

MINNESOTA QUALITY TEACHING COALITION

Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs *** Minnesota Association of Charter Schools
Minnesota On-line Learning Alliance *** Minnesota Rural Education Association

MARCH, 2005

Proposal for an interdisciplinary teachers license

As a broad coalition of Minnesota educators, we're proposing legislation that directs the State Board of Teaching to create a new *interdisciplinary teachers license*. This license would set high standards for competencies needed to teach in the kind of smaller and innovative schools and programs that today's diverse student population both needs and is demanding.

This new type of license is also consistent with the goals of both federal and state policy – that every student in every classroom will have their learning supported by a *highly qualified teacher*. And, it is consistent with Minnesota's historic leadership in promoting high quality and innovation in its public schools, as well as Minnesota's twenty-year record of expanding both school choice and choices. More specifically, the proposal is for an amendment to MS 122A.09 – as follows:

“The board, in consultation with the Department of Education and Minnesota Quality Teaching Coalition, must adopt rules to license teachers of interdisciplinary teaching and facilitating learning in innovative schools and programs.”

This proposed legislation has been introduced in the House as HF 969 by Representatives Sandra Erickson (R-Princeton), Kent Eken (DFL-Twin Valley) and Frank Moe (DFL-Bemidji). It has also been introduced in the Senate as SF 1291 by Senators Steve Kelley (DFL-Hopkins), Gen Olson (R-Minnetrista), Rod Skoe (DFL-Clearbrook) and Geoff Michel (R-Edina).

The intent of this legislation is to direct the Minnesota State Board of Teaching to establish this new license and determine the competencies and other qualifications it would require. It is also presumed that the Minnesota Department of Education would determine the types of schools and programs where this license would apply and could be used and ensure that, in such situations, it meets the highly qualified teacher requirements in the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation.

Finally, our coalition supports a parallel and longer-term initiative on the part of Minnesota's teacher training institutions and programs to prepare current and future teachers to work in interdisciplinary and other innovative learning environments. And we strongly support both public and privately-funded research designed to track the long-term results of interdisciplinary and other innovative teaching/learning environments in preparing students to become productive and contributing members of society.

Background and rationale for this proposal

Minnesota education leaders – including the State Board of Teaching and officials in the State Department of Education – have been working for the last several years on various elements of the state's compliance with accountability, teacher quality and other provisions of the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation. One such element involves the development and implementation of teacher licensure and other requirements to ensure that every Minnesota public school teacher will be “highly qualified.”

The NCLB legislation provides a number of options for states to use in determining if teachers are “highly qualified,” including college majors, passing content-specific tests and experience at teaching in a particular subject area. While states have flexibility in determining what mix of factors it will use to define “highly qualified,” the law and related federal guidance places a heavy emphasis on teachers being able to demonstrate competencies in core subject areas.

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Please be assured that we strongly support the goal in NCLB of significantly enhancing teacher quality. We also agree that all students and all schools must be accountable for achieving the high academic standards that are also required by NCLB and by related state law. We agree that these two objectives are linked – that achievement of high academic standards requires highly qualified teachers. And we agree that, in settings where learning is organized around traditional core academic subjects, teachers should be able to demonstrate competencies in the core subject areas they teach.

At the same time, a growing number of our state’s students have made the choice or been referred to schools that may not teach core academic subjects as we traditionally think of them – at least not one core subject area at a time. Many of these settings also involve fundamentally different roles for students as learners, extensive use of technology, different and more collaborative relationships between students and adults and very different roles for teachers. In some settings, what we have historically called “teachers” might more accurately be called “facilitators of student learning” or “content acquisition managers.”

These diverse settings recognize the reality that not all students learn in the same ways and at the same pace. No one program can meet the needs of what is now the most diverse cadre of students this country has ever known. This diversity of students and learning styles also comes at a time when federal and state policies have declared that *all* students shall be educated to high levels and that *no* child shall be left behind.

These diverse learning environments also reflect the belief that the ultimate goal of education is to produce effective citizens, productive workers and lifelong learners. The goal is not just an accumulation of credits from having taken traditional courses and subjects in school. Many of these programs work to achieve these broader competencies in different ways than do traditional course and subject models.

Not surprisingly, the competencies needed to teach in these different kinds of settings are also different. But, they are no less rigorous and no less demanding. In fact, we would argue that teachers who don’t possess these different sets of skills are not “highly qualified” to work in these different types of schools. As such, these competencies deserve full recognition in the federal and state-required processes for training teachers and in affirming their qualifications to work in the broad range of teaching and learning environments that are now available – or that will be available in the future.

