

Date: September 12, 2007
To: The P-16 Partnership Executive Team
From: Suzanne Tacheny, PhD, Consultant to the P-16 Partnership
Subject: P-16 Partnership Interview Results

At the October 2007 meeting of the Minnesota P-16 Partnership, University of Minnesota President Robert Bruininks will assume the Chairmanship role with Commissioner Alice Seagren serving as Vice-Chair. President Bruininks, along with the Executive Committee, recognized this transition in leadership as an opportunity to query each of the Partnership members individually about their goals and priorities for this next phase of the committee's work. The intent of these conversations was forward listening; we were not evaluating the past as much as collecting ideas for the next phase of the work.

From July to September 2007, I met with every available member of the Partnership individually; this memo summarizes the general findings from this series of conversations. We discussed members' views about the purpose and accomplishments of the Partnership to date and the goals, priorities, perceived barriers and opportunities inherent in the work ahead. Within these conversations, themes or beliefs emerged that might help guide further work. In order to encourage full candor, I committed to present interview findings un-attributed.

The core purpose of this exercise was to inform the decision-making process about the goals for the Partnership's next phase of work. Therefore, I summarized here areas of agreement as well as highlighted areas where opinions seem to diverge. I also included ideas even if only one person raised them, which is not always done in this type of summarization, but we (Kent and I) felt that at this phase of your work, every opinion deserved a hearing. In other words, please think of this report as the "setting of a ball into play" rather than a final score card and consider all views on their merits.

Background

History

Early in 2002, educational leaders in Minnesota recognized the important work being carried out by "P-16 Partnerships" across the country. These partnerships have served other states to foster stronger collaboration across institutions and to bring about greater alignment of cross-institution policies and expectations. In 2002, Chancellor McCormick convened Minnesota educators to begin defining the structure and purpose of a Minnesota Partnership. In 2003, that partnership was formalized among 15 statewide education systems and organizations. Over the past several years, the membership of this group has expanded; the Minnesota Partnership now has twenty-seven members.

Accomplishments

Improved Relationships. Many in the Partnership cite as its first accomplishment the convening of this group and its resulting relationships. While not the first of its kind in the country, Minnesota's P16 Partnership is unique in several ways. Minnesota's P16 Partnership remains a purely voluntary effort, with no state mandates or funding directing its work. Further, while many state P16 groups are seated with representatives of various education stakeholder groups, Minnesota has taken the much bolder step of seating the President or CEO of the organizations represented. In other words, Minnesota has decision-makers around the table. In this early phase, the MN P16 Partnership defined "Teacher Quality" and "Access to College" as its primary goals. An e-mentoring program for teachers emerged as an early idea from the Partnership, supported by resources from a NEA foundation grant to Education Minnesota.

Increased Focus. Many members also expressed appreciation for the increased focus through specific working groups during the committee's second phase. Several of the work-groups convened enjoyed the support of NGA grants to further their efforts. Many P16 members point to the finalization of Minnesota's math standards and the progress made toward a universal student identifier as accomplishments in the Partnership's second phase. One member explained, "The full support of the P16 Partnership was crucial to their success in the legislature."

Concrete Data. Similarly, while not an effort directly undertaken by the Partnership, many members pointed to "Minnesota Measures" as an effort that helped to focus the group's thinking with concrete data about some of Minnesota's pipeline to higher education. A great deal of exploration has also been done in the areas of an aligned math placement test (or some other system of early feedback regarding high school placement) and identifying opportunities to streamline college access programs. In addition, data has been gathered to better understand the state's remediation "challenges"; many are eager for the results of this effort to better understand the issues of remediation. In general, the availability of quality data to guide decision-making has been appreciated.

External Support. Several people noted as a point of pride that to date, the P16 has remained unfunded, benefiting from in-kind member support where needed, such as the NEA's support of the e-mentoring effort. In addition, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) was able to secure a sizable grant from the National Governor's Association that supported much of the state's work on the math standards and other efforts. A few members noted that as more priorities move to implementation, additional financial support might be required.

