

Executive Summary:

Clearing Policy Barriers to Student-Centered Learning



Recommendations for a More Relevant, Personalized, and Equitable Minnesota Education System

While Minnesota's system of public education fares well in national ratings and generally has a lot going for it,¹ when examined at a deeper level shortcomings appear. The state has struggled with decades of stagnant academic performance,² and some of the worst opportunity and achievement gaps in the country.³ Local business are pleading⁴ for students with skills in problem solving, collaboration, and creativity,⁵ while jobs requiring those skills go unfilled.⁶

We assert that much of the disappointing performance we see from public education stems from an outdated, factory-model design of school. While the traditional model has worked for some students, it was not designed to work for all. Students have unique interests, learning styles, career aspirations, cultural identities, and personal challenges. To meet all students' needs, Minnesota needs greater variation in learning experiences both within and among schools.

Over the last several years, more and more schools are innovating with student-centered learning—that is, learning that puts students in the driver's seat, is responsive to their identities and basic needs, relevant to their lives beyond school, personalized to their academic trajectories, built on a foundation of strong relationships, and not confined within school days and walls.

Unfortunately, some state laws and rules make it difficult for those designing student-centered learning to innovate with the content, pace, time, space, and role of educators in learning. This paper seeks to identify, and recommend changes to, laws and regulations in four primary areas of policy—standards, credits, and seat time; testing and accountability; licensure and staffing; and funding and finance streams—that present these barriers.

A. Standards, Credits, and Seat Time

WE RECCOMEND THAT:

- A1** The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) revise state standards with greater emphasis on what researchers call “focus” and “coherence”,⁷ and with priority placed on 21st century skills over specific content knowledge.
- Rationale**
Standards in the most high performing, educationally equitable countries in the world, including Singapore, Finland, Canada,⁸ and increasingly, in the U.S.,⁹ prioritize deep, enduring concepts and foundational habits of mind, which are applicable to future academic content and to students’ future lives.
- A2** The Legislature amend MN Statute 120B.021, Subdivision 2, paragraph a, governing the standards revision process, to require that at least one-third of participants in standards committees are representatives from civic and business communities.
- Rationale**
Involving those with practical expertise in how knowledge and skills will be used beyond school will bring greater emphasis to skills relevant to work and life, over esoteric content knowledge.
- A3** The Legislature amend the language on benchmarks in MN Statute 120B.023, to specify that the benchmarks are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather must be used as a guide in defining the appropriate evidence of having met a standard.
- Rationale**
The benchmarks are more prescriptive than the state standards. This change will allow students and educators greater creativity in meeting the standards, and is more consistent with the way benchmarks are used in practice.
- A4** The Legislature convene a special legislative task force of educators, communities, families, higher education, and business and civic leaders to define a set of *21st Century Competencies for College, Career, and Life*. The end product would be an official public document, which sets out Minnesota’s values for skills like problem solving, creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking.
- Rationale**
This recommendation would build on the 2013 World’s Best Workforce law by defining “college and career readiness”¹⁰ so that it is aligned with the skills students will use in life, and that Minnesota’s employers report they seek when hiring. Several other states have recently defined such standards.¹¹
- A5** The Legislature amend MN Statutes 120B.02, Subd. 2, Paragraph a, governing graduation requirements, to state that schools and districts may recognize standards and award credits entirely based on students demonstrating competency, independent of time spent in the classroom.
- Rationale**
While nothing in statute explicitly links credits to time requirements, districts have expressed hesitancy to fully implement competency progression because it is not explicitly sanctioned by state law, and several state data systems are still oriented to collect data on fixed-length “courses”.
- A6** The Legislature amend MN Statutes 120A.41, which governs minimums for school year and instructional hours, to make it explicit that minimum required hours of instruction and membership hours can include hours in which students are learning at any place and at any time, as long as the learning is coordinated and validated by a licensed teacher.
- A7** The Legislature and MDE move toward creating general rules for responsible operation of special categories of programs—including online learning, project-based learning, work-based learning, and flexible learning year—rather than requiring schools and districts to submit applications for approval.



