

TESTIMONY OF ROBERT E. ASTRUP, PRESIDENT
MINNESOTA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
TO THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
~~WEDNESDAY, FEB. 27, 1991~~
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am Bob Astrup, president of the Minnesota Education Association. I am very pleased to talk with you about the exciting challenges awaiting students and educators in the coming years.

The 46,000 members of our organization are concerned about how educational opportunities are provided for students today. We are eager to maintain Minnesota's fine quality education tradition and we look forward to planning, developing and debating important educational restructuring initiatives. We are concerned about how our school systems will be organized in the future to deliver the best possible education. House File 350, the bill we are discussing today, offers challenging proposals for action to restructure education. We applaud the initiative of the bill's authors -- Representatives Bob McEachern, Bob Vanasek, Ken Nelson, Jerry Bauerly and Becky Kelso -- in raising these proposals for what we anticipate will be thoughtful discussions.

Public education is at a crossroads. Many continue to tinker with the old system while others seek ways to significantly restructure schooling in Minnesota. Over the years we have worked together to promote quality reforms for our young people and many of these reforms have been successful. But there are greater challenges ahead. Previous initiatives have addressed discrete needs and specific programs. They have been implemented

on top of the structures we have known as "school." One lesson learned from all our efforts is that patching the old system is not enough. House File 350 offers several dramatic new views for public education in Minnesota as we seek new ways to help children learn and experience success -- and to translate those childhood successes into happy and productive adult lives.

Both the National Education Goals and Minnesota's Education Goals seek to reshape our school systems to provide more successful education opportunities for our youth. The Challenge 2000 document, which many of you have seen, views education as a whole, seeking to identify relationships among various programs and use resources wisely. I'm pleased to advise you that the goals and ideas included in these three reports are, essentially, endorsed by the MEA.

The United States has the lowest number of compulsory days of school attendance in the industrial world. We support Sections 6 and 18 of this bill, which provide incremental increases until the number of school days reaches 200 per year. At the same time, the committee must recognize that proportional increases in funding will be required to cover increased costs such as materials, salaries and transportation. And we all must understand that more of the same won't be good enough. Adding additional days of school without making fundamental changes in the way schools operate will not reform, restructure or redesign the effectiveness of our education system. I hope the committee will include in its discussions consideration of programs such as extended year calendars and year-round schools.

We are concerned about the language in Section 11 which would allow a school district to hire a "community expert" without first attempting to employ a licensed professional. Let me put it this way: "Telling" isn't teaching. Being a good pharmacist doesn't insure that the person will be a good science teacher. While liking young children is certainly a desirable trait, it doesn't insure that someone will be a great kindergarten teacher. Teachers are well-versed in the subject matter they teach. They also have developed skills necessary to understand how students learn and how best to design and implement instruction. We would be placing our children's future in jeopardy if we allowed persons who are inadequately prepared in the content and skills of teaching to teach our children. MEA is dedicated to supporting the Board of Teaching's requirements for persons to be well-prepared in both their course content and teaching skills. Our support for proper licensure is based on the desire for accountability and quality control. Neither is possible with a teaching staff that lacks the proper credentials to be in a classroom.

As districts work to use resources more wisely and efficiently, they may seek to share personnel resources. We agree with the provision in Section 12 which would allow districts to purchase or share the services of a superintendent.

Participatory decision making is the newest and most effective process we know for achieving excellence. In this area, we clearly lag behind progressive private enterprises. Some faculties across the nation have begun to implement creative

programs for students which address individual needs, integrate curriculum, and foster real learning communities. This can be accomplished if we establish a clear definition for the shared decision making process we implement in Minnesota schools. The Task Force on Education Organization's December 1990 report, "A Strategic Plan for Minnesota Public Education," lists these principles for shared decision making:

1. The person doing the job is the expert.
2. Strategic information flows down and operational information flows up.
3. Decisions are made at the "lowest" level possible.
4. One cannot participate in decision making outside his/her realm of accountability, authority and information.
5. Authority and accountability are always commensurate.

Educators must have the time and authority to plan educational challenges for students in the pursuit of designated outcomes. Shared decision making in Minnesota schools must enable educators to address the concerns involved in teaching, learning, curriculum, and setting a learning climate in the school. Understanding teaching strategies and methodologies requires professional expertise. These decisions must be made by licensed educators at the school building level and, therefore, we encourage you to rethink Section 15's proposals for participatory decision making as a significant tool in school restructuring.

