

Legislating Education Accountability in Minnesota:
2002-2011

MPP Professional Paper

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Public Policy Degree Requirements
The Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs
The University of Minnesota

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August 11, 2011

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Introduction

It is difficult to underestimate the impact that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has had on U.S. education policy. NCLB greatly expanded the federal government's role in education, traditionally the domain of local school districts and the states. It required that all states implement standards, testing, school report cards, Adequate Yearly Progress, and sanctions for "failing" schools in order to continue to receive federal education funding. While the mandate was effective nationwide, each state's experience with the law has been unique, shaped by the existing education reforms and the myriad factors that influence state education policymaking.

Frederick Wirt and Michael Kirst describe state education policy as follows: "No such thing as state education policy exists; what does exist are differential state responses to common external and internal events working on the local political system" (1997, pg. 197). The goal of this paper is to document how Minnesota state policymakers responded to the passage of NCLB and to explore how influences on the state political system shaped that response. Minnesota policymakers could do little to change NCLB. However, numerous state-level education accountability decisions followed its passage and were influenced by forces within the state political system:

- **State actors:** From 2003 to 2010, activist Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty used the authority of his office and his alliance with business groups to advance standards-based reform and enthusiastically implement NCLB policies. His national political ambitions led him to tap policy issue networks to bring accountability ideas, like 8th grade algebra, to Minnesota.
- **Political environment:** Near-continuous state budget crises and a governorship and legislature divided along party lines created a political environment primed for conflict.
- **Political culture:** Minnesota's moralistic political culture has traditionally emphasized government as a source of common good, issues as the center of political debate and the involvement of citizens in public life. But the increasing polarization in moral values

between conservative and liberal state political actors created stark contrasts in education accountability debates, as in the debate over academic standards and the denial of Education Commissioner Cheri Yেকে's confirmation in 2004.

- **Values:** Legislators debated the relative importance of values of equity, quality, efficiency, and choice in accountability policy (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Even when there was agreement over the importance of a value, there was often disagreement over how it would best be advanced. For example, legislators on both sides of the high school GRAD math exit exam debate placed equity at the center of their arguments, but came to opposing conclusions on whether to suspend the exam.
- **Interest groups:** Education interest groups played a modest role in issues of accountability, with the statewide teachers' union and business groups the most engaged. The alliance of teachers with the Democratic party and business with the Republican party heightened partisanship around accountability issues with which these groups were involved, such as the Race to the Top federal education reform grant application.

While none of these factors fully explain the decisions made by legislators and the Governor on education accountability, together they shed light on a period marked by massive change.

This paper will start by providing a brief overview of the accountability movement in U.S. government institutions and in public education. It will then provide a timeline of changes to education accountability policy in Minnesota, beginning with the passage of NCLB in 2002 and ending with the close of the most recent legislative session in July 2011. Finally, it will analyze several of the forces that influenced legislative decisions about these policies.

Accountability in Government

“Accountability” in government can be defined as the responsiveness of those who exercise power to the people who authorize its use. The value of accountability is central to America's liberal democratic tradition, which holds that government should be responsive to the will of the electorate.

In the U.S. over the last several decades, the term “accountability” has come to be associated with a specific set of institutional reforms. Since the 1980s, government

accountability has been shaped by a movement known as “New Public Management” (NPM). NPM arose out of business management theory and neoliberal economic policies of the Reagan era, which sought to cut government spending and apply market principles to the public sector. NPM was to make government more efficient by shifting the management focus from inputs to outputs and outcomes, by giving workers and managers more flexibility from regulation, and by evaluating performance based on the measurement of results (Ravitch, 2010, p. 9; Gregory, 2003; Van Dooren, 2011; Soss et al., 2011). President Bill Clinton advanced NPM in the U.S. by starting his first term in office with the “Reinventing Government” initiative, which required all federal agencies to create strategic plans linked to outcome measures (Kettl, 1999).

As these reforms were integrated into public sector management, numerous critiques emerged, summarized well by Van Dooren (2011). First, NPM emphasizes quantifiable measures, but many goals of public policy can be difficult to quantify. This preoccupation with measurement can cause managers to lose sight of their most important objectives. Second, NPM relies on the work of professionals, but at the same time seems to mistrust these professionals. There is an implied need for control, for objective indicators that counterbalance professional judgment (p. 422). Third, the volume of data generated by a performance management system can overwhelm managers. Finally, there is an inherent conflict in NPM systems between measuring performance for the sake of improvement and measuring performance for the sake of punishment. For example, the act of requiring employees to share outcomes data can create an incentive to hide or alter unfavorable results for fear of repercussions (Gregory, 2003).

Accountability in Public Education

The NPM model has also influenced accountability in public education. Kirst (1990) traces the modern education accountability movement to 1970, when Associate U.S.

Commissioner of Education Leon Lessinger began applying ideas of cost accounting to education, exhorting schools to look not at inputs like units of time spent in class, but at the ability of students to perform certain tasks (p. 14). The accountability movement in education gained a sense of urgency with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education that warned of a decline in the quality of U.S. education, which threatened our country's economic competitiveness. The Commission advocated a suite of reforms, including improving the quality of high school curriculum (Ravitch, 2010, p. 27). The "standards-based systemic reform" movement grew out of the response to *A Nation at Risk*. It sought to establish challenging academic standards, test and report on these standards, and restructure governance to delegate the responsibility for meeting standards to schools and districts (Massell, Kirst, & Hoppe, 1997).

These standards-based reform strategies were embedded in national education policy with the passage of President Clinton's Goals 2000 bill and the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The Clinton-era laws required implementation of state academic standards in math and language arts, aligned assessments administered once in the 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12 grade spans, an evaluation of whether schools were meeting annual performance goals, called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and public reporting of results (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). While Goals 2000 was unevenly implemented across states, it accelerated the adoption of standards and performance-management reforms.

No Child Left Behind

The biggest boost to standards-based reform came with passage of the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act. President George W. Bush's signature education initiative, NCLB built upon Goals 2000 by requiring states to (USED, 2002):

- Reach a goal of 100% of students proficient in reading and math by 2014, as measured by state tests;
- Beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, annually assess all students in grades 3-8 and once in high school;
- Measure and report the proficiency of student “subgroups” defined by poverty, race, limited English proficiency (LEP) and disability on state tests in order to identify achievement gaps;
- Set statewide achievement objectives for each subgroup culminating in 100% proficiency by 2014;
- Determine school and district AYP based on whether student groups met achievement objectives, graduation rates, and other state-determined indicators;
- Impose increasing penalties on Title I schools that fail to make AYP for consecutive years in the same subject, including diversion of Title I Part A funds to prescribed purposes, school choice, provision of supplemental educational services (SES), and eventual restructuring;
- Beginning the 2002-2003 school year, publicize school and district report cards that include AYP status;
- Adopt challenging academic standards in science by the 2005-2006 school year, and administer assessments aligned to these standards beginning in the 2007-2008 school year at least once in grades 3-5, 7-8 and 10-12.

