



Great Schools Begin at the Ballot Box

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Parents United is an organization that unapologetically advocates for Minnesota's public schools. We help parents and community members from across the state understand the link between the legislative process and local schools—we provide credible information for those parents so they can stand up for our public schools.

In an era of state standards, state assessments and federal education legislation, more and more of the policy decisions that affect our schools are being made in the political arena. Advocating for our public schools means knowing how to be most effective in that arena. It appears that being non political is no longer an option. Today more than ever, great schools begin at the ballot box.

As parents we know that our schools need funding that is adequate, sustainable and dependable in order to meet our children's needs. And we wonder how can this be happening?

We have John Myers of Augenblick, Palich and Associates—national leaders in adequacy funding work completing the funding study begun by Governor Pawlenty in 2003—a study to determine the cost of adequately educating a child in the state of Minnesota. Preliminary data shows that if we really mean ALL children will meet the standards set by the state we are under-funding our system by \$1 billion annually. It is apparent that the funding of our schools is held up in the political process and is anything but dependable and sustainable—let alone adequate.

As parents, we also know that just as our children's lives are complicated and affected by what happens around them, our schools don't operate in a vacuum, they too are dependent on the larger community. We know that Minnesota has one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation—a totally unacceptable situation—and we know that gap is also apparent in health care, housing and opportunities for college access and jobs.

We need to work so that we have a community that cares for children and youth and not expect our schools to make up for what the community refuses to fix. We need the community to care that our children are protected, safe, free from abuse, healthy and have the opportunities we've had.

Yet today in Minnesota 68,000 of our children are uninsured—and that number has exploded in the last few years. 3,000 of them will be homeless tonight, 50% of the users of food shelves are children and 2/3 of the recipients of welfare are children. And even though 71% of Minnesotans believe that a top priority for our state should be making sure that all children start kindergarten with the skills they need fully half of them will not be prepared for kindergarten. Can this really be a surprise when Minnesota spends less than 1% of its budget on early care and early education?

The situation we find ourselves in is one of our making—which means we can unmake it. Our children are losing ground in the political debate. Policies at the state and the federal level are designed to buy today and let our kids pay for it tomorrow. The deciders of those policies are our elected officials and we decide who they are.

In 2004, we saw new lawmakers elected to the House of Representatives who all ran on platforms to increase school funding. In 2005, we saw a huge outpouring of concern for our schools from coalitions across the state. We made a great noise and a great start, but now the work gets harder.

We need to continue being a presence in the political structure. And we need to remember that we are not alone. In a recent Mason-Dixon poll we find 70% of Minnesotans overwhelmingly oppose the federal budget cuts in

children's programs approved by the US Congress earlier this year and the further cuts proposed by the President in the 2007 budget—cuts that affect a greater and greater percentage of our kids here in Minnesota.

- 81% look at the issue of investing in children as a moral issue
- 94% of Minnesota voters want candidates for office who will provide a comprehensive agenda to meet the needs of children youth and families
- And by a nearly four to one margin, voters are more concerned about children in Minnesota not having adequate educational opportunities, health coverage and protection from abuse than about taxes being too high.

We need to be brave and speak out. We need to continue forming coalitions. We need to make wise choices when we cast our ballots and we need to speak to others about their decisions. If our policies toward children don't reflect what we believe, then we need to educate the deciders. We need to support those who reflect our values and reject those who don't. We do that through our personal vote and by affecting the votes of our circle of friends.

Last week, an unprecedented collaboration between families, faith communities, non-profits, community organizers, labor and higher education on behalf of children and youth in the state of Minnesota unveiled their children's platform. The platform supports a broad range of children's issues including education. The purpose of the collaboration is to provide a unified voice on behalf of all children and youth in order to strengthen the public's will to endorse policies and investments which will meet the needs of all children and help them to reach their full potential.

The Minnesota Children's Platform Coalition aims to change the manner in which public policy is crafted in Minnesota and at the federal level. We need to join them to promote and support public policy that addresses children's needs in a comprehensive manner.

Four short years ago, Minnesota was heading into an election season where the debate was dominated by the No Tax Pledge. Imagine an election season where the debate centers around keeping promises to the next generation? A season where we elect legislators focused on children's issues. To focus on children's issues requires thinking beyond the next election.

We have 341 school districts in 134 House and 67 Senate districts. Imagine parents in each and every one of those districts who will step up and speak out for children. Imagine a campaign season where candidate forums center on how we are providing for our children. We can do this.

Let me tell you what you can expect from Parents United. Parents United has been at the table as part of the Children's Platform coalition—we will continue working with this group to elevate children's issues in the coming election—from our website and in our updates, we will link you to information to arm yourself with the relevant data for conversations with your neighbors and friends.

We have been a partner at the table to learn from the Myers Funding Study. We will pass this information on to you in a usable form. We have for you a step by step guide on how to host a candidate forum and we will be happy to help you any way we can at these forums.

Later this summer we will provide questions for you that you can use to learn more about the candidates and their stance on children's issues. And we will produce a legislative report card. But the greatest service we can provide is the service we provide to each other—an opportunity to network with others in the state—to learn from each other. Together we can give a voice to children who are silent in the political process.

Divide your work, team with your local chapter of the League of Women Voters—they are the experts with candidate forums. Invite to these members from your local AAUW, your seniors, early childhood parents, your local realtors association, law enforcement the non profits in your area that work with children and youth.

Work with the after school programs in your district that are effectively making change—programs like We Win institute and faith based programs—invite them to be part of conversations with your local legislators. Help others feel that their voice matters.

Imagine empowered parents in 134 house districts and 67 legislative districts who are able to share their knowledge with each other and their legislators. That's how change happens.

We heard this morning of the disparities we have in Minnesota—gaps that hurt all of us. We know that education is at the very heart of reducing those disparities. By working to create greater equality, we can make change and give our next generation a chance.

As parents, we need to educate ourselves and the candidates. What we make an issue will become their issue. Let's make children the issue in this 2006 election season—their schools, their health, their safety and our future. I liked what Mary Brainerd had to say—for business—for all of us-it is the right thing to do it is the smart thing to do.