Next Steps

Purpose

As P16 members see it, the purpose of the P-16 Partnership is to build cross-institutional relationships to ensure students a seamless transition as they progress through Minnesota's educational system. All agreed that the mission of this Partnership remains vital; while some felt a refocusing is timely, no one said that the Partnership had outlived its purpose. Several members offered succinct views on the question of the purpose of the Minnesota P-16 Partnership:

- “Talking a physical” of Minnesota’s educational health.
- Improve Minnesota’s workforce and bridge the gap between k-12 and higher education.
- Discover tensions and needs within the educational system then work to resolve them.
- Take collective responsibility for preparing students for today’s economy.
- “Ensure every student in Minnesota has a good postsecondary education and that they are ready for it when the time comes.”

Beliefs

As we discussed accomplishment and then priorities for next steps, members often supported their suggestions with belief statements about the Partnership and Minnesota in general. These ideas provide context to better understand the goals and priorities and are worth a quick summary.

- Education is a vital resource that drives Minnesota’s economic and civic health. Minnesota is great because its educational opportunities have been great.
- Within Minnesota and globally, the economy is changing, and with it, the pipeline for employment in the state is also changing. Minnesota’s education system must change accordingly.
- Minnesota has a great deal to be proud of in the area of education, but can’t rest on past success.
- Minnesota’s students are its future and that future is diverse. The challenge of educating *all* Minnesotans is critical.
- Minnesota’s system of education should be transparent for its customers—namely, its students—and the transitions between its institutions for learning should be seamless.
- Student needs—not institutional interests—should guide the Partnership’s decision making.
- The P16 Partnership cannot solve everything and it is not the only venue in which problems are being addressed; the agenda should not strive to be comprehensive,

- rather it should identify a narrow set of issues where the collective minds of such a broad group are needed.
- The standards for learning adopted at the K-12 level must be endorsed and reinforced through the words and policies of higher education and the business community.
 - Similarly, K-12 must prepare student for postsecondary success.

Goals and Priorities

The question, “If the Partnership could accomplish three and only three big goals during this term, what would be your top three priorities?” generated a remarkably succinct list of goals, suggesting that the Partnership members share a common understanding of the challenges and opportunities for improving education in Minnesota. Those responses are listed in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned. When pushed further, “And if you could only accomplish one of your three goals, which is most important?” every person interviewed referenced one of the top three listed priorities.

The highest three priorities are to ensure that:

- 1. All students graduate from high school ready for success in their next endeavor.**
- 2. Minnesota’s teachers are prepared and supported to meet the higher learning goals to which the state has committed.**
- 3. The broader public understands and supports the educational goals to which Minnesota is committed.**

It might be self-evident to state that the fact that these ideas were the most commonly referenced does not make them the most important. I would urge members not to view these results as a final tally but as the starting place for your decisions about your priorities in the next phase. It’s important to note here that conversations focused on “goals” and not necessarily on “working group” assignments; there are other ways to address goals than assigning them to a group for further deliberation. The nuances in the discussion of these top priorities and all other priorities referenced follows.

- 1. Ensure that all student graduate from high school ready for success in their next endeavor.**

Close the expectations gap. Everyone interviewed expressed some version of this goal. Interviewees expressed this idea in different ways—some by talking about closing the achievement gap for college-going students; others by stating the needed to end remediation—but the overarching consensus is that no one wants Minnesota students to graduate from high school only to learn that they need more education before they are ready for the rigor of college or career technical education programs. Some described this as a “readiness gap” or the “expectations gap”; another as the “no-man’s land” that many students find themselves in between high school and their next career step. One

urged that clearly defining terms will be essential to finding consensus. To the person, every member of the Partnership recognized the need to close this “expectations gap” as a key goal for Minnesota.

Mind the achievement gap. Several members put a finer point on the issue, linking this goal explicitly to Minnesota’s achievement gap. One individual stated, “Even if we focus solely on traditionally underserved students and find ways to ensure that these students are better prepared, we will have done a great deal of good.”

Define “readiness” broadly. Most defined “readiness” broadly, including not only the academic preparation needed for success in postsecondary education, but also the knowledge of options and the developed self-awareness needed to make informed choices about those opportunities. Here again, most stressed that the “all students” part of the goal is a crucial focus for Minnesota and that programs to ensure preparation and access are as important as raising expectations for academic performance.

