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INTERVIEW

Standing Up for Students, Teachers, and Schools: The Education Legacy of Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton

Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.25, Spring 2019

We always took those problems that real Minnesotans told us were the issues and barriers to getting a great education, and then we tried to find the solutions.

Standing Up for Students, Teachers, and Schools

The Education Legacy of Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton

Governor Mark Dayton was Minnesota's 40th chief executive, serving two terms in office from 2011 to 2019. His tenure as governor capped a long and distinguished career in state and national politics, which began with his serving as a legislative aide to U.S. Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN), and included later serving as U.S. senator for Minnesota from 2001 to 2007.

Over the course of his eight years in office, Governor Dayton achieved a great deal on a wide range of priorities. He helped bring the state's fiscal house back into order after inheriting a \$6 billion budget deficit. Over the ensuing years, he presided over strong growth in the economy and oversaw significant achievements in a number of areas—including leading the effort to build a new football stadium. But, having spent two years teaching science at a New York City public high school early in his career, Governor Dayton held education as a central priority throughout his career as a public servant. As governor he pursued a strategic and comprehensive vision to change the landscape of public education in Minnesota.

Governor Dayton focused on increasing access to a great education for every child in Minnesota, regardless of where they live or their economic circumstances. His commitment to equitable opportunities and outcomes led him to push Minnesota to increase funding for early childhood through 12th grade (E-12) education by \$2 billion over eight years, invest in early childhood education and fairer school funding, and provide support for the higher education system. Since 2011, Minnesota's graduation rates have increased to record levels, test scores and student achievement have been among the highest in the nation, and, although further progress is needed, the achievement gap has shrunk.

District Management Journal had the opportunity to interview Governor Dayton early in his tenure for our fall 2015 feature, "No Excuses, No Exceptions: Governor Mark Dayton's Vision for Public Education in Minnesota." At the time, the Governor shared with us his insights based on his administration's work to improve public education in the state. Following his 2019 departure from office, Governor Dayton was generous enough to speak with *DMJ* again. In this edited interview with DMGroup CEO John J-H Kim, Governor Dayton discusses his strategic efforts to pursue education priorities in office, his views on the role of the state in supporting education, and the legacy and accomplishments of his administration.

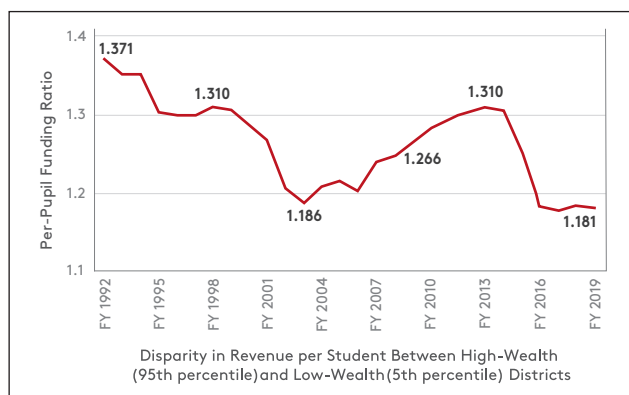


Governor, what do you consider your greatest accomplishments in the realm of education? What do you consider to be the legacy you're leaving behind in your state's education system?

I think our success was in our work to improve the quality of education overall. When we started, the funding for K-12 or E-12 education had been significantly reduced by my predecessor. We have a lot of great teachers in Minnesota, but without the resources, our schools had to cut back on curriculum, electives, and everything else. So, we empowered teachers and other educators to be successful by giving them the resources to succeed. We increased E-12 funding by almost \$2 billion over eight years, and we raised per-pupil funding by about \$2,500.

And then, of course, we did some really strategic things to improve equity. We altered the funding formula to close the funding gap between rural and urban districts. In the eight years before I took office, the funding equity gap between metro and rural schools grew by 49%. We brought the funding disparity between low-wealth school districts and high-wealth districts down from 31% to 18% (*Exhibit 1*). We also increased the focus on early childhood education, which is key to improving quality overall, closing the achievement gap, and improving equity.

