Two Paths for Education Funding in 2040

The true path is to put our money where our ideals are and make sure schools, cities, counties and states work together on student success for all

By Greg Abbott, MSBA Director of Communications

After reviewing the history of K-12 education through the past 100 years, I know it would be impossible to imagine education in 2120. But for 2040 … I see two paths for education: One path is the brave path where politicians from the federal to the local level make education for all students a priority. The second path is the cowardly, penny-pinching path where everyone is out for their own interests at the expense of any others.

The realist/cynical path

When territorial Minnesota began, schools were set up for a specific purpose — to teach the three Rs to whoever was able to show up. The goal was to give everyone an eighth-grade education, or at least teach kids how to read and sign their name.

As our country progressed, the idea of high school came along. Then college. Americans eventually paid the minimum to cover high school costs. College was left to the privileged kids who went on to become doctors or lawyers — children of the wealthy families.

During World War I, the trend began for the government enlisting schools to help solve national problems. When a third of the male population was recruited for war and found to be malnourished, a school lunch program was set up — administered by the schools. Athletic teams were set up and administered through the schools. Art, music and choir were added to the curriculum, administered by the school. Sputnik caused a national furor to get science education up to par — raising the bar for schools. School nurses, counselors and health courses were added. If society had a problem affecting kids, schools took up the banner.

Not until Brown v. Board did schools even think of giving students of color the same high-quality education as white students. And not until boarding schools closed did the nation think of restoring the culture and education tied to Native American success. Those gaps are still with us today.

A quick look at any MCA test shows that Minnesota has one of the largest achievement gaps in the country between white students and students of color. The state has taken some steps in an attempt to close the gaps — such as full-day kindergarten and discussion of quality preschool and day care opportunities to prepare children for kindergarten. Those are good steps. But those giant leaps can’t come from schools alone.

There is a student achievement gap. But there are also many other gaps that our country doesn’t measure and talk about:

- The incarceration gap: Black men were heavily targeted and incarcerated during the War on Drugs era. Today, the incarceration of people of color is much higher than white people. Where are the legislators, courts and police/sheriff departments working on this inequity? Why is this not measured and reported each year like the MCA testing achievement gaps?
- The mental health gap: Whether from increasing societal pressure, tech advancing at the cost of social interaction or the simple lack of attention paid to mental health problems, there is a huge effect on children with mental health issues — as well as parents with mental health issues trying to raise children. Where are the county reports on the mental health gap? What is being done at city, county and state levels to close this gap?
• The housing gap: Low-income housing is usually in clusters of the most blighted parts of cities. Why are schools forced to have desegregation? Usually the answer follows housing. Lower-achieving schools are usually in low-income housing neighborhoods. Where are the city and county reports on the housing gap? Where is the action to make sure there are enough homeless shelters for families with kids? Where are the reports on this gap? Why hasn’t this gained the attention that MCA testing gaps have gathered?

• The employment gap: Single-family households find it harder for that parent to come home from a long day’s work, cook supper and read a book to their kids. Included in the employment gap is the wage gap — those single parents may be working at Burger King or a minimum-wage job. Who’s going to run their kids to soccer? Who can afford the activity fees for sports?

My point is this: The achievement gap is not the only gap faced by students. There are numerous other gaps that schools can’t solve on their own — and those gaps widen achievement gaps. Schools can educate. Schools might give a child someone who loves them. Schools may give a child a place to feel safe. Schools may give kids a breakfast and nutritious lunch. Schools may send food home in a backpack for the weekend. But schools can’t get their parents out of prison or off drugs or give their parents a better-paying job. Schools can’t make housing equitable. Schools can’t make sure there will be a room at the homeless shelter for that child’s family.

IF Minnesota is serious about the achievement gap, cities, counties and the state have to get serious and work together to close all of the other gaps. Schools have to partner with cities and counties and their state legislators to tackle ALL the gaps. That means money for city and county programs, transportation, housing, health care, and education. A lot of money. Which leads me to my other realist statement ...

Americans don’t want to pay the real cost of educating ALL students.

In every economics class I took, I was told that if I wanted to see what the highest priorities are, follow the money. Is education our top priority? Far from it.

In the 2017 U.S. budget, $639 billion is spent on the military. It’s the third priority behind Social Security ($895 billion) and Medicare ($986 billion). Education receives $70 billion. It is low on the priority list.

