

What Now?

By Shari Prest, Ark Associates

Experience from the past, hope for the future, and the need for change have been the driving dynamics of this historic political season. People are participating at higher levels than at any time in recent election cycles. As Champions for Children™, we are challenged to learn from what is happening around us and to apply that knowledge to improve support for public education and the students it serves.

Government, education and research leaders continue to collect and share statistical and anecdotal information about what has and has not been effective in improving the outcomes of teaching and learning. We know that students attending traditional public schools do as well as or better than their peers who attend private schools and have similar life circumstances. We know that although some charter schools perform very well, overall outcomes do not exceed regular public schools. We have learned that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the accompanying standardized testing is not a panacea for underperforming kids or schools. Although these may all be well-intentioned initiatives for improving public schools, our **experience** tells us that we need a comprehensive and consistent approach to closing “achievement gaps between Minnesota’s students and their peers in the highest performing nations of the world, while also closing gaps between groups of our own students here at home.”*

So what now for educational leaders facing a faltering economy, a state budget deficit of nearly a billion dollars, changing demographics, and the emergence of a global knowledge economy? Do you lie low and wait for the economy to improve? Do you accept that inadequate funding may result in inadequate schools? Do you accept a discussion about jobs and the economy that don’t acknowledge the educational foundation of both? Do you permit a state deficit to translate into a deficit in our ability to compete globally?

We have learned through the current political cycle that hopes for the future inspire stakeholder involvement, commitment and funding. *Minnesota’s Promise, World-Class Schools, World-Class State* has articulated that **hope** through a clear, bold, and practical vision for schools. Champions for Children™ have an important role to play in knowing, sharing, and promoting that vision. What now? Now is the time to expand communication opportunities—engage parents, employers and legislators in seeing beyond the challenging present to the possible future.

Minnesotans and other Americans have demonstrated their desire for **change**. Although the history and success of our schools have been grand, global changes and competition require that we be different. The status quo is no longer acceptable or fully defensible.

“Public education in Minnesota is at a crossroads. In one direction, the road continues down the path we are already on, sustaining the strategies and structures that have made Minnesota an educational leader within the United States.

In a second direction, the road departs from the status quo and heads toward change, but after a short distance it splinters off into many different pathways that lead to many different destinations.

In a third direction, the road also heads toward change, but it does not diverge in different directions. Instead, it leads toward a single destination that is different from and better than the place where the journey began.

*Minnesota’s Promise seeks to put our state on the third road, down which schools and communities can walk together. As we embark on that journey, we must recognize and remember that amid our rapidly rising diversity, we are all Minnesotans, and that ultimately we will sink or swim together in the global labor pools of the Information Age.”**

**Minnesota’s Promise, World-Class Schools, World-Class State*, January 2008, www.minnesotaspromise.org