Exhibit 1 REVENUE DISPARITY BETWEEN HIGH- AND LOW-WEALTH DISTRICTS, 1992-2019(e)



Source: Minnesota Department of Education, November 2017.

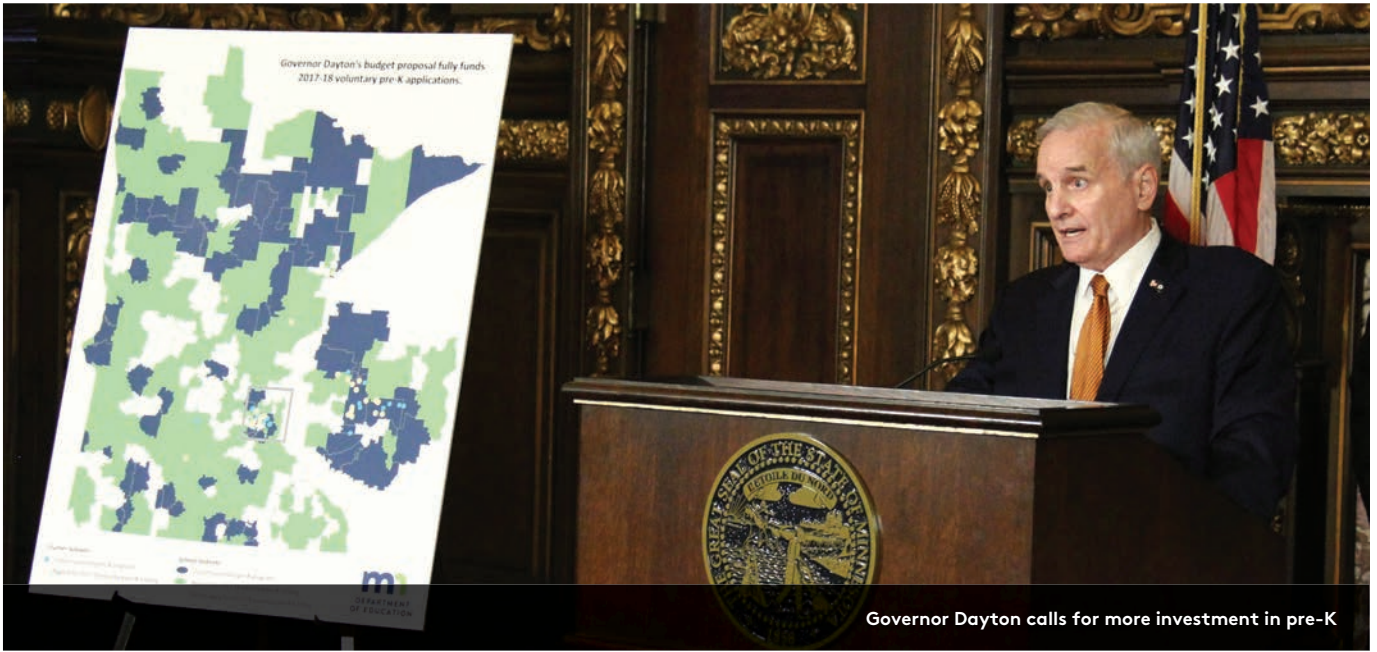
What we tried to say was that *funding is actually reform*. Funding education was the biggest reform, because for years schools had been underfunded. The statement we were trying to make to teachers, to principals, to superintendents, and to school boards was: we're behind what you're trying to do. We're on the same team, and

