



## **Fool me twice... shame on me**

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In September at a monthly Education Stakeholders Forum, Education Secretary Arne Duncan made clear his intent to rewrite the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. That statement in itself may be thought of as good news for many educators. But in the same breath Secretary Duncan noted that one of the main reasons he wanted to rewrite the legislation is that it does not encourage the setting of higher learning standards that both students and schools need to strive for. Further, he said that the legislation actually had the effect of encouraging states to lower their standards; and he couldn't understand why states would be reluctant to adopt higher standards. As the Secretary summed it up, "The net effect is that we are lying to children and parents by telling kids they are succeeding when they are not."

While the Secretary's sentiment may sound good at the podium, I believe it is fair to say that here in Minnesota, the current focus on standards and accountability as reflected in No Child Left Behind has been terribly misguided. So Mr. Secretary, please do not fault teachers and administrators for being a bit skeptical in heeding your call. As the saying goes, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

As we all know by now, the NCLB law uses standardized test scores to identify student cohorts that fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress as measured by the current standards that Secretary Duncan believes are inadequate. Yet in spite of the fact that the test scores of Minnesota students continue to rise each year, the number of schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress also continues to increase. For you see, while our kids continue to make progress by increasing their test scores, the federal standards that our schools must meet simultaneously rises. So ratcheting up your scores simply isn't good enough; rather you must ratchet them up faster than the federal government is ratcheting up its standards.

This cat and mouse game between test scores and "failing schools" has led to more than 25% of Minnesota's schools being labeled as failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2006. But of course it didn't end there, as 38% of our schools failed to make the grade in 2007; 49% in 2008; and in August of this year the Minnesota Department of Education reported that once again, the number of schools not making Adequate Yearly Progress increased from 931 to 1,014. Of course the real question we should all be asking is whether it is actually possible that half of all Minnesota schools are doing so poorly? And of course, the answer is no.

A prime example can be found in the case of Edina Senior High School. A senior high school in the first-ring suburbs of Minneapolis, Edina Senior High for many years has had a reputation for its strong academics, as well as its strong athletic programs. And in fact in September 2009 the school released the names of 17 EHS students, who after completing the PSAT qualifying exam were recently recognized as National Merit Semifinalists; a remarkable academic achievement. And in their "Best High Schools 2009" edition, U.S. News and World Report ranked Edina High School among the top 2 percent of all high schools in the nation based upon their high placement test and college readiness scores. Yet in spite of these academic accolades, earlier this year the Minnesota Department of Education listed Edina Senior High School as one that did not make Adequate Yearly Progress. Are you kidding me?

So please Secretary Duncan ... do not be so surprised to find a skeptical response from the education community as you crusade for higher learning standards. For you see, we too recognize that we need to find ways to help more students succeed; but the game that has been played since the inception of the No Child Left Behind legislation in 2002 has left a sour taste in our mouth.

In many ways it reminds me of the game that Lucy used to play with Charlie Brown as he regularly tried to kick a field goal. Sure enough every time Charlie Brown had that football in his sights, Lucy would pull it away at the very last

second, leaving Charlie Brown to fall on his tailbone. Similarly, while test scores continue to improve all across Minnesota, the number of schools failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress also steadily climbs.

So Mr. Secretary ... let's work together to improve student success, but please let's stop playing games.

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