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INTERVIEW

No Excuses, No Exceptions: Governor Mark Dayton's Vision for Public Education in Minnesota

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No Excuses, No Exceptions:

Governor Mark Dayton's Vision for Public Education in Minnesota

Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton has devoted nearly his entire career to serving his home state; since his start in government and politics as an aide to United States Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN), he has worked at nearly all levels of state government and represented Minnesota as a United States senator.

But Governor Dayton's first job out of college was teaching ninth graders in a New York City public school. That experience provided him with firsthand knowledge of the enormity of the challenges that teachers face, and has led him to make education a top priority for his state from his first day in office as governor. During his gubernatorial campaign, Dayton pledged to increase funding for K-12 education every year in office, "no excuses, no exceptions." Making good on that promise has not been easy; when he first took office in 2011, the state of Minnesota faced a \$5 billion budget deficit and owed the public schools nearly \$3 billion. Nonetheless, Governor Dayton has consistently and successfully fought to increase funding for key priorities, such as universal all-day kindergarten and reading assistance programs to support early literacy.

Today, Minnesota has repaid its debt to the public schools, and since 2011 has invested over \$1.4 billion in new funds to public education. The state has seen improvements in student outcomes; on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—commonly known as The Nation's Report Card—Minnesota ranked first in the nation for fourth-grade math, and improved from 22nd to 10th on fourth-grade reading. Despite these gains, Governor Dayton is determined to continue his focus on changing the landscape of public education in Minnesota.

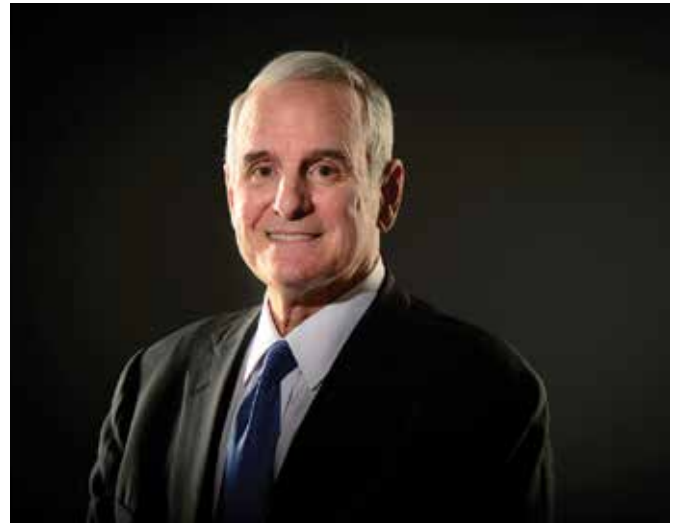
In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim and DMC Senior Associate Peter Gilchrist, Governor Dayton discusses his vision for public education and reflects on his priorities for Minnesota in the years ahead.

You began your career as a teacher and have said that teaching was one of the hardest jobs you've ever had. Why was that experience so difficult?

My first job after I graduated from college was as a public school teacher teaching ninth-grade general science on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I started teaching after a very brief summer training program that provided me with the credits required by the New York City Board of Education. The training was very basic, and certainly not adequate for the challenges that I would face. I was teaching a very diverse group of students; there were at least four different languages being spoken, and there was a significant immigrant population. As part of my training, I had spent the summer living with a family in a public housing project, and that gave me a good sense for the types of challenges my students were living with outside of school.

My students were ninth graders, so they could size up new teachers pretty well. On my first day, I just started teaching the way I had been taught and I launched into a monologue. I remember that first day: my students looked at me the way a pack of hungry lions would size up a gazelle. On the second day, some girls in my second-period class started to chat. I asked them to please quiet down, and they just ignored me. A veteran teacher had given me some advice the previous day: "If all else fails, tell them you're going to write a letter home to their parents, and that'll get them back in line." Not knowing what else to do, I told the girls that I was going to write a letter home to their parents. One of the girls looked up at me defiantly and said, "You write a letter home and I'll wipe my ass with it, and then I'll give it to my mother and she'll wipe her ass with it." So that was my introduction to teaching.

My classes were pretty out of control during the first couple months; I remember scrambling like mad every day to prepare lesson plans and devise new ways of engaging the students. I was fortunate that as a science teacher, I could incorporate a lot of experiments into my teaching to make it more participatory. But I still say that teaching was the toughest job I ever had until becoming governor.