Better Schools for a Better Minnesota

A 7-Point Plan for Achieving Excellence

- 1. Funding Education for the Future:** Invest in early childhood and strategies to close the achievement gap, targeting resources to the classroom; establish a Governor's Commission on Better School Funding.
- 2. Better Early Childhood Education:** Target all-day kindergarten, expand into a comprehensive pre-K-12 system, and implement clearly defined school readiness standards.
- 3. Raise the Bar – Close the Gap:** Set accountability targets to close achievement gaps and establish a Governor's Award for Excellence in Education and Achievement Gap Innovation Fund.
- 4. Reading Well by 3rd Grade:** Launch a statewide literacy campaign, set school accountability targets to ensure all students are reading well by Grade 3, and adopt pre-K-3 literacy standards.
- 5. Support Teaching for Better Schools:** Establish alternative pathways to teacher licensure that maintain quality, a statewide teacher performance evaluation and development system with support networks, and early childhood teacher observation and development.
- 6. Better Testing for Better Results:** Develop assessments for learning that measure growth, establish a Test Reduction Task Force, and examine new, fair accountability measures based on growth.
- 7. A Department of Education That Provides Educational Leadership and Support:** Reposition Minnesota Department of Education to support teachers, schools, and districts; reauthorize Statewide Early Childhood Advisory Council and reestablish Children's Cabinet; and charge Commissioner of Education with leadership of early childhood initiatives.

Source: Minnesota Department of Education.



we're going to put additional resources toward your success and show additional commitment on our part. We're an ally. We're with schools. We're truly an ally in this undertaking, rather than a barrier or an obstacle. We're not going to sit in judgment of you and just ideologically say you're doing everything badly, because we don't have another agenda, whether it's charter schools, busting the teachers' union, or other ways the right-wing politics of anti-public education really poison the well. We wanted to communicate a purity of effort and a consistency of effort and support.

It's about respecting the teacher, changing the dialogue around the profession, and letting teachers know that we're partners. Minnesota, over the past eight years, avoided a lot of labor strife—now you see this in West Virginia, Colorado, and California. Teachers are marching and striking in those states because there's this rancor and this sense of disharmony, whereas I think that we really stood out by saying, "We're there with you." That's why

we didn't see all of this kind of rancor here in Minnesota. And, because we invested in quality, we've seen results. Our graduation rate is the highest on record, and the graduation-rate gap between black and white students is down by almost 30%. Our students lead the nation in ACT college entrance exam scores, and we're leaders in STEM benchmarks, as well.

When you first came into office, you had an ambitious seven-point plan, "Better Schools for a Better Minnesota," that laid out your top education priorities. Can you tell us about some of the outcomes of your efforts and some of the challenges you faced in implementing the plan?

We had the seven-point plan, but there were many smaller initiatives within that—convenings and task forces that we did over the past eight years. So, for example, we provided small-schools revenue right away in 2011, which gives about \$16 million in additional revenue to schools with fewer than 960 pupils in more than 160 districts. We

Governor Dayton's Biographical Timeline

 <p>1969 Graduated from Yale University; Division 1 hockey player</p>	 <p>1969–1971 Taught science at New York City Public Schools</p>	 <p>1971–1975 Worked in youth counseling and as a social service administrator in Boston</p>	 <p>1975 Joined staff of Senator Walter Mondale</p>	 <p>1977–1978 Acting Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Economic Development</p>	 <p>1979 Founder, Minnesota Project</p>
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provided sparsity revenue—additional revenue for small and isolated schools, because they have necessarily small, costly education programs, and they can't increase the number of students without making students travel an unacceptable distance or time. So, we funded more than \$27 million in sparsity revenue to over 100 districts, with the largest amounts usually going to districts that are relatively small in enrollment and large in geographic area.

We made some movement on special education, because we heard from districts about the cost burden of providing that. We looked at transportation for some of our larger districts that had larger and longer routes for kids. And we expanded early childhood education opportunities and child care. That was a big thing in some of our rural areas, because there were child-care deserts. So, we prioritized those schools that had no childcare by their school to get school-based funding for preschool. Those are some examples. It is very complex when you have suburban, urban, rural, and very rural areas, and so that was always top of mind. We always took those problems that real Minnesotans told us were the issues and barriers to getting a great education, and then we tried to find the solutions.