B. Testing and Accountability

WE RECCOMEND THAT:

- B1** In the long run, the Legislature create a new performance assessment-based accountability pilot program, much like New Hampshire.¹² Performance assessments are embedded into student learning experiences. Teachers make proficiency judgements about their students based on their work on those assessments, using common state rubrics and work samples. Teacher judgements are then confirmed by other teachers, in a blind cross-verification system, and also verified against traditional summative assessments in some years.
- Rationale*
Performance assessments do not disrupt or take time away from student learning, and better measure important 21st century skills like problem solving and critical thinking.¹³
- B2** The Legislature ask MDE to develop fully grade-adaptive, vertically scaled tests for the state accountability system.
- B3** Once these tests are implemented, we recommend that MDE revise its ESSA plan to determine growth scores in its accountability system based on the extent to which each student has increased their vertically aligned score.
- Rationale for B2 and B3*
Under current state tests, schools are disincentivized from meeting the needs of students who are either far behind or highly advanced, because their results will not show up in either proficiency or growth measures. In contrast, tests that yield a vertically aligned score can capture growth that occurs for students far above and below “grade level”.
- B4** The Legislature designate the ACT as the state high school test, for the purposes of accountability, rather than the MCA.
- Rationale*
Most students already take the ACT as they apply for college; using the test as the statewide assessment reduces duplicative testing and helps pave the way for more equitable access to postsecondary education.
- B5** MDE include a measure based on student and family surveys of engagement as part of the new ESSA “fifth indicator” of school quality and student success (SQ/SS), and also report that measure on state report cards.
- Rationale*
We know that engagement is both a determinant of learning and important to students and families.
- B5** MDE allow schools and districts to self-report one to three additional measures for their official state report card. The state could provide a “menu” of possible measures—for example, social emotional learning, well-rounded education, etc.—and also let schools write-in their own mission-related measures.
- Rationale*
Many schools use unique assessments to measure success with their mission; for example, a language immersion school might use a foreign language exam. These measures should be recognized in some official capacity.



C. Licensure and Staffing

WE RECOMMEND THAT:

- C1** The Legislature direct the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) to create a new “Personalized Learning” endorsement licensure field, which includes at a minimum these skills:
- Helping students to own and personalize their own learning, by helping them discovering their passions, interests, and talents.
 - Overseeing, coaching, and validating independent learning rather than only delivering direct instruction.
 - Helping students to find and evaluate sources, recognizing that the teacher will not always be the primary source for subject-matter knowledge.

Rationale

As students play a larger role in driving their learning, teachers are more important than ever, and will spend more of their energy mentoring, advising, validating, and designing personalized learning environments. These new roles for teachers require different professional skills.

D. Finance and Funding Streams

WE RECOMMEND THAT:

- D1** The Legislature and MDE seek to expand the use of the Concurrent Enrollment and PSEO programs, through continued legislative appropriations, communications and awareness building initiatives, and other efforts.

Rationale

Students who have progressed through required high school credits and standards deserve to continue their learning journey. This saves both the students and the state money in the long run, and provides more equitable access to postsecondary education for students with fewer resources.

- D2** The Legislature amend 126C.10, governing general education revenue, to make it explicit when, and under what conditions, schools can collect revenue for students learning off-site—for example when students are in blended learning and community- or work-based environments.

Rationale

While special statuses exist in law for project-based, work-based, online, and independent learning, districts and schools are unsure at what level of implementation these approaches need to be approved as special programs, and when they can collect revenue for students involved in those approaches to learning without specific approval.

- D3** The Legislature revisit each funding stream, ask the purposes for which it was created, simplify and combine those formulas as much as possible without compromising those purposes, and merge streams that do not have specific requirements into the basic general formula.

Rationale

Running Minnesota’s complex education finance system requires a high level of overhead both for MDE, and for districts and schools across the state.

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