Unlike the 1994 reauthorization, NCLB gave USED the authority to penalize states that failed to implement the law on time by withholding Title funds.

Thus New Public Management-style reforms brought radical change to U.S. public schools by attempting to define, from the federal government’s perspective, the goals of schooling (proficiency in reading and math for all students), how learning would be measured (standardized tests), how results would be evaluated (AYP), and who would be held to account (schools, districts). NCLB abruptly shifted the power over these policies from the states, which hold constitutional responsibility over education, to the federal government. The trajectory of education accountability in Minnesota from 2002 to 2011 was entirely changed by NCLB.

What follows is a timeline of changes to Minnesota education accountability policies during this period and the key political events that surrounded them.

Timeline

January 8, 2002: President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), into law. Passage of NCLB did not generate much reaction in the Minnesota media. While both Minnesota U.S. senators Mark Dayton (DFL) and Paul Wellstone (DFL) voted against the bill, they did so because it failed to fully fund special education. In a *Star Tribune* story, Senator Wellstone said that the increased student testing in the bill “doesn't end up being at all onerous” because of changes made in conference committee ensuring states would use "multiple measures" to gauge school progress (Hotakainen, 2001).

To comply with the new requirements, staff at the state education department (then called the Department of Children, Families and Learning) began working on Minnesota's implementation plan, using the state's Profile of Learning standards as the basis, despite the controversy that surrounded the Profile standards.

April 2002: Minnesota House votes to repeal Profile of Learning; Senate narrowly upholds. At the same time DCFL was proposing to use the Profile of Learning to comply with NCLB, the Republican-controlled Minnesota House was passing a law to repeal the Profile.

The Profile of Learning was part of the Graduation Rule. Initiated in 1992, the Graduation Rule (1999 MN Rule Ch. 3501) laid out the knowledge and skills expected of Minnesota students for graduation and the performance measures that would be used to determine whether students were meeting those expectations. The Graduation Rule was divided between (1) Basic Standards in reading, writing and math, and (2) “higher academic standards” embodied in the Preparatory Standards in K-8 grade and the High Standards in 9-12 grade (Ch. 3501). To graduate, each student would be required to assemble his or her own “Profile of Learning” by demonstrating mastery of a certain number of High Standards through teacher-designed projects, assignments or tests (Davison et al., 1998).

Education scholars described the Profile of Learning standards as performance-based standards, rather than traditional content standards, that were grounded in constructivist education theory (Avery, Beach, & Coler, 2003). Content-based standards are described “in terms of the knowledge and skill that should be acquired,” whereas performance-based standards are described “in terms of tasks through which students demonstrate knowledge and skill by their performance” (Marzano & Kendall, 1997). The Profile was primarily focused on the demonstration of knowledge through prescribed tasks. Further, it was grounded in a “constructivist” philosophy of education that believes “students ‘construct’ meaning by engaging in activities that require them to manipulate and synthesize data, rather than reproduce information” (Avery et al., 2003). The Profile’s constructivist, performance-based orientation became a source of criticism from those who believed in traditional education content and teaching methods.

The “Profile” first went into effect for students in grade 9 in the 1998-1999 school year. DCFL used the Profile standards to comply with the 1994 ESEA standards requirement. Minnesota also began administering the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) in math and reading in third and fifth grades and writing in fifth grade to comply with ESEA. In 2002, tests of reading in tenth grade and math in eleventh grade were added. The Basic Skills Tests (BST) in math and reading in eighth grade and writing in tenth grade were administered beginning in 1996 to measure whether students had mastered the Basic Standards in the Graduation Rule. Passage of the BST was required for high school graduation (Davison et al., 2004).

The Profile faced immediate controversy upon its adoption by the State Board of Education¹. The Rule was complex, with 48 High Standards grouped into 10 learning areas, of which students were required to complete 24 to graduate. Demonstrating standards completion through locally developed “performance packages” required extensive record keeping by districts and significant additional work by teachers .

¹ The Legislature abolished the Minnesota State Board of Education in 1998 in an amendment introduced during legislative conference committee negotiations. Minnesota and Wisconsin are the only states in the U.S. without state boards of education (NASBE, 2011).

In 1998, a group of conservative anti-Profile activists banded together to form the Maple River Education Coalition. The Maple River Coalition argued that Profile standards promoted liberal secular values and beliefs and focused on basic skills in an effort to funnel children toward entry-level employment (Ragsdale, 2003). Further, because the Profile was used to satisfy ESEA requirements, anti-Profile activists saw the program as a form of federal government intervention (EdWatch, 2003).

Electoral politics also came into play in the Profile debate. In 2002, then-House Majority Leader Tim Pawlenty authored the Profile repeal amendment. Pawlenty was at the time vying for the GOP nomination for Governor in a close race against businessman Brian Sullivan. Despite repeated attempts by the House to scrap the Profile, the program survived the 2002 legislative session due to the support of Senate DFL education chairs and Governor Ventura. Nonetheless, once Pawlenty secured the nomination, he made repealing the Profile a centerpiece of his campaign.

November 2002 to January 2003: Pawlenty elected Governor; Cheri Pierson Yecke appointed Education Commissioner. Tim Pawlenty won the gubernatorial election in November 2002 against DFLer Roger Moe and began his first term in office in January 2003, with the state facing a historic projected budget deficit of \$4.5 billion.

Pawlenty quickly appointed Dr. Cheri Pierson Yecke to be his Commissioner of Education. Yecke was a native Minnesotan who had served in the U.S. Department of Education under President George W. Bush and as Virginia's Secretary of Education. She brought a reputation as an outspoken conservative who advocated for students' rights to express religion in school and was a staunch advocate of NCLB (Hotaikainen, 2003).

Upon taking office, Pawlenty announced his intention to repeal the Profile and replace it with content standards in mathematics, reading and writing, science, and geography and history. The Governor and Commissioner Yecke declared that they would re-focus education on a "back to the basics" approach (Yecke, 2003). As a symbol of this new focus, Pawlenty renamed the Department of Children, Families and Learning the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE).

January to May, 2003: Profile repealed; Legislature adopts standards, assessments, course credit requirements, and report cards. Yecke immediately set about drafting standards, even though the Profile was not yet repealed. She selected a panel of teachers, parents and members of the public from among hundreds of applicants to draft language arts and mathematics standards, with the intent of having school districts implement them by the fall. The 77-member committee was divided into grade level and subject subgroups, and provided with the standards from several other states as the basis for its work. Its charge was to develop standards that would focus on content rather than learning processes (Draper, 2003 Feb. 14). The committee produced draft standards in language arts and math in just 20 days.