Let's talk specifically about one of your seven priorities: early childhood education. Can you tell us how you got people to prioritize early childhood education and what some of the outcomes have been?

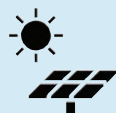
All-day kindergarten is something we started, as well as School Readiness Plus (a new early learning program for four-year-old children who demonstrate one or more risk factors), early learning scholarships, and voluntary pre-kindergarten, which was something that I wish we could have expanded more and provided statewide. Even so, we made some significant progress in making that early-education opportunity available to kids before they started kindergarten. We invested \$326 million in our youngest students across the state. Over 29,000 kids now

“We always took those problems that real Minnesotans told us were the issues and barriers to getting a great education, and then we tried to find the solutions.”

have access to early learning programs and early learning scholarships, and thousands are in pre-K or School Readiness Plus programs. When we started, only about half of students were in all-day kindergarten, and a lot of the families that were enrolled were paying thousands of dollars per year. Now, almost every district provides all-day kindergarten, and it's free.

The last time we spoke in 2015, you highlighted your efforts to close the racial achievement gap in Minnesota. What was your approach to that issue, and what have been the outcomes?

Well, there's deservedly very serious concern in Minnesota, because we consistently rank in the top in terms of ACT scores and other measures of student proficiency—our students rank very well—but the disparity between kids of color and white kids is significant—one of the worst in the country. Even though all groups have increased their average scores, including black students, Hispanic students, and students from many other backgrounds, the achievement gap still remains.



1983–1986
Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Energy and Economic Development



1987
Founder, Vermillion Investment Company



1990–1994
Minnesota State Auditor



2001–2007
United States Senator



2011–2019
40th Governor of Minnesota

And that's again where early childhood comes in as one of the keys; I think most experts on education agree that early childhood is one of the keys to closing the achievement gap. All-day kindergarten, as I said, was crucial. And then just trying to improve the quality of education. If we give schools the resources to tailor instruction and services to the needs of their students, they're obviously going to be more successful improving quality overall, as opposed to when you cut back, and they're forced to cut back on special services and the special attention that needs to be provided to improve the chances for those groups to catch up.

I concluded, after eight years of trying to close the achievement gap, that there are numerous factors beyond school that impact achievement and opportunity—factors like quality of housing, lack of quality housing, or even lack of housing itself. The number of kids in some of our urban schools who are basically homeless, or are spending the night in homeless shelters is staggering—and God-awful. And we wonder why they don't have the ability to come to school and focus on their studies when they're wondering where they're going to be sleeping that night. The violence in the streets and the neighborhoods also impacts their sense of security and wellbeing. And then there's nutrition. There is a whole combination of factors that makes the job of the school, where the kids are spending six or seven hours a day, that much more difficult. So, we did Homework Starts with Home,¹ and made efforts on housing, as well as mental health supports, and home visiting. Even though we can do things on the in-school side, like fund schools and focus on teacher quality, there still are outside factors we need to address.

Governor, you mentioned earlier that one of the challenges in Minnesota is that it is such a large state with very rural areas, especially as you go up north. Can you discuss the approach you took to addressing such a diverse set of needs?

There were a number of things. I traveled all over the state with Dr. Brenda Cassellius, commissioner of education, and we went to hundreds of schools. We said, "Let's go out and talk to real Minnesotans and talk to teachers. Let's go out and find out what's going on in our schools and find out what they really need." And we brought educational leaders into the discussion about policies that impact them. A lot of what we heard was around trying to work on teacher supply, so we put grants together for that. We changed our licensing system to a tiered licensing system. That helped clarify licensing for in- and out-of-state teachers and created tiers for teachers with different levels of qualification, and it helped make it easier to hire and license teachers in technical fields and shortage areas.