In summary, we believe the time has now come to formally recognize these realities by creating a new type of teaching license in Minnesota that identifies and codifies the competencies needed to work in non-traditional learning environments. Quite frankly, we feel this approach is highly superior to a continued dependence on temporary licenses, waivers and other approaches that do little more than delay or avoid realities – without the formalized assurances of quality that should come through formal licensure tied to specific sets of qualifications.

Proposal has implications for a growing, vital segment of public education

This is an important discussion because it has significant implications for a growing and vital segment of public education in our state that includes three broad categories of schools or programs. All three are represented in the coalition that has developed this proposal:

- **Alternative schools**, both urban and non-metro, that are often small in scale and place an emphasis on establishing a culture and adult/student relationships that will attract, retain and engage students that have previously not succeeded in traditional educational settings or who want to learn in non-traditional settings.
- **Small, most often rural secondary schools** that are struggling to offer a broad and rigorous curriculum to students – against financial realities that challenge their capacity to offer individual academic subjects that are all taught in traditional courses by teachers who meet content-specific “highly qualified” requirements.
- **Charter and district secondary schools that use a variety of non-course-specific teaching and learning methods**, including project-based learning, service learning, internships, inter-disciplinary

classes and others – all of which require teachers to have different, but still highly skilled competencies. This includes a growing number of district, charter and alternative schools and programs that use a variety of **on-line learning technologies and teaching methods**.

In addition, a variety of **programs within traditional district high schools** have similar needs for teachers with qualifications beyond subject matter competencies. They include certain special education programs with unique programming, programs utilizing community experts, experiential programs such as Outward Bound and many environmental education programs, service learning, on-line learning programs and other programs using interdisciplinary teams of teachers.

Examples of competencies needed for the proposed interdisciplinary license

As noted above, we believe teachers obtaining this new type of license must be able to demonstrate a number of rigorous competencies. While not intended to be a complete list, examples of such competencies include the knowledge or ability to:

- Facilitate interdisciplinary learning experiences that bring students to integrate knowledge, skills and methods of inquiry across state subject-area standards.
- Exhibit the skills of a facilitator of student personal learning plans that can be used to individualize instruction for every student to meet differing learning styles, interests and multiple intelligences.
- Use community, parent, technology and other “non-school” resources to foster student learning.
- Demonstrate skills in creating positive relationships and partnerships with students and families – helping to create the type of culture and environment in which students will be successful and sustained learners.
- Use formal and informal assessments to determine student acquisition of not only required state standards but also broader life competencies such as those needed to be responsible citizens, productive workers and lifelong independent learners.

Commitment to ongoing implementation, research and refinement

In making these recommendations, we are conscious that we are dealing with some very large and long-range issues. The implementation of these recommendations must not be a single set of actions by one or two agencies of state government. Rather, we must be willing to work collaboratively over an extended period of time to adapt our system of teacher preparation, certification, professional development and research and evaluation to meet the changing needs of today’s educational environment and students. More specifically, we are committed to:

Further collaboration with State Board of Teaching, Education Department on details

We have consciously avoided proposing that the Legislature prescribe the detailed language on either the proposed interdisciplinary license or criteria to be used in determining settings in which the proposed license could be used. However, we are committed to working with the State Board of Teaching and Department of Education to develop these criteria, as well as the process for implementing the new license.

Changing teacher preparation for non-course-based learning environments

We are committed to working with traditional teacher training institutions and other emerging resources for teacher preparation and professional development to help establish or strengthen programs to prepare individuals to work in non-course-based and other non-traditional settings. This is clearly a long-term need and investment – in achieving our goal of making formal licensure an option for large numbers of teachers working in such settings. Such a program existed at the University of Minnesota in the 1950/60s and was recognized by the State Department’s (then) Teacher Licensure Division.

Promoting creation of high quality non-course-based learning environments

The organizations that are part of this Coalition are committed to working with the Minnesota Department of Education and charter school sponsors, districts and others to not only help create more schools using non-course-based learning methods, but also to ensure that new entrants are of high quality. This includes working with existing alternative programs, charters and rural and other district high schools to inform them of the options, to connect with technical assistance resources and to help match them with qualified personnel.

Supporting long-term research on student life-long learning outcomes

Finally, we are committed to supporting the long-term research that is needed to rigorously evaluate the impacts of various teaching/learning methods on student achievement over time, on attendance and

performance in post-secondary education and on becoming productive and contributing members of society. Such research can be useful to policy makers and educators in evaluating, comparing and improving what we expect will be a growing variety of teaching/learning methods and schools and programs in which they are used.