However, community support, parental involvement and student input must be a part of other essential educational

decisions. Students, parents and community members must be shareholders in the process of restructuring schools. Teachers will be the first to tell you that cooperative efforts between home and school multiply the chances for a student's success. MEA currently provides training and materials that promote significant parental and community involvement in schools. We invite and encourage programs that broaden opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's educations.

While we believe this bill offers several innovative and exciting programs for our schools, we absolutely disagree with Section 16's intent to allow the creation of chartered schools. Chartered schools purport to broaden opportunities for students by working cooperatively with parents, educators and community leaders. I submit to you that this valuable sort of interaction and cooperation can, should and, indeed, already does exist in Minnesota today. At a time when educators and others maintain that only properly licensed persons should be teaching, the chartered school proposal would authorize use of "unlicensed public school educators". At a time when we seek the wisest and most cost-efficient manner of operating schools, the chartered school proposal would allow budgets that include travel expenses and consultant services. While many elementary teachers throughout this state still do not have adequate planning time, this proposal would include planning activities for chartered schools alone.

Change is never easy. Incentives must be provided to encourage communities to pursue significant educational reforms by

changing school district policies from those that favor a "watchdog" approach with tight controls to ones that encourage and support change and innovation. Cooperative action among all parties can insure that districts will be able to support change while remaining fiscally responsible.

Section 20 of this bill offers additional support for staff development programs in Minnesota. These funds will be important to the development of the teaching force as it moves through implementation of so many creative initiatives. Staff development committees at the school district level have been successful in planning programs which address the specific needs of that district or of individual schools. This process celebrates the shared decision making initiatives begun around the state and should not be encumbered by earmarking funds for state mandated programs.

Everyone in this room and, indeed, everyone in this state, wants the finest teachers possible in Minnesota classrooms. MEA certainly does. But we do not believe that excellence can best be gained by increasing the probationary period for new teachers, as Section 21 suggests. Instead we urge district administrators to use the procedures available to work with new teachers during their first few years on the job to identify strengths and build on them. We also invite the committee's review and support for House File 124, the Teacher Fair Dismissal bill, which encompasses true tenure reform.

Significant new opportunities for collaboration between professional educators and new teachers are presented in Section

22. In fact, adoption of this section would preclude the need for an extended probationary period, as the preceding section suggests. The peer review process offers the beginning of appropriate induction of new teachers into practice. Through site based decision making at each school peer review processes can be developed and the many aspects of teaching addressed. We caution all who take part that effective teaching cannot be isolated on a checklist or in a generic program, but must be tailored to meet the individual needs of students and teachers. With the stated intent of improving instructional effectiveness and guaranteed time provided for teachers to undertake their responsibilities as mentor teachers, the peer review process can be an important part of a statewide education improvement effort.

MEA could support a peer review process that vests appropriate authority with the licensed educators of the school to hire, review and support probationary teachers as well as to make decisions about annual employment. We are concerned about the supervisory and liability issues these responsibilities may raise. The officers and executive committee of the MEA have reviewed Sections 22 and 23 and will take these issues to the March meeting of the MEA Board of Directors.

We also believe the peer review process for tenured teachers could be a valuable program. Section 23 states this would be "an opportunity for professional growth" and we are delighted that the bill's authors recognize that teachers take very seriously the need to grow and learn in their chosen profession. Once again, we assert that excellence in teaching cannot be standardized.

Tenured teachers must have the opportunity to plan their professional development through their school's shared decision making process. Peer review can be an important part of this professional growth. However, Sections 22 and 23 have additional funding implications, including the need for substitute teachers and time for participation.

We also favor Section 30's provision to require teacher educators to work with elementary or secondary teachers to obtain periodic exposure to the K-12 classroom. As we all know, schools have changed greatly in the years since we were students. This provision insures that those who prepare our future teachers are preparing them for the schools of the future.

MEA reaffirms its commitment to appropriate licensure of the state's teaching force. The state licenses many occupations and professions in order to provide safe, superior service to Minnesota citizens. We rely on the state through its licensure requirements to monitor everyone from hair stylists to funeral directors, from lawyers to teachers. A fundamental constitutional responsibility of the state is to provide quality public education to its student citizens. Licensing its teachers is a critical aspect of that responsibility. If it is the intent of Section 31 to ignore the importance of licensure to the state's education system, we will oppose such efforts. We unequivocally oppose any proposals to eliminate the Board of Teaching. We support the need to improve teacher education and the consideration of incentives for the recruitment and training of minority teachers.

