

On Tuesday, March 22, 2011, Commissioner Brenda Cassellius testified before the Senate Education Committee on Senate Counsel – SC 8210. Remarks are as prepared.

Commissioner Cassellius  
Senate Testimony  
March 22, 2011

**Good afternoon, Madame Chair and Members,**

I stayed up until 2am reading your bill. Thank you for hearing my testimony today.

As I said yesterday when testifying about the House education proposal, I am hopeful that throughout this legislative process, we will have a serious dialogue about the best ways to serve Minnesota's students, teachers and schools. I am also hopeful that our dialogue is premised on finding common ground.

However, like the proposal offered in the House, the education bill you have introduced makes it very difficult to find common ground.

I must tell you, I am so disheartened by these proposals. I am puzzled by the bill's disregard for the unique and challenging circumstances facing cities of the first class when it comes to meeting the needs of the students who come through their school doors.

It is not my nature to be critical. But as Commissioner, I feel a responsibility to stand up for all of our children, and especially for our most vulnerable children and families - many of whom live in Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth - and whose opportunity for a quality education would be seriously hampered by this bill. And as a Minneapolis resident, and the mother of two Minneapolis public school children, I share a belief that as Minnesotans we are better than this.

We have a rich history in Minnesota of welcoming people from other cultures and walks of life. Our tradition has woven a rich tapestry of diversity in our great state that has enhanced our quality of life. It's what has given us our own special brand of "Minnesota nice."

But today, I wonder where is our shared belief and our neighborly "Minnesota Nice"?

This bill cuts programs that directly support poor kids and kids of color. At a time when the number of children living in poverty is increasing and when diversity is increasing, this bill cuts funding for those very children. It unfairly makes deeper cuts to cities of the first class while increasing funding for wealthier districts. After 60 years of struggling to get it right regarding integration, do we just want to give up? This bill ends our commitment to racially integrated schools. This bill cuts special education and will surely lead to higher property taxes. This bill compromises the Department of Education's ability to provide adequate oversight and support for teaching and learning. And this bill targets public employees and teachers.

Madame Chair and members, we have a constitutional responsibility to provide a uniform system of education to every student. This bill would make it impossible to meet that obligation. After 10 years of NCLB – of bashing schools and teachers, labeling them as failures, taking away their creative passion, and replacing it with testing and false accountability, parents and the public are ready for something more. They want us to change the conversation and find real common ground about the best ways to improve our schools for all our children.

Most of us in this room can agree on the need for some fundamental changes that will improve the way we serve our students. And all of us recognize the serious nature of the budget crisis we face. It is not an overstatement to say that we are at a tipping point in public education and in Minnesota. Our actions this session will determine the future for nearly a million children. Our actions will shape the future of Minnesota's schools. And our actions will set the course for our future quality of life as Minnesotans. We cannot be short-sighted; we must be forward thinking in order to find better solutions we all believe in.

We now have the opportunity to find real common ground – specifically on getting all children reading well by third grade (by supporting Reading Corps), rewarding educational excellence and innovation; supporting early learning; and finding solutions to ensure the best and brightest teachers are in every child’s classroom. We’ve already made one big step together with the passage of alternative pathways – and I firmly believe we can do more together.

Governor Dayton has stated often “that a budget bill is about our values and priorities as much as it is about dollars and cents.” This means we must exercise great thought and deliberation in how we proceed. We must reaffirm our commitment to start from the places of common ground so that we can ensure what we enact is a true reflection of all Minnesotans’ values. Unfortunately, the Senate bill before me today does not reflect the kind of Minnesota values Governor Dayton or I can support.

The Governor and I are eager to begin a serious and thoughtful discussion about the best ways to support Minnesota schools and students. Again, we want to work with you in the areas of supporting our youngest learners, reading well by third grade, ensuring great teaching and closing achievement gaps. We hope to begin that serious discussion soon, so that we may complete our work in the timely and respectful manner Minnesotans expect and deserve from their leaders.

**Thank you.**