The speed of the standards drafting effort drew concern. Before the work began, a coalition of reading experts from several Minnesota colleges of teacher education wrote to urge Commissioner Yecke to slow the process and consider standards created by groups such as the National Council of Teachers of Reading (Welsh, 2003). Even some members of the Yecke-appointed committee expressed discomfort with the speed of their task (Welsh, 2003 April 16).

In early March, Senator Steve Kelley (DFL-Hopkins), chair of the Senate Education Committee, and Representative Mike Opatz (DFL-St. Cloud) announced that they would lead an alternative standards-development effort. Kelley and Opatz argued for a slower timeline; revising, rather than scrapping, the Profile; and looking to the recommendations of national organizations for guidance (Draper, 2003 March 4).

The Department of Education committee released its standards to the public in March and began holding statewide hearings to gather input. Soon after, Senator Kelley released his alternative set of standards, based on a 2002 effort by DCFL to revamp the Profile. Commissioner Yecke reacted angrily, accusing Senator Kelley of overstepping his role as a legislator: “It [Kelley’s bill] turns the Legislature into the state school board. If Senator Kelley wanted to be commissioner, he should have applied to the Governor” (Welsh, 2003 March 21).

Yet with just days remaining in the legislative session, Senator Kelley, Commissioner Yecke and House Education Finance chair Alice Seagren (GOP-Bloomington) were able to forge an agreement to combine the Kelley and Yecke standards into one document. In the final bill, the Profile of Learning was repealed, and content standards took its place in math, language arts, social studies, science, and the arts. Math and language arts standards would be effective the 2003-2004 school year, and MDE would assemble another citizens' committee to draft science and social studies standards and present them to the Legislature by February 2004 (HF302, 2003 MN Law Ch. 129). Senator Kelley succeeded in getting social studies standards to encompass government, citizenship and economics in addition to geography and history and in having the arts added as a required statewide standard. He also got health and physical education, vocational and technical education and world languages added as required, but locally-developed standards.

The 2003 Profile repeal bill further changed state education law to comply with NCLB. The bill (2003 MN Law Ch. 129):

- Authorized the Commissioner to develop assessments in language arts and math to test students annually in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, to be administered in the 2005-2006 school year and later.
- Required the Commissioner to develop science assessments aligned to the 2004 standards, to be administered once in the 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12 grade spans beginning in the 2007-2008 school year and later.
- Required ratings to designate high and low performing schools and school report cards to disseminate testing and other performance data.
- Required that the Commissioner adopt criteria for Supplemental Education Service (SES) Providers in Rule. These organizations provided tutoring services to students in schools that were not making AYP. The state-level guidelines were intended to insure minimum quality criteria for these tutoring providers.

In addition, bill authors addressed the graduation requirements encompassed in the Graduation Rule. The BST was retained as a high school graduation requirement. The Profile of Learning standards requirements for graduation were replaced with student course credit requirements.

August 2003: Yecke unveils report cards at State Fair that include star ratings. Governor Pawlenty and Commissioner Yecke unveiled a new star rating system attached to the NCLB-mandated school report cards for the first time at the 2003 Minnesota State Fair. These “report cards on a stick” assigned separate star ratings to each school for reading and math based on AYP status, with up to three stars available to schools making AYP. Schools could earn up to two additional stars for having student scores among the top of schools with similar socio-economic makeup or having very few students scoring below proficient (Davison, et al., 2004).

Superintendents and school district officials questioned the value of the rating system. As Bloomington School District research and evaluation director Jim Angermeyr said, much of the data was already available: “What’s new is that it’s collapsing complicated data into a movie star rating. Even though you want to make things simple, you can make things wrong.” (Welbes, 2003).

September 2003 : Yecke released draft social studies and science standards. Commissioner Yecke released new draft academic standards in social studies and science in September, 2003. DFL lawmakers and some teachers criticized the social studies standards for being too detailed and exhibiting a conservative view of American history, for example, by neglecting the contributions of Democratic presidents and the U.S. labor movement (Locke, 2003). These concerns were at least partially addressed by the standards-writing committee in the final revised draft released in December.

Spring 2004: Schools administer 7th grade MCA reading and math test for the first time.

April-May, 2004: Senate denies Yecke confirmation. The Senate Education Committee began holding hearings in April on the confirmation of Commissioner Yecke. While the hearings began cordially, it became clear that Yecke might not be confirmed. DFL committee members pointed to Yecke’s polarizing conservative views and wholehearted embrace of No Child Left Behind testing mandates as reasons to oppose her confirmation (Draper, 2004 April 28). DFL chairman Steve Kelley argued that Yecke was too divisive a figure to capably lead the education community in the state. Republicans, however, countered that Yecke was bright and well-

qualified for the position and that the Governor had the right to nominate individuals who would advance his conservative agenda (Welsh, 2004 April 1).

On April 27, the Senate Education Committee rejected Yecke's confirmation along party lines, in a 6-4 vote. For several weeks, it remained unclear whether Yecke's opponents had the votes in the full Senate to deny her confirmation, with the DFL holding only a slim majority. Yet on the last day of the legislative session, the full Senate voted 35-31 to deny Yecke's confirmation.

In addition to rejecting Yecke's confirmation, the legislature adopted a further revised version of the standards on science and social studies, with implementation scheduled for the 2005-2006 school year (Laws 2004 Ch. 294). The conference committee again had to reconcile the MDE-prepared standards in social studies with an alternative set of standards prepared by University of Minnesota faculty and K-12 teachers, coordinated by Senator Kelley (Draper, 2004 May 7).

July 2004: Alice Seagren named Commissioner. Following the contentious fight over Yecke's confirmation, Pawlenty selected moderate Bloomington Republican and House Education Finance Committee Chair Alice Seagren to be the next Commissioner. DFLers and education groups saw Seagren as a conciliatory choice: a capitol insider who had strong relationships with education legislators and interest groups (Pugmire, 2004).

November 2004: 2004 election brings 13 new seats for House Democrats. House DFLers won 13 seats previously held by Republicans, coming within two seats of taking over the majority from the GOP. These changes helped shift the legislative balance of power back toward the DFL following the GOP sweep in 2002.

January 2005 : Senate easily confirms Seagren as Commissioner

July 2005: Education bill passes during Special Session following brief government shutdown; QComp adopted; MCA-IIs replace BST. The 2005 legislature and Governor Tim Pawlenty could not agree to a budget by the end of the regular legislative session in May, forcing the state into a week-long government shutdown and July special session. Disagreements

included how to close a \$700 million deficit and whether the Governor and House Republicans would compromise on their “No New Taxes” pledge. The Session eventually ended with Governor Pawlenty agreeing to an increase in the cigarette tax, called a “health impact fee,” to help close the deficit.