Governor Mark Dayton

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How did that experience shape your vision for public education?

My time in the classroom taught me so much about what it takes to be a teacher. I think there are a lot of policy makers out there who have no real understanding of what life is like in a classroom. My teaching experience stamped itself indelibly into my consciousness, and I always look at education from that perspective. I've been in a couple hundred schools and probably a couple thousand classrooms in Minnesota over the course of my career, and I have seen firsthand the challenges our teachers face—much more difficult and complex →

than what I faced in New York so many years ago. Here in Minnesota, we have students speaking over 100 different languages and dialects, and students coming from all over the world; some have never been in a school or haven't been in a school for a number of years.

Has this personal experience shaped your perspective on the role of teachers in the efforts to improve education? Some of your neighboring states—Wisconsin, for example—have taken a very different approach to working with teachers, and have tackled collective bargaining issues.

I came into office after two decades of very different political leadership in Minnesota. Teachers had been blamed for everything despite the complexity of the problems they were facing. Meanwhile, real-dollar funding had been consistently cut. Problems were mounting, resources were diminishing, and teachers and schools had become the scapegoats. I approach education from my experience as a new teacher with 32 ninth graders, and without the resources and the support I needed to be successful. When I look at issues like collective bargaining, tenure, or seniority rights, I see structural fixes that are not directly related to improving student achievement. I believe that teachers' voices need to be heard, and that they need to have a seat at the table. My approach is to listen to what teachers say they need to be successful, let their voices guide our policy, and then work with the legislature to find the resources to provide teachers the tools that they need.

Can you speak about your “no excuses, no exceptions” promise to increase funding for education?

It has been very important to me to keep my campaign

promise to increase the funding for K-12 education every year, in real dollars, with no excuses, no exceptions. When I came into office, the state was facing a \$5 billion deficit and had been borrowing from the schools, owing the schools \$2.8 billion. So I'm very pleased that we have been able to get the schools paid back and that I have been able to keep my promise to increase funding for K-12. And a lot of the money provided to the school districts has been unrestricted so districts can use it as they think best in terms of their particular needs.

We still have a long way to go. We have all-day kindergarten now, which I think is crucial to improving test scores and closing disparities. Every school district except for one charter school district is providing all-day kindergarten. And, in our first year of all-day kindergarten, we have a 99.6% participation rate across the state. Next, we are trying to get funding for all-day preschool; we were not successful this year, but I'll keep working on that during my three remaining legislative sessions. We did increase funding for scholarships for early childhood programs, which is another part of the overall strategy to close the achievement gap before it even begins.

Speaking of overall strategy, can you talk about the seven-point plan “Better Schools for a Better Minnesota,” which you unveiled early in your first term? How did you determine the seven priorities?

All of the management books they sell at the airport seem to have either a seven or an eleven-point approach, right? I like to joke that we have a seven-point plan because I couldn't think of another four. In reality, we had a long list of objectives. Brenda Cassellius, whom I appointed commissioner of education in 2011 when I took office, initially came to me with a 21-point plan.

Governor Dayton's Biographical Timeline



1969

Graduated from Yale University; Division 1 hockey player



1969–1971

Taught science at New York City Public Schools



1971–1975

Worked in youth counseling and as a social service administrator in Boston



1975

Joined staff of Senator Walter Mondale



1977–1978

Acting Commissioner of Minnesota Department of Economic Development



1978

Founder, Minnesota Project

Commissioner Cassellius spoke about her 21-point list of objectives when we interviewed her back in 2011 for *The District Management Journal*.

We spent time looking at that list and decided we wanted to select and focus on a manageable number of priorities, but they needed to be broad enough in scope.

I see education as a continuum—from early childhood through post-secondary. I wanted to make sure that our priorities reflect that, and are as seamless as possible. The key is to make sure that preschool connects with kindergarten and elementary school, and then that junior high leads into high school and beyond. We need to start very early with our students, and we need to focus on their developmental needs to enable them to be successful in society. As students move through that continuum, we need to make sure that we focus on providing the particular kinds of education that will prepare students for jobs that will give them a real future in life.

