



French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited America in 1831 and recorded his observations about American society in a detailed study called *Democracy in America*. One of his most important observations was the way Americans took responsibility for the greater good in communities. He reminded us that “America is great because she is good. If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.” Part of the greatness we know as America has been people’s willingness to support government services like a public system of education. Decisions in recent years have resulted in the practical erosion of that support. It is time to examine the potential future of our state and to hold our ourselves and our elected representatives accountable as the implementers of our vision and stewards of our resources.

According to Minnesota state finance commissioners who have served 18 of the past 22 years—under Republican, Democrat, and Independent administrations—we should be concerned about the current status of state support for our schools. Former commissioner Jay Kedrowski warns that Minnesota must address core financial issues or shortfalls will compound. Pam Wheelock, finance commissioner in the Ventura administration, believes that the state’s budgetary problems are different than those that have occurred in the past because Minnesota has not had robust economic expansion or strong growth in this decade. “Local governments and schools have been feeling pinched for quite a while already. They don’t have a lot of capacity to absorb cuts this time,” says Wheelock. John Gunyou, finance commissioner during the Carlson administration, blames tax policies that have failed to keep up with inflation and forced much of the burden back on to local governments. Peggy Ingison, who served under Governor Tim Pawlenty from 2003 to 2006, describes a tax structure that is out of sync with the current state demographics. Wayne Simoneau, finance commissioner under Republican Governor Arne Carlson, cautions that if we don’t fund education properly, Minnesota’s economic problems will become chronic.

These are the most experienced and knowledgeable finance people to serve in state government in recent decades, and they all agree that we need fundamental change in how we collect and distribute resources. Our need to invest in the future of Minnesota, particularly our public schools, is not a partisan issue; we must address it collectively.

To understand where our public system of education is headed, it is useful to do three things.

- 1) Examine the past, including Minnesota State Constitution and the ideals upon which public schools were founded.

Minnesota State Constitution: ARTICLE XIII – MISCELLANEOUS SUBJECTS

Section 1. Uniform system of public schools. The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it is the duty of the legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools. The legislature shall make such provisions by taxation or otherwise as will secure a thorough and efficient system of public schools throughout the state.

- 2) Examine potential scenarios for the future based on the choices we are making in the present.
- 3) Become engaged in promoting the best possible outcomes for our kids and ourselves.

We have already begun to experience deterioration of our state economy resulting in inadequate commitment to early childhood programs, increased class sizes, rising jobless rates, and aging infrastructure. We have placed ourselves and our kids in the position of playing catch-up. We need to do what we can to ensure the distance between where we are and where we need to be doesn’t grow more beyond our ability, or theirs, to cover the distance. **We need to be good to be great.**

These materials are provided by:

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