Members and supporters of the Minnesota Quality Teaching Coalition

This proposal and rationale was developed by a broad Coalition of organizations that support innovative and often smaller teaching and learning environments. These organizations are associated with smaller and rural districts, charter schools, district and contract alternative schools and district and charter on-line schools and programs. The Minnesota Quality Teaching Coalition also includes individuals associated with a growing number of innovative programs within larger traditional district high schools. The Coalition is chaired by

Wayne Jennings, a highly respected Minnesota educator with extensive experience in the district, alternative and charter sectors. The four principal organizations making up the coalition are:

Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs – MAAP was organized by a small group of educators in alternative education in the early 1980's to provide a forum for networking, professional development and advocacy. Currently MAAP has over 800 members from over 300 ALC's and alternative programs in Minnesota, surrounding states and Canada. Alternative education has significantly grown in Minnesota over the past 15 years – from serving 4,000 students in 1988 to over 167,000 today.

Minnesota Association of Charter Schools – MACS is a membership organization representing Minnesota's 105 operating charter schools and their nearly 18,000 students, as well as dozens of schools approved for opening or in various stages of planning and development. MACS has a number of current initiatives de-signed to ensure the growth and success of high quality charter schools including those on leadership, governance and accountability, facilities, fiscal management and special education.

Minnesota On-line Learning Alliance – The Alliance is a broad coalition of school districts, charter and alternative schools and other innovative educators who make use of various on-line learning technologies and curricula. Founded in 2003, the Coalition has been working with state legislators and the state Department of Education to ensure fair and equitable funding for on-line learning programs and schools and to remove artificial financial and other limits on the growth of enrollment in these programs.

Minnesota Rural Education Association – MREA is an association of 150 school districts located in non-metropolitan Minnesota. MREA was founded in 1985 by a group of school board members and administrators who believed that non-metro school districts needed a clearer voice in St. Paul. MREA is an inclusive, grassroots organization that, in addition to school districts, includes education agencies or organizations and individuals. Its board includes teachers, school board members and administrators.

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In addition, the Minnesota Quality Teaching Coalition includes a number of individuals in higher education, education policy and reform organizations and traditional school districts and district schools. They include:

Deb Andries, president, Minnesota Rural Education Association and Reading First Teacher, Willmar; Jon Bacal, director, SchoolStart; Tim Berg, teacher, Fisher High School; Mark Bezek, superintendent, Fergus Falls Public Schools; Don Blaeser, superintendent, Fertile-Beltrami Public Schools; Rhonda Bonnstetter, teacher, Murray County Central Public Schools; Shirley Buschenea, school board member, Fulda Public Schools; Dan Daley, secretary-treasurer, International Assn for Learning Alternatives; Bob DeBoer, director, New Visions School; Walter Enloe, professor, Hamline University Grad School of Education; Joe Graba, senior policy fellow, Education/Evolving; Ted Kolderie, senior associate, Center for Policy Studies; Vernae Hasbargen, legislative director, Minnesota Rural Education Association; Desta Hunt, at-large board member, Minnesota Rural Education Association, Fergus Falls community Leader; Wayne Jennings, board member, Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs; Jerry Jensen, superintendent, Lake City Public Schools; Jim Kielsmeier, president, National Youth Leadership Council; Valerie Kylo, interim co-director, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools; Terry Lydell, president-elect, Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs; Jay Martini, board chair, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, director, Rochester Off-Campus; Ron Miller, school board member, Foley Public Schools; Synova Nelson, president, Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs, Riverbend ALC, New Ulm; Jerry Ness, executive director, Minnesota Rural Education

Association; Cathy Nissen, charter coordinator, Project for Pride in Living; Aaron North, director, MN Charter Public School Resource Center; Holly Peterson, communications coordinator, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools; Tracy Quarnstrom, director, TRIO Wolf Creek Distance Learning Charter School; Jon Schroeder, coordinator, Minnesota Charter School Forum; Justin Testerman, Charter coordinator; Volunteers of America; Doug Thomas, Director EdVisions Schools; Chris Thompson, legislative chair, Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs, Mounds View Area Learning Center, Tess Tieman, interim co-director, Minnesota Association of Charter Schools; Bob Wedl, director, Minnesota Sponsor Assistance Network; Scott Wurdinger, Coordinator, Experiential Education Graduate Program Minnesota State University, Mankato.