More discussion needed. Within this broader discussion of post-secondary preparedness, divergence of views emerged that will require further deliberation.

- *Post Secondary Education for Every Student?* While most interviewees recognized the increased convergence of the standards for success in college and career-technical postsecondary choices—stating that in this economy, college readiness and career readiness mean the same thing—that belief is not universal among all members of the Partnership. A few members challenged this view, asserting that some students do not need any postsecondary training for life success. Further, while it might be safe to say that the overwhelming majority of P16 members believe that all students will need some form of postsecondary education, in private interviews many express frustration at the vast differences in what “readiness” means as defined by Minnesota’s many post-secondary institutions, making “ensuring readiness” an elusive target.
- *Ending Remediation?* Many people interviewed stated that reducing or eliminating the need for remediation after students leave high school is a critical goal for Minnesota. In fact, the majority of members who talked about ensuring readiness talked about it in the terms of “ending remediation.” Some quickly clarified that not all remediation is a problem; that taking a brush-up course in areas such as mathematics is not necessarily a bad thing. But “remediation” does become a problem when student are paying for multiple, non-credit earning courses when these skills should have been mastered in high school at no cost to the student. Many expressed this as an area where we must be especially mindful of the potential harm to disadvantaged students who are expending limited college scholarships on non-credit earning courses. And, for some, the idea of open access necessitates providing remediation for students who are not yet ready for college-level work. But, as one person stated emphatically, expanding remedial courses in higher education is moving in the wrong direction; this member called

that “mission creep.” A few people acknowledged that employee and institutional financial interests further complicate this challenge.

- *One Definition of College Ready?* Easily a majority of those interviewed pointed specifically to another challenge in reducing the needed for remediation, namely, that Minnesota lacks a consistent definition of what “college ready” means in various skill areas as defined by college entry placement exams. One respondent said, “K-12 gets blamed when students need remediation in college. We would like to get them ready; but tell us what ready means.” The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, who educate 65 percent of all Minnesota students, have taken a large step toward addressing this issue by recently adopting system-wide threshold scores on the ACCUPLACER for all entry-level, credit earning freshmen courses starting in the fall of '08. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities credits the conversations held in the P16 on this issue as a part of the impetus for this change.

Many recognize this addresses only part of the challenge; the myriad of other colleges and universities using different standards continues to blur the target and early feedback systems are still needed to enable students to get the remedial help they need while they are still in high school. Many in the Partnership are aware the work done in other states to align college placement exams with high school subject tests in order to provided early feedback to high school students. Many expressed interest in developing such a system in Minnesota. One member said that for the system to have focus, we need fewer tests and urged the group to identify the 1-2 assessments that can serve the broadest purposes.

2. Ensure that Minnesota’s teachers are prepared and supported to meet the higher learning goals to which the state has committed.

Help teachers teach standards. As members spoke with pride about the completion of the state’s new math standards, many leapt to the next challenge: ensuring that Minnesota’s teachers are prepared to help students meet them. Teachers will need standards-aligned instructional materials and access to quality training opportunities. This is a concern for teachers currently teaching in Minnesota classrooms as well as for students in teacher training programs whose curricula might not yet reflect these new, higher standards. One member said, “Just setting new standards doesn’t convey what is expected; we need to offer guidance about way to help students meet these standards.”

Don’t forget about principals! While many members called attention to the need for more teacher support and training in order to implement the new state standards, a few urged the Partnership to recognize the critical importance of school leadership in brining about the changes these new standards envision. These members stressed not only instructional support and training but also training in organizational leadership and change management.

More discussion needed: What's Higher Education's role? While the issue of supporting and preparing teachers to meet the higher standards was the second most commonly referenced issue, there is some divergence here too. Some members believe that teacher-training programs within Minnesota colleges and universities must adjust their curricula to specifically align to the new standards, others expressed skepticism about this goal, pointing to Minnesota's commitment to revise its standards every few years. One member stated, "It simply isn't realistic to continue revising our curricula every four years; we have to approach content more broadly."