About a year ago, I attended a Microsoft seminar, and they said that they have 2,600 vacancies for people with computer science degrees and experience. These jobs pay salaries of over \$100,000—up to \$200,000 with benefits—and they can't fill them. It breaks my heart that these opportunities are out there, and yet students are dropping out of school. Obviously, students have to have the interest and aptitude to pursue these opportunities, but I keep thinking that if students stayed in school and applied themselves, they would see how incredibly bright the future can be. The challenge is that there is a disconnect between the opportunities that are out there and what many of our students believe is their potential, based on their life experiences. That is why I believe that providing that continuum is so important.

I see education as a continuum—from early childhood through post-secondary. I wanted to make sure that our priorities reflect that, and are as seamless as possible.

Students need to be able to move through that continuum and continue to develop their abilities and broaden their scope of understanding of the possibilities that are out there for them.

What has surprised you as you set out to put this plan in place? For example, were there any aspects of the plan that received greater pushback than you were expecting?

I was surprised to learn how terribly far behind Minnesota was in early childhood education when compared to other states. We consider ourselves fairly advanced in how we prioritize education, but I found that states like Oklahoma and Georgia already had all-day kindergarten; Oklahoma, I believe, has had all-day kindergarten and pre-K for about fifteen years. When we started out, there was strong opposition from the Republican-dominated House to providing any early childhood funding. There was a level of ideological extremism that you just couldn't believe should be a part of education policy-making in the 21st century. There were legislators →



1983–1986

Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Energy and Economic Development



1987

Founder, Vermillion Investment Company



1990–1994

Elected and served as Minnesota State Auditor



2001–2007

Elected and served as United States Senator



2011–Present

Elected and serving as 40th Governor of Minnesota



Governor Mark Dayton and Minnesota Commissioner of Education Brenda Cassellius (center) greet a student.

questioning our motives for educating students, considering it a form of government intrusion. In fact, we had to work with a few members of the Conference Committee in the legislature to help us devise a back-door approach to get just \$4 million in early childhood scholarships for the entire state. But today, we are debating whether or not to increase the funding—and now, the amount we are talking about is \$100 million in scholarships, so there has been a very rapid increase in awareness as well as support.

What do you think has led to such a significant shift?

The business community deserves a lot of credit. There’s an organization called the Minnesota Business Partnership that really spearheaded the campaign to raise awareness about the importance of funding early childhood education. They have a program called Parent Aware that really wants to ensure that quality education and quality childcare are part of the childcare programs around the state. When they got behind us, that gave us a lot of momentum.

The challenge, however—which became clear during the last legislative session—is that funding for initiatives like early childhood education has become an “either-or” debate. There are a lot of people who support the business community but have a great deal of antipathy toward the public schools, and so they want to isolate the early childhood experience from the public schools; for some, the push for early childhood funding in public education is seen as part of a Democratic Party plot to bring more teachers into the teachers’ unions by having early childhood providers become public school teachers. At the same time, some of the current early childhood and childcare providers are opposed to full-day pre-K because they don’t want to lose all the four-year-old students to a different system.

My argument is that the earlier we can get a child to a quality childcare program—especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the better off they will be. So let’s have both approaches: let’s have, from the first few months up to age three, quality childcare with a quality early childhood education component, and then let’s have all-day preschools for four-year-olds and all-day kindergarten for five-year-olds. That’s the kind of continuum we need to establish, and if adults would stop letting these debates keep students from getting the benefits they need, we would get a lot farther a lot faster.

RECENT STUDENT OUTCOMES

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA

1st in Nation
in fourth-grade math
on 2013 NAEP exam

68%
of students matriculated
to college in 2014*

Improved from
22nd to 10th
in nation on fourth-grade
reading from 2011 NAEP
to 2013 NAEP

Among the largest
achievement gaps in
the nation between
white and black students:

33.8% of black
students proficient in
reading, compared to

81.2%
graduation rate in 2014,
improved from 75.5% in 2010*

67.5% of white
students in 2014

* Total number of students earning a regular high school diploma who enrolled in an institution of higher education within 16 months



MINNESOTA FAST FACTS

Schools, Staff, and Spending:

- **2,017** schools state-wide**
- **54,054** teachers (FTE)*
- **67,737** total licensed staff*
- Currently ranks **24th** in the nation in per-pupil spending

Switching gears, I wonder if you could talk a bit about how you approach accountability in Minnesota. As a U.S. senator, you voted against No Child Left Behind, and Minnesota was one of the first states to receive a waiver to build your own accountability system. How has this approach helped you make sure that schools are getting results?