In fact, the federal government has made funding education worse by trying to get involved in it. The two major laws have all the best intentions in the world. The problem is that we’re good at saying we want to solve the problems as long as it doesn’t cost any money. But solving problems always costs money.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was signed into law in 1965 as a civil rights law to give all students a “full educational opportunity,” according to President Lyndon Johnson. It was there to help school districts cover the cost of educating disadvantaged students. But in 1970, the federal government tightened the purse strings, saying the money could only supplement, not supplant money spent by states. The money was further linked to “reform” under the guise of testing and No Child Left Behind. Full funding for all the testing and additional programs never followed.

Then the federal government got involved in educating kids with special needs and disabilities. For decades, those children were sent to institutions. But in 1975, Congress ended that practice and required schools to provide educational services to children with disabilities. Educating all students means ALL students.

Again, the right decision with the best intentions. But even then, Congress and the American public did not want to pay the real cost of doing that. Congress was only willing to pay 40 percent of the real cost. That same year, the federal government went back on its word quickly – never paying more than 17 percent of the costs. States were supposed to help cover the remaining 60 percent of the cost, but anyone who follows the money
knows that Minnesota has a huge cross-subsidy of more than $500 million in the past fiscal year. This is money that has to come out of a school’s general fund budget to meet the mandates in special education law. During the past decade, Minnesotans are showing they are not willing to pay the taxes that it would take to cover the costs of special education.

And if times get tough, you only have to look back to the early 2000s when the state ran huge budget deficits. Citizens were not willing to increase taxes to pay for inflationary costs for education. For seven years, schools went with minimal or no increase. The problem is this: We can’t hit a pause button on a child’s education and wait for the economy to turn around. Children still need a quality education. ALL children need to succeed. Starving education funding just made matters worse.

In the next 20 years, we will hit tough economic times. Will we respond the same way with legislators flocking to “no new tax” pledges? Or will the state make education the priority it should be and keep inflationary funding? My realist brain is not very optimistic.

**The brave path: What I really want for education in 2040**

In every respect, I want the American public to again see education as the number 1 priority and fund it as such. I want the American public to look at funding schools so ALL students succeed. No achievement gaps. No special education crossover subsidy. Every student funded and every student achieving to the best of their ability. It is a future with Minnesota roaring as an educational and economic powerhouse, with the other 49 states trying desperately to copy the model.

My mother taught me never to complain about something unless I could offer a solution. So here goes, with some help from my experiences and conversations over 50-plus years.

My solution: Start with each child when they’re born. What does that child need to be ready for school? Does that child have a home to go to each night? Does that child have a parent to care for them during the evening or during the day? If one parent, is there quality day care or preschool for the child? Does the parent have a job that pays enough to afford a house/car/food/clothing? If the parent is struggling with addiction, is there help for that parent? If a parent is incarcerated, do their children have a safe, loving place to go? Is there transportation and opportunities to see their parent? Does that child have someone who loves them? Does that child feel safe? Will that child have enough food and clothing?

Chances are, additional money to help children is going to keep an inflationary increase — if that. The result is that schools have to do MORE and collaborate MORE to reach the needs of all students. That means getting the city, county and state invested in the process as well.

It also means raising the bar on everyone in education. For some examples, I turn to the documentary “love them first” about Minneapolis’ Lucy Laney staff. Most importantly, the principal makes the school a safe place for all students, and the staff are also challenged to love each child the way they are: flaws and all. Find that one strength in the child. Find a way to reach that child and let them know you care about them and are willing to listen to them beyond the day-to-day learning in the classroom. The mindset is that all students are capable and deserving of a quality education.

The Lucy Laney film shows staff going door-to-door before school starts and knocking on every student’s home to invite parents to the back-to-school event. It shows how staff offer that if the student needs a backpack, a coat, shirt, shoes, just bring a dollar to school — that is the kind of effort some schools are doing to make sure they reach all kids and their parents.
These solutions definitely involve schools, but for gaps to close and for education to be truly successful 20 years from now, cities, counties and state government have to work together. And state and federal governments must pay more than lip service to the ideals of educating ALL students because that is a VERY costly ideal. It may mean moving education from the 18th priority in the federal budget to the third-highest priority in the federal budget. It may mean for state legislators that, despite times when the economy turns bad, education funding is paid for by at least the inflationary rate.

By starting with the child and involving the city, county, state and school, we CAN close all sorts of gaps. It takes political will! Remember how Wendell Anderson pushed to create the Minnesota Miracle and fund education at better levels? We just need one such governor and legislature again. We need to think of a better future, a more inclusive future, and be willing to put our money where our ideals are.