible, too, if it's true (as we now hear) that the superintendents want out. Don't want bargaining to be a local district function, any more.

The Task Force on Education Organization has a contract out for a design of a regional-bargaining mechanism.

As the discussion proceeds someone could ask why teacher-compensation has to be a matter of bargaining at all. Most professionals don't have their salaries centrally bargained. For most the compensation-decision is an internal matter, within the professional group itself. This takes us back to the question of who owns the schools, the system or the teachers.

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Our discussion in Minnesota is way behind much of the rest of the country in applying the 're-structuring' notion to schooling itself -- to what happens inside the classroom.

The Johnson brothers at the University have been almost unknown here, at least until the Itasca Seminar last fall. Their ideas about cooperative learning (collaborative learning, group/work) are still not a significant part of the education-policy debate.

Minnesota has so far declined to join the Sizer/ECS "Re:Learning" project, so the "student as worker; teacher as coach" idea is also not a significant part of the discussion here.

The Governor continues to talk about technology but we almost certainly aren't maximizing the potential of that, as a learning method, either.

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Desegregation . . . racial balance . . . is another puzzlement.

A couple of years ago you could sense the forces mobilizing for a major push. Minneapolis and Saint Paul were moving toward 50% minority enrollment. Inter-district movement seemed the next step. Gary Orfield was up here several times, from Chicago. One of the newspapers had a major article, or series, written and ready to go, about opening up the suburbs. Minneapolis was known to have a lawsuit ready. In Minneapolis one organization was arguing for dissolving the city district . . . for attaching sectors of the city to the adjacent suburban districts . . . as a method of 'de-concentrating'.

Nothing happened. The article never ran. The lawsuit was never filed. The Legislature did appropriate substantial sums to the two central city districts.

Partly this probably has to do with the minority community itself. People were suddenly conscious that there were no voices from communities of color, asking for metro deseg. Most of the voices speaking for it seemed to come from white school administrators. People of color were asking simply for "quality education". In one case the request was for "our own school".

Much more of the interest in communities of color today is for a better understanding on part of the majority, and of the school system, for the racial/cultural differences; and for a much more sensitive handling of those differences in school and in the curriculum. There is a substantial effort now starting, financed by some local foundations, to move that along. You'll hear from that effort.

These communities of color are not at the moment as good as they need to be on questions of method: how the system can change, to produce quality education for the kids traditionally not well served. But the effort is to address that problem, too.

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The 'finance' area is a subject all its own.

There's the lawsuit, coming along.

There's the round of bargaining round now just winding up. The average of contracts settled so far is just over 10%, and twice the dollar-amount of contracts settled at the same stage in the last bargaining round. Query: Is the legislative appropriation being overspent?

Some people think the state will never get real attention to improvements in schooling so long as the door is left open to the system to consider money-only as quality. They think the state needs to take away the excess levies. No more whip-sawing. Districts could improve so far with money; beyond that with ingenuity.

There is not much attention yet to the fiscal impact of the retirement of so many senior teachers over the next few years. Where will the money go as district salary costs come down?

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The problem is that the discussion is still locked into the conventional box . . . into the traditional assumptions about what the system is and about what "improving it" means.

So every session the Legislature looks at a round of incremental programmatic improvements, and a few grants for "demonstrations" to show we're interested in change.

Most people probably think that if the state ever did get serious 'mandates' would be its strategy. It's a central-planning model. (People are noticing the similarities with eastern Europe, these days.)

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What we need more than anything is for somebody to get the

discussion 'out of the box' of conventional assumptions.

The 'choice' strategy depends on some way to create new schools.

The teachers (and their organizations) might be interested. But they need a push from the outside: something to react-to.

So everything really depends on leadership . . . as, with what the Governor did in '85.

How can we get that again?