The 2005 E-12 education budget bill, which included both finance and policy changes, included several significant changes to accountability law:

- Legislators agreed to Pawlenty’s signature proposal for a statewide merit pay program for teachers, known as QComp. Under QComp, school districts would receive an additional \$260 per pupil in exchange for working with their local teachers to adopt a plan to provide teacher merit pay increases based on schoolwide and classroom achievement gains on the MCA-IIs or local standardized tests;
- Students, beginning with those entering 8th grade in the 2005-2006 school year and later, would be required pass the MCA-II reading and math tests for graduation, replacing the BST;
- The Commissioner would be required to implement a value-added assessment model to assist districts in measuring student learning growth; data on individual teachers would be considered private under the law;
- MDE was directed to request waivers on aspects of NCLB from USED, including the ability to use multiple measures, including a growth measure, to determine AYP; and using a computer-adaptive test (2005 1st Special Session Laws Ch. 5).

April 2006: Schools administer MCA-IIs (aligned to 2003 standards) in 3-8th grade reading and math, 10th grade reading, and 11th grade math for the first time

May 2006: Legislature passes Algebra requirement. While the 2006 legislative session did not bring many changes to education, the legislature did adopt Governor Pawlenty’s proposal to beef up high school math and science graduation requirements. The 2006 Education Policy Bill (SF2994/2006 Laws Ch. 263) required that beginning in the 2010-2011 school year, all students would be required to complete Algebra I by the end of eighth grade. These same students would be required to complete Algebra II for graduation in the 2014-2015 school year and later. The bill also required students to complete one credit of chemistry or physics for graduation beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. Finally, the bill laid out a schedule for the

Commissioner to revise academic standards in Rule in each subject, beginning with math standards in the 2006-2007 school year.

The Governor presented the algebra, chemistry and physics proposal in his 2006 State of the State address, arguing that the requirements would help improve math and science skills across the state. Some educators expressed concern over whether schools had the capacity to make major changes to elementary curriculum, teacher training, and student support needed to help all students succeed at high levels of math and science (Boldt, 2006). Nonetheless the bill passed the House and Senate with almost no opposition.

August 2006: Mike Hatch accuses Pawlenty of unnecessary delay of AYP results.

Throughout the summer and fall of 2006, DFL gubernatorial candidate Mike Hatch waged a close campaign against Governor Pawlenty, who was seeking re-election. In August, Hatch made news by arguing that MDE's decision to delay the release of 2005-2006 AYP results would be harmful to parents, who deserved to see results before the school year began, in accordance with NCLB (Stassen-Berger, 2006). Typically, results were released at the State Fair, but because of the new MCA-II tests, Seagren said the Department needed more time. DFL Rep. Mindy Greiling argued that delaying the results until one week after the election was a political move aimed to help Pawlenty's campaign, as test results were likely to drop under the new MCA-IIs (Davis, 2006).

Nov 7, 2006: Pawlenty wins re-election; DFL wins House. Despite trailing Hatch in a number of polls leading up to the election, Governor Pawlenty won re-election by 22,000 votes. Verbal gaffes by Hatch and his running mate Judi Dutcher in the last week of the campaign may have propelled Pawlenty to victory in a year when Democrats otherwise made large electoral gains. The DFL won large majorities in the House and Senate, therefore ensuring at least two more years of divided state government.

Nov 15, 2006: MCA-II results released showing large drop in proficiency under new test; number of schools not making AYP nearly doubles to 483. In the first year of full implementation of NCLB math and reading testing and accountability requirements, results

showed large drops in student proficiency on state tests. The new MCA-IIs tested students for the first time on the 2003 math and language arts standards adopted by the legislature. Average statewide math proficiency across grade levels dropped from 76% on the MCAs to 58% on the MCA-IIs. Eleventh grade math proficiency fell to only 32% on the MCA-IIs. Consequently, the number of schools not making AYP jumped to 483 from 247 in the 2004-2005 school year out of roughly 2000 schools for which AYP was calculated (MDE, 2011; Draper, 2006).

January 2007: Session begins with budget surplus, new House DFL majority. The 2007 legislative session began with the swearing in of Governor Pawlenty for his second term, the selection of a new DFL House Speaker and DFL Senate Majority Leader, and announcement of a forecasted \$2.2 billion state budget surplus for the 2008-2009 biennium (\$1.02 billion adjusted for inflation). In his State of the State address, Pawlenty proposed new initiatives in education accountability, including tying additional school funding to the number of stars a school receives on the state report card; providing additional funding to schools that require students to complete one year of college credits in high school; and requiring all students to complete four years of a world language for graduation.

May 2007: Education bill passes; MDE releases revised math standards incorporating Algebra requirements. The debate over whether to increase income taxes in a time of budget surplus to fund spending priorities received the most attention during the 2007 session. The governor vetoed DFL spending bills premised on an income tax increase. The Legislature was forced to re-draft budget bills without tax increases that were then signed by the Governor. The education bill contained a number of accountability-related proposals, including:

- An MDE proposal to revise state testing statutes, so that rather than passing the MCA-II for graduation, students would pass the “Graduation-Required Assessment for Diploma,” a new graduation test to be embedded into the administration of the 10th grade reading and 11th grade math MCA-IIs. A separate GRAD writing test was also established;
- Funding to re-establish the Office of Educational Accountability at the University of Minnesota. The OEA was first funded by the 1997 legislature, with a mission to report on the condition of Minnesota education, using accountability indicators (Davison et al., 1998). The office closed in 2005. Governor Pawlenty line-item vetoed the 2007 OEA funding, calling its charge duplicative of MDE’s work;

- A bill authored by freshman Rep. Kathy Brynaert (DFL-Mankato) to eliminate the five star rating system from state school report cards and direct the OEA to convene an advisory group to recommend how to re-structure state school report cards;
- A delay, requested by MDE, in the timeline for implementing a value-added measure of student achievement to the 2008-2009 school year;
- A requirement that the Commissioner request additional NCLB waivers on growth models, sub-group size, allowing a district to be its own SES provider, and the definition of highly qualified teachers;
- A revival of direction to the Commissioner to implement rules on SES providers, including withdrawing approval from those who fail to help students achieve proficiency on statewide tests;
- A requirement that academic standards revisions incorporate the contributions of American Indian tribes;
- Flexibility for career and technical education courses to fulfill a science, mathematics or arts credit for graduation (HF2245, 2007 Laws Ch. 146).

Notably, none of the Governor's initial accountability proposals (high school reform, school performance pay, and the world language graduation requirement) were passed into law.

The MDE standards-setting committee completed its work to revise state academic standards in math at the beginning of May. The major new change in the standards was to shift Algebra I instruction to 8th grade and embed related concepts throughout the elementary standards, following the 2006 law requiring all students to achieve this benchmark.

