

March 15, 2021
Education Finance and Policy Committee

S.F. 0789 by Senators Rosen, Chamberlain & Cwodzinski

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Chairman Chamberlain, Senator Rosen, and members of the committee.

Good afternoon. I am Joseph E. Brown, Sr. – Superintendent of Fairmont Area Schools.

Just as Minnesota is currently experiencing a severe teacher shortage, it is expected that there will be a more serious shortage of skilled workers in the next two years in carpenters, welders, electricians, and plumbers. Can you imagine what the fiscal impact is going to be in Minnesota when 239,000 skilled workers retire over the next 24 months?

What is the problem? Why are students not taking vocational classes?

- The answer is that many high schools have simply eliminated vocational programs with an increased emphasis on preparing students for a four-year college experience.
- Schools have found it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain certified vocational teachers.
- Schools have cut vocational programs due to lack of funding for up-to-date equipment and facilities and the shortage of certified vocational teachers.

We have observed that many students do not have time during the regularly scheduled school day to take a vocational class.

- Due to state and federal academic requirements that result in full high school schedules, many students do not have time during the regular school day to take vocational classes.
- Many of our top academic students are taking required core classes along with a foreign language, multiple college classes, band, choir or orchestra and cannot fit a vocational class in during the regular school day.
- Some of our students that are highly interested in vocational careers have full schedules due to taking core classes more than once, remedial classes, and required classes.

What is the solution?

Fairmont Area Schools has implemented summer welding academy classes and Saturday welding academy classes in addition to summer agriculture classes.

Last year we had 20 students taking a 15-week 4 hour per day welding class on Saturdays: 11 students from Blue Earth Area, 3 students from Granada Huntley East Chain, 2 students from Fairmont and 4 adults. This class has 5 women and 15 men. Fairmont has 20 welding booths.

Currently we have 12 students taking the Saturday welding class: 7 adults and 5 students.

SF 789 should have broad bi-partisan support. The concept is supported by business and labor. This will have a positive impact on all parts of our great state: rural and urban. Eventually most people will need a skilled worker to build or remodel their home whether one resides on the Iron Range, in the metro or greater Minnesota. This legislation will encourage school districts to recruit and retain vocational teachers that may be year-round employees.

Minnesota is blessed with a variety of manufacturing plants that are crying out for skilled welders, machinists, carpenters, plumbers and electricians.

I do not believe any of these three bills will be a very expensive for **three reasons**:

- Very few Minnesota high schools have comprehensive vocational programs with certified vocational teachers.
- Few teachers are willing to teach classes in the evening, on Saturdays or in the summer.
- A limited number of students are willing to take any class outside of the regularly scheduled school day.

Fairmont Area Schools is fortunate in that we have all three: comprehensive vocational programs; teachers willing to teach outside of the traditional school day; and students willing to take vocational classes on evenings, on Saturday, and in the summer.

Schools should also strongly consider hiring vocational teachers on a twelve-month contract and compensate them accordingly. Too many vocational teachers quit teaching to pursue full-time employment in the skilled trades. Minnesota needs well trained certified vocational teachers to provide the appropriate instruction for our students.

The **World's Best Workforce** law requires school districts to produce graduates that are both career and college ready.

The **Tiered Teacher Licensing** law allows school districts to hire Tier I vocational teachers that have five years of experience in the trades.

Over the past 10 years, Fairmont Area Schools has developed the following vocational academies:

- Welding Academy
- Agriculture Academy with a green house and 40 apple trees
- Automotive Academy
- Culinary Arts Academy (Note we hosted the Minnesota Supreme Court and the president of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank Neel Kashkari and former Justice Alan Page)
- Construction Trades Academy

On February 9, 2021, our voters approved a \$6,730,000 expansion of our vocational building by a 67% yes vote that will house the following:

- Johnson Controls HVAC lab
- Expanded Wood Shop
- Construction and Manufacturing Lab to build houses for Habitat for Humanity, fish houses and tiny houses.

Traditionally, schools are only in session 15% of the year. Over the past year, we have learned that education can be obtained anytime and anywhere.

Finally, we always seem to have money for failure, but we do not seem to have money for success. Vocational classes are best taught in block classes of 2-4 hours. We have shown that teachers and students are willing to take vocational classes on the weekend and in the summer. Currently, schools do not generate any state aid for these expanded programs.

Passage of this legislation will produce additional skilled workers that are eager and ready to reduce the shortage of skilled workers. I would be glad to yield to any questions.