Governor Dayton and Commissioner Cassellius welcome students

And then, we have our North Star accountability system, which recognizes schools for success in academic achievement, progress toward English language proficiency, academic progress, four-year and seven-year graduation rates, and consistent attendance. But North Star also identifies schools for support and publicly reports the data; in 2013 we invested \$2 million to establish Regional Centers of Excellence to support those schools, which was really crucial. The Centers of Excellence provide support more regionally and even locally to schools and districts, especially smaller ones in more outlying areas of the state. They have specialists in every subject—math, reading, special education, English language development, equity, graduation support, support to help districts with implementation and data analysis, leadership trainings, professional development, principal leadership, academic standards—all kinds of supports these districts need. In the first year alone, which was 2014-15, specialists from the centers spent 13,000 hours serving 78 schools, and around 65% of the underperforming schools showed improvement.

Switching gears a little bit, you previously served as a U.S. senator and worked as a school teacher. Could you tell us how those two experiences influenced the way you approached your work on education as a governor?

My first job out of college was two years teaching at a public school in New York City—ninth-grade general science. I've always felt that was the toughest job I ever had up until being governor. It gave me a healthy respect for the skill it takes to be an effective teacher and also the challenges that they face, which have only increased since I worked as a teacher about 50 years ago. I think many people, especially those serving in the legislature, have a very poor understanding of the complexity of modern education and lack appreciation for all that is being done there.

As a teacher in New York, I learned about the challenges and opportunities that come with a diverse student body. In Minnesota today, you've got a very different student body from the past. In our rural areas, the populations remain mostly unchanged—meaning largely white, middle class—and they provide the basis for our very successful ACT testing. But there is a new influx of people from other states and other countries—bringing diversity of religion, diversity of language.

All of these are complicating factors that were certainly present in New York when I was teaching, but were virtually unknown in Minnesota at that time. Now they are so prevalent. And those factors of diversity really impact the ability of established, mostly white teachers, who've been in the profession for 10, 20, 30 years, to deal with very different student bodies and the very different problems that they bring into the classroom. The school district with the largest percentage of students of color in Minnesota is Saint Paul, and the second is Worthington, way down in the southwestern corner of the state. When I was growing up, diversity in Worthington was virtually nonexistent. So, we've got a whole new constellation of challenges that professionals in both education and in social and human services are all adjusting to, and now they're getting more experience with it, but in the beginning it was a big shift.

In your view, what is the role government ought to play in education and education funding? How can the government help school districts and others make adjustments so that all students receive a quality education and have a chance to succeed?

We need as a country to spend more money on education, especially given the diversity of our students now and the disparities in life circumstances of the American population. As a U.S. senator, I tried seven times in six years to get the Senate to keep the commitment they made when they passed the special education formula as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, which was for the federal government to pay 40% of the costs of special education. Actual funding was less than half of that when I was in the Senate.² And it would have cost \$30 million a year to fulfill the full 40% commitment—\$30 million is what we were spending on one month of the war in Iraq at the time—and I couldn't get that to first base in the Senate.

When I first ran for governor, we had the slogan, “No excuses, no exceptions.” That was a specific reference to how we increase state funding for education. Remember, in 2011, when we were fighting for funding and trying to pay back that \$6 billion deficit, the GOP was throwing every



Governor Dayton visits Westview Elementary School

single last reform there was on the table. They had teacher alternative certification. They had teacher LIFO. They had teacher evaluation tied to 35% test scores. I mean, you name the ALEC³ bills that were out there, and they were throwing them on the table. Minnesotans have valued education as a top priority for many years, and that support has traditionally been bipartisan. But again and again, we ran into Republican majorities in both the [Minnesota] House and Senate that were just absolutely fixated on reducing government spending and having no tax increases—as far as they were concerned, success was spending less money. It wasn't about doing anything more to improve areas like education. Any additional dollar going anywhere was something that they were ideologically averse to. So, we were just trying to get back to an even keel before we could even start to do some of the more creative and innovative approaches that we wanted to undertake.

As I'm recalling all of this, it sounds awfully basic, but it is basic. Educators understand there's some differences in this or that, or Common Core, or all these other phrases. But, basically, educators understand what they need to do to be successful, and they get feedback if they're not doing it, so they've got a strong incentive to be successful. Failing to give them the resources and the wherewithal to carry that out, and then to hold them “accountable,” whether it's the federal government or state legislature or whoever, is putting them in an impossible situation.