We wanted to make sure that our accountability system was not solely based on test scores, and instead included multiple measures of growth. So, in 2013, we enacted the Worlds' Best Workforce legislation, which is built around our seven-point plan and five key goals of preschool readiness, third-grade literacy, high school graduation, college/career readiness, and closing achievement gaps. The legislation requires that every school district in the state have a strategic plan based on these goals and report on their progress. If a school district doesn't meet its goals within three years—two years from now—then the Commissioner can set aside 2% of that district's funding to focus more aggressively on meeting their goals.

One of the biggest hurdles has been changing our mindset around accountability in education. Under No Child Left Behind, our districts were forced to focus so intensely on year-to-year, short-term results. It's very difficult to pull back and think about the big picture and to take the long view about the work we are doing. The reality is that some of the systems we are putting into place could take several years to show really substantive gains; we will have incremental progress each year, but it could be five to eight years before we really see breakthrough results.

Minnesota's gains on the last round of NAEP tests demonstrate you've made progress during your first term.

Senator Gen Olson, Republican chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, Commissioner Cassellius, and I worked hard to fund literacy and early literacy initiatives. We have seen achievement gaps close by 10 points, and Minnesota moved from 22nd in the nation in reading overall to 10th in the nation in fourth-grade ELA. It is fairly well established that students who can read at or above grade level by the end of third grade are on track to be successful, while students who cannot will continue to struggle. Once again, it's that all-important continuum.

Minnesota ranks 24th among all states in per-pupil spending on education. ... Meanwhile, we rank 11th among all states in per-capita income—so we are investing less than our capacity.

I've seen a number of schools in Minnesota that, on their own, adopted strategies such as a "one-minute read aloud" at the beginning of second or third grade so they could tell if students are on level, and then provide individual or small group intervention for the students who struggle. They were able to have the resources to devote to that effort for the whole year, and the gains were really impressive, even astonishing. So our focus has been to provide those resources state-wide. We have a program called the Reading Corps that enters schools to provide support for reading instruction, and we are working hard to make sure that second- and third-grade teachers, especially those in more remote parts of the state, are aware of and in tune with these resources. Commissioner Cassellius set up regional centers around the state to help reach out to schools and promote these opportunities. Today, two-thirds of our schools benefit from some sort of a reading assistance program. With the new funding, we have over 1,600 tutors working with our youngest learners, including preschoolers. In addition, we have incentive aid, additional revenue for schools to increase student proficiency at third grade and sustain it at fourth grade; all of the additional money is invested directly into the schools' literacy programs, coaching, and professional learning.

Efforts like that around early literacy take bipartisan cooperation, which can be challenging in a difficult negotiating environment, but this was an example of an early win. Overall, we have good bipartisan support that education is important, even if we disagree in terms of what programs we should prioritize. →

Student Demographics: 857,039 students overall**

- American Indian/Alaskan Native: **20,268** (2.4%)
- Asian/Pacific Islander: **61,862** (7.2%)
- Hispanic: **71,849** (8.4%)
- Black: **98,595** (11.5%)
- White: **604,465** (70.5%)

- ELL: **70,779** (8.3%)
- Special Education: **128,088** (14.9%)
- Free/Reduced-price Lunch: **328,502** (38.3%)

* 2013-2014 ** 2014-2015

We know that there is a lot of work ahead. We are trying to create a continuous improvement model, because we're on a journey, not a sprint.

Minnesota was recently ranked the number-one state in the nation for children's well-being by the Children's Defense Fund. Your response was that it's not enough. Why isn't it enough, and what will you prioritize during your second term?

I am very proud of our national standing, but I don't want us to act as if that's enough, because we know that there are still huge deficits, which the report by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) highlighted. For example, we still have persistent achievement gaps, and pre-K enrollment is too low. We need to continue to invest in programs that we know can help address some of the challenges our kids face; this means continuing to expand funding for, and access to, early childhood education. I know that some of my opponents will say that we have done



Governor Dayton in the classroom.

enough and that it would be better to try to lower taxes, but our current numbers suggest that we could have a budget surplus of over \$1 billion. So, from my perspective, if we are going to look at taxes, we first need to make sure that there is equitable funding for education so that we can address the deficits we saw in the CDF report.