Summer 2007: Legislative work group recommends changes to report card, including value-added growth model. Despite the line item veto of funding for the OEA, DFL House and Senate legislators proceeded to hold hearings on adding new measures to evaluate schools to the state school report card. With the assistance of school district and University of Minnesota assessment experts, they identified a value-added growth model of student achievement that would allow the state to report on whether students were achieving high, medium or low growth on state tests as compared to other students who achieved the same prior year score.

August 2007: AYP results released showing 729 of approx. 2000 schools did not make AYP, more than one-third of schools in the state

January 2008: Republican state senators announce bill to withdraw from NCLB.

Republican Senators argued that the law had failed and a return to local control was needed. The effort followed numerous bills and amendments authored by legislators from both political parties since 2003 calling for the state to cease complying with the law, despite the potential loss of over \$250 million in federal funds. Nonetheless, these attempts seemed more symbolic than real, as no NCLB withdrawal bill ever passed both bodies or made it to the Governor's desk.

March 2008: House and Senate hear bills to create new school report card. The DFL-led proposal would add multiple measures to evaluate schools to the report card, including a growth measure, a measure of student engagement, and a measure of college-ready course taking. Bill authors argued that multiple measures would provide a more rounded perspective on school success, and could be used to highlight "beat the odds schools," rather than to punish "failing" schools. Commissioner Seagren countered that these measures could weaken the state accountability system by masking poor performance (Boldt, 2008).

April 2008: Schools administer first MCA science tests online in grades 5, 8 and 10; 10th grade reading GRAD/MCA-II first administered as graduation requirement. Seventy-five percent of 10th graders pass either the MCA-II or GRAD reading tests on their first attempt. However, only 32% of students statewide, and only 8% of African-American students, scored proficient in 2008 on the math MCA-II, which was scheduled to become a graduation requirement the following school year.

May 2008: Omnibus education policy passes with value-added growth model; Pawlenty vetoes bill. The House and Senate agreed to passage of an omnibus education policy bill that included the proposal to add three new measures to the state school report card, including the value-added growth measure (SF3001, 2007 Laws Ch. 310 Art. 2). The bill also would have added health and physical education as required statewide academic standards.

In his veto message, Governor Pawlenty stated that he opposed the norm-based growth model in the legislative bill: "...This bill represents a step backward for educational accountability and high expectations, which are essential for preparing Minnesota students for the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century...[the Omnibus K-12 Education Bill] creates a school 'growth-to-the-norm' model which measures school performance against statewide student performance averages. We need to set high standards and expectations. This bill would mask underperformance of schools and students compared to rigorous standards." (Journal of the Senate, May 12, 2008, p. 10194. Chapter 310 Veto Message).

August 2008: AYP results released showing 937 of approx. 2000 schools did not make AYP, nearly half.

August 2008: MDE releases a norm-based growth model similar to the vetoed legislative model to the public, titled the "Minnesota Growth Model."

September 2008: MDE releases revised academic standards in science.

November 2008: DFLers add two seats to majority in 2008 Minnesota House elections.

December 2008: Legislators begin holding public hearings on GRAD math test. Groups representing school districts, administrators and teachers began pushing legislators for changes to the GRAD math test during the 2008 legislative interim, before the test had begun to have consequences for high school graduates.

Like the MCA-II exams, the GRAD tests were aligned to 2003 math and language arts standards. The 9th grade writing test was administered as a stand-alone assessment; the 10th grade language arts GRAD and 11th grade mathematics GRAD were embedded within the MCA-II exams in those subjects. In the 2007-2008 school year, the year before the 11th grade math GRAD would first be administered as a graduation requirement, only 34% of students were proficient on the larger MCA-II math test, 20% were partially proficient, and 46% were not proficient. Among black students, only 8% were proficient.

It was difficult for schools to know what the impact of the GRAD math test would be because under Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) guidelines, the Commissioner would not set the cut score (or passing score) for the test until after it had already been administered. The Commissioner and others argued that because students would be more motivated to pass the test once it became a graduation requirement, scores could increase significantly. "When students have a goal to meet, they will rise to the standard," Seagren said. "We're not used to expecting that of kids, which is sad. ... We can't forget that our kids are competing with the rest of the world" (Vanderwerf, 2008).

Nonetheless, school districts worried about the potential barrier to graduation. As Minnesota School Boards Association lobbyist Grace Keliher put it, "This is a daunting issue coming at us. These are almost 70 percent of our students, who might already be accepted to college, who are getting As and Bs ... who might not get a diploma. All that (student work), all those years, for nothing. I don't want to point fingers, but this is a huge problem" (Boldt, 2008). Legislators began discussing alternatives, including an appeals process for students who did not pass the math GRAD.

January 2009: The 2009 legislative begins with \$4.85 billion deficit; Independent education research office proposed. Governor Pawlenty proposed a budget that would rely on cuts, borrowing from schools and federal stimulus to close the deficit. However, in K-12 education, he proposed an increase in funding to make QComp available to all school districts in the state.

Despite the looming budget deficit, a coalition of education groups renewed a proposal to create an independent research office outside the influence of the Minnesota Department of Education. Proponents argued that sound research and evidence were needed to make policy decisions, yet this work could not be done by MDE as the role of the Commissioner was inherently political. As Scott Croonquist, Director of the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, put it, "We've seen it happen too many times where important issues like state accountability tests become politicized, instead of legislators basing decisions on the data, the research, the best evidence

available. They too often end up being made on a partisan basis" (Johns, 2009). Commissioner Seagren countered that the proposed center would duplicate MDE work.

April 2009: Legislators and Seagren propose alternatives to address GRAD math fears.

Rep. Carlos Mariani (DFL-St. Paul) and Sen. Chuck Wiger (DFL-Maplewood) co-authored a bill to address widespread concerns over student failure on the 2010 GRAD math exam. Their proposal would have provided a five-year window for students who did not pass the math GRAD to get a diploma by meeting three criteria: pass all other state and local graduation requirements, participate in district remediation, and re-take the exam at least twice.

Yet critics, including the Minnesota Business Partnership (MBP), countered that legislators would render the high school diploma meaningless. MBP lobbyist Jim Bartholomew said, "If we're just going to give high school graduates a diploma because they stayed there long enough, even though we know they don't know what they need to know, that's really not doing them a favor." School districts were more supportive of the proposal. As the North Branch Superintendent put it, "Do we want to be held accountable? Absolutely. Do we want to hold kids to high standards? Absolutely. We just want to make sure that the tests are meaningful." (Johns, 2009). While MDE and the Governor did not openly oppose the legislative plan, they proposed shifting the discussion's focus to replacing the GRAD with end of course tests in all high school subjects, focused on college and career readiness.