Bring high school and college teachers together. As one strategy for ensuring teachers are prepared to meet the new learning standards, a few members called specifically for efforts to bring together high school teachers with college faculty to review student work as it relates to these new standards, evaluating together what "college ready" means. This model was viewed as a win-win strategy in which both sides benefit from the expertise of the other.

3. Ensure that the broader public understands and supports the educational goals to which Minnesota is committed.

Many members lifted up another challenge as a high priority: ensuring that the broader public understands the rationale for the changes taking place in Minnesota public schools. Those members spoke proudly about what they saw developing consensus among the majority of Partnership members about the need to push Minnesota's aspirations for education, but recognized that this is likely a conversation that's taking place among professional insiders. Several members talked about the need for a campaign to raise awareness about why higher standards and increased college attendance are critical to Minnesota's economic health. A few members suggested that "Ready for K" is a great model of using a "bully pulpit" effectively.

More discussion: Would the public agree? One member of the partnership essentially made the same point, but coming from the other side of the argument, stating that the case for higher standards has not been made. This person viewed the push for higher standards as more politically than empirically motivated, stating that not everyone needs college to have a successful life. This person felt that pushing college readiness as a goal for every student is unrealistic and sets schools up for failure.

...or is the public already there? Another member essentially pushed back on the idea that the general public doesn't understand that need for higher standards, saying that the public is there in concept, but might not be there in specifics. For examples, parents understand that postsecondary education is critical in today's economy, but might not understand how increased math standards relate to that goal. (The fact that this comment was offered by one of the non-educators in the Partnership is significant to the perspective it offers.)

Partnership's "bully-pulpit" is underutilized. Several people commented that the power of this Partnership as a collective "bully-pulpit" has been under used and noted

that President Bruininks is especially well positioned to use it more effectively. One person said, “If the heads of Minnesota’s college systems stand together with the leaders of Minnesota’s employer community and discuss how the economy is changing, then endorse the need for higher educational standards, that would get everyone’s attention.” Another made the same point in a slightly different way, “For the state’s new learning standards to be taken serious, the heads of Minnesota’s college systems and the leaders of its business communities must endorse and promote them.”

Need fresh messages. Several member stated that in order for this kind of campaign to be effective, it must go beyond traditional calls for increased funding and raise public awareness about the importance of education to Minnesota’s economy as well as help parents and the general public understand the critical importance of education—and higher standards—to students’ future life success. As one person said, “If we lead with the same old message that we need more money, they will shut us off before the rest of the message gets heard.” (This is not to say resources cannot be part of the conversation; it simply suggests this topic should not be the opening salvo.)

4. Closing the achievement gap.

In addition to those members who referenced the achievement gap as a critical concern in ensuring all students are prepared for postsecondary success, many members called attention to Minnesota’s achievement gap as a priority that they felt requires its own high-profile commitment. These members cited research that Minnesota has one of the highest achievement gaps in the nation, a status they felt does not reflect Minnesota’s values, and called on the Partnership to address this at every level of the P-16 education system. One member did express candidly a concern with an “achievement gap” focus, namely that focusing too directly on “closing gaps” could result in blunting the high end of achievement in the state.

5. Continue to promote Minnesota’s dual enrollment opportunities.

A few members remind the Partnership not to lose sight of what has been Minnesota’s most successful effort to bridge the transition between high school and college: dual enrollment programs. These programs have served as an effective way to improve the conversations across institutions and to promote access to higher education for all students. Through mechanisms like forging articulation agreements, both systems develop a more concrete understanding of standards and expectations. Several members noted that more can be done in Minnesota to ensure that all Minnesota students have access to these opportunities and to “trouble-shoot” where perceived barriers prevent access. Members cited especially how new technologies enable these programs to reach more deeply into the state and, given the advent of these new technologies and the lingering inequities in terms of access, dual enrollment might deserve a fresh, concerted push.

6. Ensure that MN students are ready for all the transitions inherent in their educational careers, including the transitions from P to K, elementary to middle school, and middle to high school.