What advice or suggestions would you have for other governors on how to replicate some of the success that you've had?

First of all, I think it is appropriate for Minnesota to be modest. I believe that we have been successful given the grim budget picture we faced at the start, with a \$5 billion deficit during my first legislative session. We now get pushback that we have invested so much money into education recently and that we have done more than enough.

However, if you look at recent U.S. census data, Minnesota ranks 24th among all states in per-pupil spending on education. What that means is that since Commissioner Cassellius and I started, we have moved from the bottom third of all states to the middle third. Meanwhile, we rank 11th among all states in per-capita income—so we are investing less than our capacity. If we were making an effort commensurate with our fiscal capacity, we should rank 11th in per-pupil spending and should rank similarly in other measures as well, and we don't currently. While I'm certainly glad if others are able to learn from Minnesota, I don't want to presume that we are a model others should emulate.

I'm focused on what Minnesota still needs to do to achieve. During the first two years of my first term, the focus was really on "righting the ship," with respect to the approach to funding schools and revamping our department of education to better serve teachers and districts. We have seen progress, and we should celebrate the incremental wins, but we know that there is a lot of work ahead. We are trying to create a continuous improvement model, because we're on a journey, not a sprint. And we want to embed this for the whole state. ♦

7-point plan

1 Funding for the Future

- Invest in early childhood: No cuts to pre-K programs such as Head Start, ECFE, or Community Education; secured \$4 million in scholarships for early childhood programs for at-risk children in the 2011 legislative session.
- All-day kindergarten: Provided additional flexibility for school districts which may be used for all-day K programs.
- Establish Governor's Commission of Better School Funding: A bipartisan workgroup of experts provided a report to the Governor in May 2011.
- Invest in strategies that close the achievement gap and target resources to the classroom:
 - Minnesota's new accountability system, as outlined in the NCLB waiver, will allow school districts and the state to allocate resources to schools with greatest need.
 - Protected Integration Revenue Program funding through 2013.
 - Protected compensatory funding and linking of that funding.
 - Added \$50 each year of biennium and increased funding by \$132 million.
 - Protected special education growth factor of 4.6 percent or \$48 million.

2 Better Early Childhood Education

- Expand K-12 system into a comprehensive pre K-12 system: The new Office of Early Learning will align early learning initiatives across agencies to provide for seamless support of high-quality early education.
- A new Children's Cabinet and Early Learning Council will bring heightened focus to early learning state-wide.
- Implement clearly defined school readiness standards: Submitted broadly supported Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge application, which clearly defines our early learning focus to provide high-quality early learning in Minnesota.

3 Raise the Bar; Close the Gap

- Set accountability targets to close achievement gaps: A new school report card and web-based data center will report achievement targets for schools and districts.
- Enacted English Learner (WIDA) standards to provide additional support for English Language Learners.

4 Reading Well by Third Grade

- Launch State-wide Literacy Campaign: Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the State Literacy Team are developing a literacy framework that will provide guidance to districts wishing to create their own local literacy plans.
- Beginning in October, MDE is offering a monthly Read Well by Third Grade professional learning series for district and school leaders.
- Secured Literacy Aid to reward schools for third-grade reading results and third-to-fourth-grade growth.

5 Support Teaching for Better Schools

- Passed Alternative Certification for Licensure Bill.
- Passed Principal Evaluation Bill.
- Passed Teacher Evaluation Bill.
- Race to the Top will define highly qualified training for pre-K teachers.

6 Better Testing for Better Results

- New online assessments will be computer-adaptive and can be administered up to three times a year.
- NCLB waiver will provide a new multiple-measure-based accountability model.

7 A Department that Provides Educational Leadership and Support

- Restructured the agency to create the Office of Early Learning, Office of Student Support, and Office of Educator Excellence.
- Launched an accessible and user-friendly website in December 2011.
- Shifted mission to reflect agency-wide goals of offering strategic support and technical assistance to teachers, schools, and districts.