We tell ourselves that we're making all these commitments—and there's no question there's been a lot of really innovative, very sophisticated and successful education initiatives going on in Minnesota and around the country—but they're underfunded, and they're understaffed relative to the need, and we get what we pay for.

You opposed No Child Left Behind as a senator and were governor when ESSA was passed. To over-generalize, ESSA provides a greater level of accountability, authority, and responsibility to the states. Was placing that responsibility back on the states something that, from your standpoint, was welcome?

Most of the funding for education comes from the state, and I believe those who are paying the bills should have the right to set the basic standards. Again, Minnesota has fortunately set our standards consistently high for decades, so there is an expectation to provide a quality educational experience. Look at special education, where the federal government is funding less than 20% of costs (I think it got down to 13% at one point)—whereas they committed to fund 40%. Talk about hypocrisy. The federal government is telling you, the school district, how to operate, and they won't provide the resources to even fulfill the legal obligation they put on themselves over 40 years ago. If our military budget was less than half funded, we'd hear a national outcry. Failing to fund special education puts an enormous burden on the school districts to pick up those unfunded costs, especially given the obligations for IEPs, which are good, which we should have for every child. But when you don't have the resources, and you have a legal obligation to provide supports, you just really stifle the opportunities to be successful.

Governor, are there any thoughts or insights you would like to share with superintendents and district leaders around the country? From your perspective, what do district leaders need to focus on?

Well, I think superintendents do an amazing job and provide a major service to our communities. There is so much dysfunction in our society, and probably most of that is socioeconomic: the disparities, the widening gap in terms of income and opportunity, continue to increase. And then we say to the schools, "Now, you fix everything up." These kids come into the school every day with different needs, different languages—when I was teaching in New York City, there were four different languages, and I learned firsthand how hard it is to teach kids with a second language without that specific training. And now, in Minnesota, there are over 100 languages and dialects in our schools, so just that factor alone is so much more complicated, and challenging, and difficult. The first thing I want educators to understand is, from my standpoint, I understand how hard your job is and how difficult it is to make the kind of progress that we all want, how hard it is to achieve the kind of improvement in learning results that

“Most of the funding for education comes from the state, and I believe those who are paying the bills should have the right to set the basic standards.”

we want, given the complexity of the people who come to your school every day.

So part of this has to be defined in the context of what's possible and what the obstacles are. And then the focus needs to be on providing the resources, and it's a battle between the forces of inequity and the resources and attention to support our students' success and competitiveness in a world economy. If we're up against that battle, we need to increase the intensity of our efforts. We need to put more resources, more people, more dollars, more technology, everything that we have potentially available to gain the upper hand against those forces of ignorance and lack of success. I also hope that our education policies in Minnesota better reflect that view than they did when I started.

Governor, thank you. I think that's a powerful message for us and for our readers. Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us. ♦

NOTES

1. Homework Starts with Home is part of collective efforts in Minnesota to implement the initiative Heading Home: Minnesota's Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, established by the Minnesota Interagency Council on Homelessness. Under this initiative, at least 800 families and their school-age children will have access to stable, affordable housing, a critical platform for educational success.
2. A February 2018 letter from the National Council on Disability to President Donald Trump confirmed that the federal government still funds less than half of its original obligation, stating, "In 1975, Congress promised to cover 40 percent of the average cost to educate a child with disabilities. Congress later amended the law to say that the Federal Government would pay a 'maximum' of 40 percent of per-pupil costs. Today, the Federal Government pays less than half of what it originally promised in 1975." (National Council on Disability, "Broken Promises: The Underfunding of IDEA," February 7, 2018, https://ncd.gov/sites/default/files/NCD_BrokenPromises_508.pdf.)
3. ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, is a conservative nonprofit organization focused on drafting model legislation.