

Section 3: My Message/Education Issues

As Minnesota Teacher of the Year, you would serve as an ambassador for the teaching profession. What would be your message to your profession and the general public? What are the major public education issues today?

Culturally, we sit on the tip of a growing wave of knowledge and information that increases by more than 30% each year. Simply put, the rate at which information is growing obsolesces much of the information we learn so quickly that the information we know is secondary to knowing how to learn. The implications for education are sobering. If we are to build citizens capable of thriving in this new information age, we must help our students develop an entirely new set of metacognitive skills. It is no longer sufficient for teachers to teach students to the point that they master a subject; we must go beyond that and teach students the skills that will enable them to teach themselves. We must guide them to become better problem solvers and more discerning thinkers. Simply put, we must actively draw them into the learning process.

Technology sits at the core of this surge in information, and must be a focus for our efforts at building better citizens. Time magazine selected “You” as the Person of the Year for 2006, with the argument that the technology at the heart of this new informational landscape— Blogging, YouTube, MySpace, video chat, to name just a few—gives a person power for expression, collaboration, and growth beyond our wildest imaginations. Unlike the dot-com bubble of 2000, the technology of today’s “Web 2.0” is user friendly and fast, and its potential is unlike anything we’ve experienced. To help students be a part of this world, we need schools with adequately funded technology budgets, innovative programs to get already overworked teachers the time and training they need to feel comfortable with this new technology, and teachers from all disciplines to strive to develop the technological expertise of their students.

All is not golden in this new age, however. The same technology and access to information that offer incredible opportunities for growth also come with a darker side that creates so many opportunities for youth to travel misguided and dangerous paths. With the same breath that we call for an increased emphasis on teaching students how to learn and how to

handle this new technology must come an equal call for us to redouble our efforts at insuring that our schools are learning communities that deeply care about the students in them.

At the heart of any successful effort to build and maintain such caring schools must be the quality of relationships that teachers build with their students. If we are to help students navigate in the 21st century, teachers must continue to enthusiastically listen to, talk with, and interact with each and every one of their students. In an age fraught with so much individual potential for both good and bad, it is especially imperative that we reach out to the lonely, the picked on, and the struggling. Teachers must welcome all students, discover what motivates them, and let them know through words and actions that we sincerely care about them.

But teachers can't do this alone. First and foremost, we need manageable class sizes at all levels of education. I work with a teacher who last year had 193 students in five classes, nearly 40 students every class every day of the week. The negative implications of such numbers on student achievement and teacher burnout are well researched. What is also well researched is that massive classes make it all too easy for a child to pass through the system with too little interaction with the system and too few opportunities for quality teacher-student interaction. The monetary cost of such education may be high, but the societal cost of a child that slips through the cracks in our educational system is exorbitant. Comparatively, education is a bargain.

We need help from parents as well. Parents must continue to communicate with their children, to believe in them, to be a part of their lives and schooling, and to model lifelong learning so that the messages students get at school are reinforced in an upward spiral of growth.

In conclusion, the educational effort and decisions our society makes in the next decade will have profound and long lasting consequences on our children, our schools, and our country. It is my greatest hope that we make the right choices to enable educators to guide our children with great love and care, and to help us build citizens brimming with the technological and pedagogical skills they need to flourish in this exciting new age.