

March 3, 2020

To: Senate members hearing testimony regarding the proposed constitutional amendment aimed at clarifying and strengthening the state's commitment to provide quality public education.

From: Steve Ford, retired teacher, writer, author

While I agree with the sentiment behind the proposed amendment, I'm concerned and uncertain about how new language will translate into student success. It's similar to the demands we make about other untenable situations: we use terms like *unacceptable* all too often when addressing poverty, discrimination, sex crimes, domestic violence, gang-related violence, and, yes, the achievement gap.

The solution to our "education problem" will not be reached by proclaiming our obvious failures to be unacceptable, or worse—illegal—and then adjudicating plaintiffs' claims against school districts, individual schools, teachers, or units of state government. Wouldn't it make more sense to face up to the reasons *why* our kids are failing?

In my view, our teacher-training institutions are ground zero for education reform. If teachers are failing to teach our youngsters how to read (and I would add write and speak clearly), wouldn't it be prudent to examine the quality of the training they're receiving in college? With all the attention our education problem is getting, I can't recall seeing or hearing any input (interviews, articles, editorials) from teacher-training institutions. Their silence is deafening and, I fear, telling.

*Education Week* published a report a few months ago that included a graph: when teachers were asked who they would credit "most" for their understanding of how to teach reading, only 5% of those surveyed cited their pre-service training institution. (Others credited staff development, colleagues, classroom experience, personal research, their school's curriculum, and "other.")

Now, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education does not *directly* oversee training institutions, nor does it accredit them. *Private* organizations, like NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education), TEAC (Teacher Education Accreditation Council), and AACTE (The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education) recommend training institutions for accreditation, and then the Minnesota Office of Higher Education bestows it on those institutions. Perhaps we could do better on our own, as a state?

I believe, from experience, that the single most important move we could make right now is to direct our school districts to adopt quality phonics programs and train elementary teachers to implement them, just as states like Utah and Mississippi are already doing, with impressive results. We need to accept the fact that the "whole language" approach to teaching reading has failed; the theory has been debunked, repeatedly, over the last 50 years. I urge members to listen to a report (*At a Loss for Words*) by Emily Hanford of American Public Media; it traces the history of reading instruction in the U.S. and documents the *true* science that explains how our brains learn to decode and understand the written word.

Finally, education is complicated, especially public education. As legislators, you know that as well as anyone. You know that it's failing many kids. You know that many families are stressed and don't always send their children off to kindergarten as prepared as they should be. You must also know how stressed our teachers are and how dedicated they are. The least we can do for them is to make sure they're properly prepared to teach the many subjects they'll be responsible for.

Blaming, shaming, and reconstituting our constitution will only delay and complicate the path to better education, but more rigorous teacher-training programs will yield better teachers. As for children who come to school under prepared? Maybe we should make that illegal too.