May 2009: Omnibus education bill signed into law, Tax bill vetoed; Governor vows

unallotment. At the end of the 2009 legislative session, the legislature sent the Governor a series of budget bills premised on income tax increases. Rather than vetoing the bills, forcing legislators to negotiate a new budget in special session, Pawlenty instead vetoed the tax bill and funding for low-income adult health care, signed the budget bills, and used the governor's little-known power of unallotment to unilaterally make the remainder of spending cuts needed to close the deficit.

The signed omnibus education bill included language on the GRAD test. The final compromise proposal followed the outline of the legislative bill, creating a five-year suspension of the GRAD

math test requirement and allowing students who have not passed to graduate if they meet all other criteria. The bill also required a work group jointly headed by the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Education to convene over the legislative interim to recommend changes to the high school assessment system to ensure students would be “college and career ready after graduation” (HF2, 2009 Laws Ch. 96).

In addition, the changes to the Minnesota school report card sought in the vetoed Omnibus Education Policy Bill of 2008 were adopted into statute.

June 2009: 11th grade Math GRAD test results released, 58% of students pass. Proficiency rates on the overall MCA-II exam did jump ten percentage points due to the high-stakes nature of the GRAD. Yet had legislation not passed, many students would have begun 12th grade with the possibility of not graduating, including 37% of white seniors and 79% of black seniors. (MDE, 2011). Students were still required to pass the reading and writing GRAD tests to graduate, and 13% had not yet done so.

August 2009: AYP results released showing 1,048 of approx. 2000 schools did not make AYP, roughly half of all schools.

November 2009: U.S. Department of Education announces Race to the Top guidelines. After months of waiting, states received guidance for the U.S. Department of Education’s \$4.35 billion Race to the Top competition in November, with a deadline set for January 2010. The federal Race to the Top competition asked states who wanted to receive millions in stimulus grant funds to commit to recruiting and retaining high performing teachers, adopting common core standards and assessments that measure college and career readiness, developing longitudinal data systems, and turning around the lowest performing schools. The teacher component of the competition specifically scored states on two controversial policies: alternative teacher licensure and linking teacher and principals to data on student achievement.

The application process in Minnesota raised tensions over the Governor’s exclusive role in determining the plan. The Gates Foundation offered the Minnesota Department of Education a

\$250k grant to contract with McKinsey Corporation to prepare the state's application. While legislators sought involvement, Pawlenty announced that he would not pursue legislation as part of the application, despite the broad policy reforms required to compete.

The MDE proposal was released in late December, allowing school districts several weeks to review; ultimately most districts in the state signed on. The plan relied heavily on QComp as the leading reform proposal and proposed altering collective bargaining agreements to make tenure decisions based on teacher performance appraisals. Education Minnesota president Tom Dooher refused to commit the statewide union's support for the application, citing opposition to the QComp program and concern over tying student test scores to decisions about teacher evaluation. He claimed in this letter that "the evidence is strong that LEAs' willingness to sign on to the state's plan at this time stems from financial desperation rather than genuine support for Q Comp" (Dooher, 2010).

January 2010: Pawlenty unallotment ruled unlawful by state judge; Session convenes. Due to the ruling and continued deficits, legislators faced the task of closing a \$1.2B budget gap in a non-budget year. Further, the political climate was intensified by the open race for Governor. Candidates included DFL House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher and GOP House Minority Leader Marty Seifert, along with six other sitting legislators. It was also becoming increasingly clear that Governor Pawlenty had his eyes set on a Presidential run.

February 2010: ACCESS report released. The high school testing work group co-chaired by Kent Pekel of the University of Minnesota College Readiness Consortium and Dirk Mattson, director of testing at MDE, presented its findings to legislative committees early in the 2010 session. The work group, which named its proposal the "ACCESS system," recommended creating end-of-course assessments in high school algebra and biology and a comprehensive language arts assessment in reading, writing and other literacy skills, with a focus on aligning the tests to "college and career readiness" expectations (CCRPI work group, 2010). Students would have to meet a cut score on the language arts test to graduate. Students would take an end-of-course test in high school algebra and biology that would count for 25% of a student's grade in

that course and would not be required to meet a state-determined cut score on those tests in order to graduate.

March 2010: Minnesota places 20th in Race to the Top Round 1. Only two states were awarded grants in the initial round, and Minnesota did not make the list of 15 finalists. The Governor pinned blame squarely on the shoulders of Education Minnesota and its lack of support for the plan: “It’s hard to race to the top with an anchor tied to your leg,” Pawlenty spokesman Brian McClung said in a statement. “For years, the teachers union has fought against any meaningful education reforms.” (Boldt, 2010). Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced that a second round of the competition would be held. Governor Pawlenty immediately convened a press conference, stating that the state’s second round application would hinge on the legislature’s ability to enact key reforms, including alternative teacher licensure.

May 2010: 2010 session ends without an education bill. As the bill to adopt the ACCESS report recommendations progressed through legislative committees, there was considerable discussion over whether students should also meet a cut score on end-of-course tests for graduation and for what proportion of the course grade the test should count. Due to fiscal constraints, the E-12 Education Omnibus bill (HF3833) passed off the House floor in 2010 only included the algebra end-of-course test. The Senate did not include the ACCESS recommendations in its Education Policy Omnibus bill (SF3189).

Further, the alternative teacher licensure bill, on which the state’s Race to the Top application purportedly would depend, failed to pass the Minnesota House. The measure was stripped from the omnibus education bill by legislative leaders in committee, who were subject to intense lobbying from the statewide teacher union, Education Minnesota, which opposed alternative licensure. Shortly after the session adjourned, Pawlenty announced that the state would not apply for a second round of Race to the Top, saying, “While other states race to the top, the DFL-controlled legislature has Minnesota stuck in a pit stop” (Boldt, 2010).

August 10, 2010: Mark Dayton wins DFL gubernatorial primary.

August 2010: AYP results released showing 1,048 of approx. 2000 schools did not make AYP. This was the first time the number of schools not making AYP did not go up, but still represented roughly half of all Minnesota schools.

Nov 2010: GOP wins House and Senate majorities; Mark Dayton (DFL) defeats Tom Emmer (GOP) for governorship by 9,000 votes, triggering automatic recount. In a tide of Republican victories, both bodies of the legislature shifted from DFL to GOP majorities, the Senate for the first time since 1972. There were 36 newly elected members of the 134-member Minnesota House, 33 of whom were Republicans. There were 23 new members of the 67-member Senate, 20 of whom were Republicans. There was also a new Speaker of the House (Rep. Kurt Zellers) and a new Senate Majority Leader (Sen. Amy Koch) (House Public Information, 2011). The division in party control of state government continued, but this time with a DFL governor and Republican legislature.

