

NEWS RELEASE

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Commissioner Approves Innovative SW MN FLY Application



On March 12, 2010, Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Alice Seagren approved the flexible learning year application submitted by a consortium of 25 school districts in Southwest Minnesota. The ultimate goal of the flexible learning year initiative is to improve student achievement. All activities and goals within the initiative are designed with that end goal in mind.

The Commissioner of Education and her staff have been supportive of this process. MDE's high expectations led to an innovative approach to increasing student achievement through improved instruction. A primary goal of the initiative is to provide job embedded staff development that will improve teacher effectiveness. Klint Willert, Superintendent at Marshall Public Schools commends the Commissioner, "By approving this application, Commissioner Seagren has shown her support for local school board decision making, her support for innovation and collaboration, and her commitment to 16,000 students and 1,380 licensed professionals. Commissioner Seagren and her staff should be commended for their vision and leadership."

School leaders and locally elected school boards are constantly being challenged by the Governor and Legislature to be more innovative in their approach and practice. When the Governor asked schools to do more sharing through the concept of shared services, a group of Southwest Minnesota superintendents met in the Fall of 2008 to see what they could do to meet the challenge. The outcome of those initial discussions was the "Improving Student Achievement" flexible learning year initiative. "This is a well thought out plan. We have developed this in a purposeful and intentional way by focusing on research-based best practices and effective collaboration; with an emphasis on student achievement gains for ALL students", said Dave Marlette, Superintendent at Tracy Area Schools.

"From my perspective, the biggest "sell" is the collaboration between 25 school districts and school boards, and the increased possibilities of high quality staff development among districts", said Allen Hoffman, Superintendent at Comfrey Public Schools. Schools in Southwest Minnesota have been sharing staff, technology, business office resources, and administrative services for more than 35 years. This initiative includes collaborating with regional colleges and universities to better align schedules and programs to meet the needs of students of both institutions, and supports the Governor's seamless (K-16) Initiative.

Opponents of the flexible learning year cite issues with the initiative; including, taking away from late August tourism, State Fair participation, and a shortened summer for their student workforce. While

school leaders understand these concerns, they believe student achievement should be the highest priority for local school communities. “We challenge and encourage the Minnesota State Legislature to acknowledge student achievement as the number one priority in the same way that our local school boards have recognized this commitment”, comments Bill Strom, Superintendent of Mountain Lake Public Schools.

The core values supporting this initiative are collaboration, innovation and leadership. “We believe that schools who share a common direction and sense of community can get where they need to be quicker and more effectively because they are traveling on the strength of one another,” concludes Rick Ellingworth, Superintendent of Redwood Area Schools.

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List of 25 Consortium School Districts and Superintendent

ADRIAN, Roger Graff
BREWSTER, Nate Hanson
CANBY, Loren Hacker
COMFREY, Allen Hoffman
EDGERTON, LeRoy Domagala
HENDRICKS, Bruce Houck
HILLS-BEAVER CREEK, Dave Deragisch
IVANHOE, Dwayne Strand
JACKSON COUNTY CENTRAL, Todd Meyer
LAKEVIEW, Chris Fenske
LIVERNE, Gary Fisher
LYND, Bruce Houck
MARSHALL, Klint Willert
MILROY, Bill Delaney
MINNEOTA, Dan Deitte
MOUNTAIN LAKE, Bill Strom
REDWOOD AREA, Rick Ellingworth
ROUND LAKE, Nate Hanson
RTR, Bruce Houck
SLEEPY EYE, John Cselovszki
SPRINGFIELD, Keith Kottke
TRACY AREA, Dave Marlette
WESTBROOK-WALNUT GROVE, Loy Woelber
WINDOM, Wayne Wormstadt
WORTHINGTON, John Landgaard