What's the role of P-8? A few people observed that given the past focus of Minnesota's P-16 Partnership, the group could more aptly be called a 9-16 Partnership. Those members stressed that a great deal of focus has been placed on the transition between high school and higher education with little to no focus on the role that P-8 plays in that pipeline or the importance for ensuring these earlier educational transitions are smooth ones. As with post-secondary preparation, these individuals also referenced Minnesota's achievement gap and noted that this gap needs attention at all levels of schooling. One linked this goal to the issue of remediation, observing that we should not be waiting until high school before assisting those students who have fallen behind.

A few members offered rationale for the group's lack of focus on K-8 issues. First, Minnesota enjoys strong leadership in the area of early childhood, which has resulted in the "Ready for K" recommendations. Therefore, while the P-16 Partnership is not addressing this, the issue enjoys a high level of attention within the state. (This member suggested that the group might consider endorsing the "Ready for K" agenda as a sign of support for these goals.) Second, some felt that the transitions inherent in progressing through the P-12 system are not topics that require extensive input from higher education, so may be best addressed through other venues.

Scaffold college readiness back to all grade levels. While a few members felt that the P16 had not done much in issues affecting P-8, another member called for active involvement of leaders of the lower grades in the discussion of standards, noting that the most significant changes to the math standards were made in grades K-3 and 5-7. A few members suggested a workgroup dedicated to scaffolding the standards backwards to set clear expectations for each of the transitions inherent in the P-16 pipeline, such as:

- What does kindergarten readiness mean?
- What does readiness for middle school mean?
- What does high school readiness mean?
- What measures and supports are needed to ensure readiness at each of these transition points?

7. Align high school and postsecondary career technical curricula to the state's new learning standards to ensure these programs prepare students for a changing economy.

A few members talked about the need for increased rigor and standards alignment to standards within the state's career technical curriculum. Some argued that re-orienting all high school curricula to college-preparatory work ignores the realities of Minnesota's workforce in which many students pursue vocations, not college, after leaving high school. These members recognized the need to increase the rigor of the state's high school vocational programs to ensure alignment to standards, but stressed the importance

of allowing for multiple approaches to meeting these higher standards. The recommendation is that Minnesota should develop career technical standards similar to the standards recently adopted in California that compliment the state's learning standards.

8. Enhancing STEM competence in schools.

One individual commended the work Minnesota has done in its STEM initiative and stressed that this effort is critically important to the state's long-term economic health. This member urged that continued focus on Math and Science should remain a priority and the Partnership should look for ways for higher education to support P-12 instructional needs in these areas. Another remarked on the importance of the Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) to the state and stressed the need for stronger alignment between high school and higher education and math and science standards.

9. Longer school-year

One person urged that in order to achieve the higher standards toward which Minnesota is aiming, a longer school year is needed, envisioning this as an issue for which the P16 could advocate collectively.

Barriers and Opportunities

After discussing goals and opportunities, we discussed what members saw as the barriers and opportunities for meeting those goals.

Potential barriers included:

- Resources, both broadly for Minnesota's education system and specifically to support initiatives that members agree are essential goals and priorities.
- Resources also become a barrier when it creates contention over limited resources.
- The large size of the Partnership, which many feel makes taking action more challenging.
- "Turf" issues or other adult interests that obscure focus on student needs.
- The belief in Minnesota's "greatness" or our past successes that can obscure areas where improvement is needed.
- Lack of understanding of student and family needs in a changing demographic landscape.
- Lack of foresight (or belief) in the degree to which Minnesota's economy is changing, especially in the broader public.
- Lack of stability in the state's learning standards. (If the standards change every four years, alignment becomes a constant effort.)

- With no mandate, the Partnership has no inherent institutional accountability.

As is often the case, the opportunities seen are really just the barriers in disguise.