January 2011: Cassellius appointed Commissioner; Dayton announces 7-point plan for education; 2011 Session begins with \$6.2B budget deficit. Dayton proposed forming a commission to recommend the elimination of unneeded state tests.

March 2011: House and Senate release Education Omnibus bills. The House proposed creating a new A-F school grading system based on proficiency and growth on the MCA-II's that would provide monetary rewards to highly rated schools. The House also proposed instituting new teacher performance evaluation, probation, tenure and dismissal laws based 50% on how much growth that teacher's students show on state tests (HF934). Education Minnesota vigorously opposed the teacher performance evaluation bill. The Senate proposed rewarding schools based on 3rd grade student proficiency on MCA-II reading tests and the amount of growth students show in reading between the 3rd and 4th grades. The Senate also proposed premising teacher evaluations and tenure on student growth (SF1030).

May to July, 2011: Budget disagreements lead to prolonged state shutdown; agreement includes reading rewards and teacher evaluation. Impasse over the state budget, especially over revenue and spending levels, led to no agreement on education or other budget areas by the

end of the regular legislative session in May. Further, an agreement was not reached by the end of the fiscal year on July 1, and Minnesota entered its longest ever partial shutdown of state government services. Ultimately, Governor Dayton and legislative leaders agreed to a shutdown-ending budget fix. The final education bill included funding to reward schools based on third grade reading scores and a slimmed down teacher evaluation bill that would require schools to tie 35% of a teacher's evaluation to student test score growth.

Analysis: Influences on state decision making

Numerous factors came into play in Minnesota lawmakers' decisions about education accountability. Wirt and Kirst (1997) identify a number of potential influences on state education policies. These include: values; political culture; key actors, including the Governor, chief state school officer, and influential legislators; federal mandates; interest groups; political parties; policy issue networks and public opinion and the media. I will analyze those influences I consider most critical to the shape of the education accountability debate in Minnesota.

Federal mandate

The federal government's mandate to implement No Child Left Behind played the biggest role in education accountability changes in Minnesota from 2002 to 2011. The majority of the state policy changes that would be made during this period took place in 2003, when the legislature and Governor codified NCLB into state statute. What followed from 2004 to 2011, such as revising standards, adding then removing stars from the school report card, or creating a growth model, amounted to tweaking the 2003 laws.

Neither legislators nor the Governor did much to resist NCLB. While various legislators attempted to pass amendments or bills opting Minnesota out, as Republican State Senators attempted in 2008, no such bill passed the full legislature. If it had, the Governor would likely have vetoed it. The threat of losing over \$250M in federal aid was a sufficient deterrent from a

true opt-out effort, even as resistance to NCLB grew. Efforts by Senator Kelley and others to pressure MDE to request waivers seemed to have little effect, as USED offered little flexibility and the executive branch's overall orientation was to strongly support the law.

The NCLB mandate created a profound change in education governance. The U.S. and Minnesota Constitutions leave education as a responsibility of the state. While Minnesota was traditionally a local control state, major mandates like the Profile of Learning led to an increase in the state's role in education. Thus Congress and the President in 2001 took on education policy authority that would otherwise have fallen to the legislature and Governor.

State actors

Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, more than other state-level political figure, seemed to play the biggest role shaping the post-NCLB policy reforms in Minnesota. While Governors hold significant positional power, Pawlenty's influence went beyond that.

First, Pawlenty was an enthusiastic supporter of NCLB. He initially chose a Commissioner, Cheri Yecke, who came straight from the Bush U.S. Department of Education to Minnesota and began implementing the law in Minnesota. From repealing the Profile in 2003, to asking schools to base tenure decisions on MCA scores in 2010, Pawlenty consistently pushed the accountability agenda. In contrast, the DFL-controlled House and Senate's education agenda focused mainly on increased funding for schools. In repeated budget negotiations, Pawlenty agreed to hold school funding harmless or increase the formula, and in exchange, won agreement to his proposed accountability reforms, most notably QComp.

Second, Minnesota Governors appoint and oversee the chief state school officer, or Commissioner, and the Commissioner's role in NCLB implementation was pivotal. ESEA uses state education agencies to both distribute aid and monitor compliance. NCLB provided the

Commissioner and MDE a key role in determining the state's implementation plan, drafting standards, and requesting waivers. Because Minnesota abolished its State Board of Education in 1999, even more of the implementation decisions fell to the Commissioner than in other states.

Third, Pawlenty's national political ambitions influenced his accountability agenda. Pawlenty grew his national profile by taking on leadership roles with the National Governors' Association, the Republican Governors' Association, and Achieve, Inc., a business-oriented education policy network. Several of Pawlenty's accountability initiatives were drawn from the playbooks of these groups, in particular his proposal to require Algebra I, Algebra II, and chemistry or physics for high school graduation.

Finally, Pawlenty allied closely on his accountability agenda with the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and the Minnesota Business Partnership. These two groups, influential among Republican legislators, helped advance and shape the Governor's reform agenda at the Legislature, particularly on issues of testing and teacher evaluation.

Political culture

Minnesota is noted by political scientists for having a moralistic political culture. Political scientist Daniel Elazar in 1966 described state political cultures in the U.S. as being primarily moralistic, individualistic, traditional, or a combination, based on their history and immigration patterns (as cited in Gray & Spano, 2000; Schier, 2011; Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Moralistic political cultures emphasize the common good, view government as a positive force that should embody moral principles, and support citizen participation in the political process. Public corruption is not tolerated in a moralistic culture.

Carleton College political scientist Steven Schier (2011) notes that while the moralistic culture persists in Minnesota, political actors no longer hold shared moral principles about

government. Liberals and conservatives in Minnesota are very ideologically divided and increasingly see their political adversaries as morally misguided.

This culture – moralistic, but divided – played a role in the debate over education accountability reforms. It was most evident in the standoff between Commissioner Cheri Yecke and state Senator Steve Kelley over academic standards and Yecke’s confirmation. These two principled political figures clashed over the ideology they wished education to advance. Would education standards be traditional in learning philosophy and in content, with history standards focusing on America’s greatness? Or would they be progressive, emphasizing learning-by-doing, with history standards that incorporated social justice movements and the views of underrepresented Americans? Some viewed the fight over Yecke’s confirmation as primarily partisan, a way for the DFL to lash out at Governor Pawlenty. Yet the primary reason Yecke was not confirmed by the Senate seemed to be that she was a principled conservative and saw it as her public duty to imbue those beliefs into state education policy.

