

POLK DES MOINES
TAXPAYERS
ASSOCIATION

August 2007

Special Edition

**School board elections are September 11.
Be sure to vote!**

**THE DES MOINES SCHOOL BOARD:
STRATEGIC DIRECTION**

In a somewhat controversial move, the DM school board hired consultants to help them with a series of community and focus group meetings, conduct a survey, and collate the data. It has been suggested that the school board members could have done this themselves, but I believe that 1) that while the board is accountable to the community, this is not the function of the board, and 2) to do the task well requires experts in the field, not amateurs. Board members were involved in the process, however and Ms. Woods attended every public session.

The DMPS Board developed five core values. They are:

**Success in school and beyond,
Equity throughout the district,
Accountability in financial and policy matters,
Investment in an exemplary workforce,
and
Ongoing communication in all matters.**

The process is not complete. There will be further community forums beginning in October. What exactly those five values mean will need to be worked out (for example, what exactly does *equity* mean?)

After those forums, the Board will need to formally adopt a Strategic Direction.

I have seen improvement in the Board's actions. The Association has been commenting on the District's poor record when it comes to communication for many years. There is certainly more room for more improvement, but the process was a very good first step. It's up to the Taxpayers Association - and everyone in the district - to hold the school board members to their commitment to change the practices we've witnessed in the past.

STATE FISCAL FORECAST

The fat years for state budgets are over for this decade, a new national analysis says – and that could be trouble for future funding of pre-school, K-12 education, and other spending promises that were made this past legislative session.

Although Iowa looks pretty solid, the National Conference of State Legislatures released a report that suggests that overall, states' revenues have peaked and that officials are destined for some financial belt-tightening.

Nationwide, the explanation is that states are seeing weaker revenue projections, mostly because of the housing slump, while projected spending is growing.

THE LATEST FROM ODDEN & PICUS: SCHOOL FINANCE ADEQUACY

Their review of the evidence has uncovered individual educational strategies that work. One of these strategies includes class sizes of 15 in grades K-3. With the rapid growth in some of the metro school districts, there is not enough space to accomplish this.

Other strategies include school-based instructional coaches as part of ongoing professional development, individual and small group tutoring as the first intervention for struggling students. In addition to deploying resources effectively, successful schools used databased decision making – making use of both standardized tests and curriculum-focused, formative assessments. They also engaged teachers in collaborative work centered around the instructional program, produced a professional school culture, and had teacher, principal and district leaders – which, fortunately at the top level, we seem to be ahead of the game in the metro area.

From their studies, Odden and Piccus recommend four key aspects of school finance adequacy

*Identify what it takes to dramatically improve student performance.

*Cost out those strategies. Make sure the current amounts are being used effectively before adding more resources.

*Surround any school finance reform based on an adequacy study with a sharp accountability system. Everyone needs to be held accountable for results.

*Establish some constraints to ensure that schools use key resources as part of a strategy to double student performance: instructional coaches, tutors, and formative assessments for databased decision making.

THE TEACHER PAY QUESTION

“All teachers are not doing the same job, but I can’t say that in a faculty meeting,” Susan Bischoff, 4th grade teacher in Manatee County, FL.

Pay for performance “would be fighting a culture and a mind-set” that distrusts any behavior that distinguishes one teacher from another. Ford Morishita, Oregon.

Reward teachers along the four dimensions they studied: the learning gains of their students, demonstrated and shared skills, new roles and responsibilities, and market value. Standardized test scores, for better and/or for worse, will need to be included in any plan.

It will also take more than just paying teachers for more professional development. “It is important that teachers not only attend, but go and use what they learn. There are teachers who go to every professional development opportunity in my district because they are paid for it, but it has no effect on what they do in their classroom,” Lisa Suarez-Caraballo, Cleveland.

One of the fresh ideas that emerged from the group is finding a way to pay teachers not just for raising student test scores, but also using assessment data to guide their work with students, a teacher practice that is widely thought to improve instruction.

Another is to consider paying relevant subsets of teachers for academic gains – all 3rd grade teachers in a school, for instance, or middle school teams that work with the same group of students.

A major function of assessment should be to gather data about what students have or have not learned so teachers can decide whether the students are progressing toward meeting standards of the goals of a course or subject – and if not, what to do next to improve their learning.

EDUCATION WEEK

HOW SOME HIGH SCHOOLS ACCELERATE LEARNING FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

1 – focus on preparing students for life beyond high school instead preparing them for graduation.

2 – the focus should be on academics, not rules.

3 – Teachers and administrators should express consistent views about achievement-related school goals.

4 – teachers need to embrace external standards and assessments rather than simply tolerate them.

GAINING TRACTION, GAINING GROUND
The EDUCATION TRUST