Opportunities included:

- MN's P-16 Partnership is a voluntary group, which means people are in the room because they see value in this effort.
- A great deal of progress has been made to build the relationships needed for collective action.
- MN's P-16 Partnership is comprised with organization principals, not representatives, so real decision-making is possible.
- The Partnership is an enormous bully pulpit to speak with a collective voice about needs and challenges affecting Minnesota education at its broadest level.
- Minnesota places high value on the strength of its educational system. We are used to being "great" and are not eager to lose this distinction, which should compel us toward continued improvement.
- The leadership of this Partnership by and large shares the same understanding about the need for change and the challenges inherent in that.
- Minnesota's immigrant community provides a huge opportunity for innovation as it responds to the unique needs of some of the state's special populations.
- Finally, as one member said, "Minnesota has a long history of rising to challenges—this is not our first."

General Feedback

While the intent of these interviews was to be forward-looking, many members did offer thoughts about the ways that the structural and procedural workings of the Partnership might be improved as the group moves into its new phase.

Focus! In general, everyone values this Partnership, but some expressed a hope for higher-level of discussion. At least five people said practically the same thing: "Pick three things and do them well..." Many valued the first phase of the work in which relationships were forged as well as the focus that was brought moving to six working groups, but then stated they felt ready for even more focus on a fewer, higher level issues.

Executive Committee? The existence of a separate Executive Committee received mixed reviews. Some said they thought it was redundant and pulled energy from the larger discussions; others said it brought focus back to the meetings after the group got too large. Some expressed frustration that the executive committee is in no way representative (i.e., its members weren't elected) so lack the standing to make decisions on the part of the broader group. One member in particular commented that this could become a problem if that committee tried to move forward on a difficult issue. One person felt the "problem" was that the members of the Executive Committee don't have

their “get things done” staff people in the conversations with them, so commitments made in Executive Sessions don’t always move to action effectively.

Staff Support and external information. In general, a few members stated that that as the group moves to a more action oriented agenda, it could benefit from ongoing staff support and will need other resources to support initiatives the groups endorses. One member suggested that the group might benefit from some forum-style sessions in which outside information is presented. Another suggested that there are not enough “customers” or other non-educator stakeholders on the committee to provide that perspective.

Fewer, More Action-Oriented Workgroups. When I asked about the progress of the workgroups in order to reflect the Partnership’s accomplishments to date, some members suggested ways that future working groups might function more effectively. Several members essentially said that they lost track of the working group’s progress; some suggested that too many working groups were underway simultaneously and advocated a “less is more” approach. Several members suggested that working groups need strong, clear leadership to bring issues to resolve. One member noted that when working groups presented their findings and recommendations, these recommendations were not discussed and then put to a vote or moved to action in some other way. The recommendation, then, is for specific recommendations to be made by committees and specific deliberation and action scheduled immediately following those recommendations. Also, given the strong concern shared by many members about the issue of remediation, many members are eager for some conclusion of the research from this working group

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, please permit me to inject my own observation that this committee is primed for action, if you accept this charge for finding and committing to a clear focus for your next phase. You have obviously done some good thinking together. This Partnership has great potential to lead and bring common sense back to a fractious policy environment.

- You have assembled decision-makers who are making these meetings a priority; as a group, you have the ability to tackle those challenges to which you commit.
- I share the observation so many in the group expressed that this is a group that is developing a collective mind. You might be using different words to express concerns, and sometimes I found members coming to the same point from the opposite side of the argument, but I heard far more agreement of beliefs and concerns that I would have expected from this large a group.
- A significant number of you stated strongly that you want to “get something done”—and many of you used precisely those words. You asked for focus, and defined success as doing a few things well.
- Equally hopeful, a clear focus is developing already. Almost every member referenced the top three listed priorities as their goals and the other priorities

raises are more targeted initiatives that support one of those initiatives. Not only do you share a sense of urgency, you share some specificity about the problems that most need your attention.

- Perhaps most important, with the doors closed and the promise of anonymity on the table, I did not hear a lot of nay saying from anyone. I heard areas of disagreement, certainly, but not insurmountable ones.

In this series of interviews, I met with thoughtful leaders who understand the unique value that education has played in the past in Minnesota—a value for which many of you recognize as worth fighting. Again, please use these results not as a summary of fixed areas of “consensus” but rather as a means of “hitting the ground running” toward deciding on a common agenda for the next phase of work. I am excited for you; this group has a unique opportunity to make a real contribution to Minnesota’s future.