Values

In a related way, many of the education accountability debates that took place over the last decade were debates over values. Wirt and Kirst (1997, p. 206) identify four primary values in education: equity, quality, efficiency and choice. Equity is a value focused on eliminating gaps between a desired standard of education and the actual condition for a particular group and is associated with programs such as special education and services for English language learners. Quality focuses on improving educational services and is represented by policies such as rigorous curriculum standards. Efficiency emphasizes both cost effectiveness and accountability and is associated with policies like budget regulations and testing. Finally, choice is a value that promotes the individual’s right to choose between values.

The accountability era is most closely associated with the values of quality (raising academic standards) and efficiency (holding schools accountable to meet the standards). However, the value of equity, particularly racial equity, was held up as a key rationale behind No Child Left Behind. Raising quality standards and holding schools accountable to meet them, it was argued, would be a means to achieving equity in educational outcomes.

The interplay of these values was evident in the debate over Minnesota education accountability policies, most notably the GRAD test. Lawmakers were conflicted over the purpose of the GRAD test and the values it was intended to promote. On the one hand, the test was about ensuring the quality of a high school diploma. But was the quality standard to be “basic skills” or “college and career readiness”? On the other hand, the test was about equity, ensuring that students of color and other groups were being taught the same content as their peers. But the test was poised to keep 80% of black students from graduating, a very inequitable outcome.

While both sides of the GRAD debate agreed that equity was a key goal, they disagreed over the most efficient means to advance that goal. Proponents of the GRAD believed that sanctions would motivate. By threatening to withhold diplomas from large numbers of students, students and the public school system would respond to new, higher expectations. But opponents of the GRAD were not so sure. They feared keeping thousands of students from graduating and could not support holding students accountable for the failure of the system to teach them higher math. These divisions surfaced initially in the debate over suspending the GRAD and eventually prevented the legislature from moving forward on the ACCESS proposal.

Political environment

The political environment in Minnesota that created a backdrop for education accountability reform was one primed for conflict. First, between 2003 and 2011, Minnesota experienced near back-to-back budget deficits of record proportions. Each legislative session was dominated by the ideological battle between the DFL and GOP over whether to raise taxes or cut services, particularly aid to cities, higher education, and health and human services. The context for education policymaking was thus a scarcity of financial resources, which led to pitched budget battles. Further, Minnesota had a legislature and governorship divided along party lines during the entire period from 2002 to 2011. Ideological disunity was the norm.

The impact of these divisions could be seen in the partisan fights that took place over education accountability, particularly in the state's failed Race to the Top application. The Governor seized Race to the Top as an opportunity to project his vision for education reform, opting not to partner with the legislature or other education groups. While the application was bold, it lacked the backing of statewide or local teachers' unions, and thus earned low marks from USED. Rather than taking this failure as a call to unity, the political debate over Race to the Top turned away from the substance of the reforms and became a discussion over which was more unwilling to compromise--the Governor or the union-backed DFL legislature.

Interest groups

Overall, interest groups played a lesser role in accountability debates than they did in other state education issues. Most of the institutional groups, like superintendents, school boards, and school district associations, strive to straddle partisan divides and may have hesitated to align closely with one party in accountability discussions.

Business groups and the statewide teachers' union were the exception. The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and Minnesota Business Partnership consistently advocated a strong

standards-based reform agenda, supporting Republican proposals on teacher evaluation tied to MCA test scores, graduation tests based on attaining a cut score, and rigorous math and science standards. Education Minnesota, on the other hand, weighed in primarily on teacher-related issues. The union consistently opposed any state effort to tie teacher evaluation, pay, tenure, or other decisions to student test scores.

The alliance of these groups to the GOP and DFL parties, respectively, and their involvement in campaign contributions, heightened the partisanship of education accountability issues with which they were involved. Thus when the Chamber weighed in on the GRAD math test or Education Minnesota lobbied against teacher evaluation, legislative debates were more likely to become partisan than issue-based.

Conclusions

Clearly, the decisions of legislators and the Governor on education accountability were influenced by a complex mix of federal law, party politics, values concerning education, and interest groups. A few key conclusions can be drawn from this exploration:

- NCLB began a new era in education policymaking, in which states gave up significant control to Congress and the federal government in exchange for federal education aid. Standards-based reform as defined by NCLB has become so integrated into state policy that it is difficult to differentiate state from federal law. If Race to the Top is any indication, this era of federal control is likely to continue.
- Governors can have a big influence on accountability policy, particularly when they keep a consistent focus, as Pawlenty did. The Commissioner's role in executing NCLB and the lack of a state board make the Governor's position even more pivotal.

- Minnesota’s political culture, divided state government, and continued budget crises create a challenging context for forging agreement on changes to accountability policy. A large ideological gap between liberals and conservatives will likely continue to mark accountability discussions, with divisions over principle playing a bigger role than partisanship.
- Nonetheless, partisanship in education accountability debates exists. It is heightened by the involvement of business and teacher interest groups, who use campaign funding to advance their agendas.

Given these conclusions, and given Congress’ inability to act on the next round of ESEA reauthorization, the future course of education accountability in Minnesota is unclear. Debates will continue over the appropriate use of tests and whether the system should focus on sanctions or rewards. Issues like graduation testing will remain very difficult to resolve because of differences in values and the large impact of these policies on students’ lives. Yet despite all of the conflict surrounding these issues, there seems to be a bi-partisan consensus in favor of some type of standards-based reform. Accountability-style reforms appear here to stay.

What does a decade of school accountability reform mean for Minnesota? Despite the many policy changes, MCA scores in reading and math have not improved drastically, and Minnesota’s racial achievement gap remains among the largest in the nation. It seems that even by the narrow measures of standardized test scores, accountability reforms have not led to the promised improvements in student achievement.

Unfortunately, the focus of No Child Left Behind and most of the ensuing accountability reforms enacted in Minnesota has been negative. The state has carried out sanctions for “failing schools”, labeled poor performers, withheld diplomas from students who miss the GRAD cut

score, and will now require districts to discipline teachers based on student test scores. While there are positive incentives to improve student achievement, like merit pay, these are based on the narrow measures of the MCA scores. This education system that values standardized test scores above all else has demoralized many teachers and parents, as heavy doses of reading and math have replaced time devoted to science, the arts, world languages, and interdisciplinary, creative projects.

If accountability policy is to make a real difference, the focus should turn to identifying and celebrating success across all the academic disciplines. To do this, we should abandon many of the sanctions and focus instead on celebrating the schools and teaching teams who close the achievement gap and learn from their successes. Minnesota's system of standards, assessments and reporting should provide educators and policymakers with better information about where we've been successful, and how to improve where we're not. The state should therefore invest in independent research and evaluation of accountability data. Finally, educators and policymakers must work to reverse the narrowing of the curriculum to enrich the learning experience and maintain a comprehensive education. Federal inaction on ESEA reauthorization has opened a window for states to re-define what education accountability means. Understanding the history of accountability reforms in Minnesota should help policymakers make these needed changes.

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