We favor the alternative preparation licensing for administrators program described in Section 32. It provides opportunities for persons to enter the field of education administration without compromising the skills needed to be an administrator. The intensive preparation program outlined in the proposal indicates that the persons licensed under this section would be qualified.

Periodic assessments or surveys are always useful in areas where we seek to improve. The evaluations by high school graduates and the opinion surveys of parents, students and district resident outlined in Sections 33 and 34 will provide some of the many tools needed in dynamic school restructuring.

Section 36 requires that any staff development plan include inservice experiences concerning outcome based education implementation. We support this provision, but there's more. In order for outcome based education to succeed, educators must develop new, collaborative skills. They must think in new, creative ways. And, these new skills and behaviors -- which should include conflict resolution, consensus building and problem-solving methods -- must be learned. We believe our schools must establish the necessary conditions to give all students the opportunity to be successful. Site based decision making must be a part of any training program for staff. As our schools undergo restructuring to better meet the needs of students, teachers and administrators will need to learn more about working in new and more cooperative environments.

If the intent of Section 37, which permits public libraries to be located in public schools, is to increase accessibility to materials and facilities, then we are supportive. However, we urge committee members to remember that persons employed as instructional media specialists in schools perform quite different functions than the regular public librarian. We believe that only licensed media specialists should be employed to work in school libraries.

We believe Section 38, which deals with payment for remedial instruction, exceeds the intent of this bill's mission statement. We must recognize that the goal of our public school system is not to prepare every child to go to college but, rather, to begin a process of lifelong learning and to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to be a productive member of society.

We believe it is entirely appropriate for the state board of education to review its rules for consistency, need and cost effectiveness and, therefore, support Section 42.

Section 43 offers a way to streamline the way we deliver education services in our state. By specifying three levels of organization -- the school district, an area education organization and a department of education with central and regional centers -- we can recognize savings not only in time and money but, also, in effectiveness, as we unravel a tangled and often incomprehensible organizational hierarchy. The end result is that a greater percentage of our educational resources will go directly for our children's education.

If we truly believe that learning is a lifelong process, we need to make sure our young people get a good start in life. The Way to Grow program, funded in Section 44, does just this. It stresses prenatal and preschool programs that provide the support and assistance parents need to help their children be ready for school.

Finally, we are pleased that the committee recognizes the important link between teachers and parents. Section 45, which provides funding for three pilot projects to place telecommunications equipment in schools, has our support. The use of telephones to communicate the good and bad news about a child's progress in school is not a revolutionary idea. But it is a good one. We urge the committee to consider that schools funded under this section also should look ahead and be prepared for the many different kinds of communications technology that will be available in the coming years.

Any proposals that seek to reform our education system must contain certain elements which are missing in this bill. We urge committee members to give serious consideration to adding the following items to House File 350.

First, we believe the state must have a vigorous licensing program, one which insures that every child in Minnesota will be taught by teachers who have demonstrated their capabilities in both subject matter and teaching skills. MEA stands four-square behind rigorous teacher preparation requirements, internships for beginning teachers, and responsible staff development programs that provide opportunities for experienced teachers to further

refine their skills. We are dedicated to supporting the Minnesota Board of Teaching in its enforcement of licensing requirements.

The increase in funds provided for staff development programs is encouraging. These additional funds will allow faculties at each school to design staff development programs which provide the skills necessary to implement participatory decision making and outcome based education. However, we are concerned with portions of House File 350 that establish important new programs without providing adequate funding. Peer review programs for both tenured and nontenured teachers and shared decision making initiatives are new and innovative ideas. They cannot succeed if essential resources, including time and money, are not provided.

Finally, this bill includes the beginnings of teacher empowerment, but we must go further. Reforming education into a participatory, outcome based system will establish many new responsibilities for educators. These reforms will meet the individual needs of each student only if educators may act with authority. Responsibility without authority is a prescription for failure.

Reform means many things to many people. But some elements of reform are essential. Every student in Minnesota has the right to expect adequately funded programs from early childhood through adult education. Every parent in Minnesota has the right to expect that students will have the opportunity to experience instruction planned and delivered by an appropriately trained and licensed teacher. Every teacher in Minnesota has the

right to exercise control and authority over instructional decisions for which they are responsible. And every person in Minnesota has the right to expect that the future is secure because today's students are developing skills that promote lifelong learning and responsible citizenship.

We look forward to working with members of this committee in the coming months and throughout the next several years as we develop and implement significant reform initiatives for public education.