



# Summary of Meeting with Joe Graba

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

*Friday, July 25, 2008*

**Guest speaker: Joe Graba**, senior policy fellow, Education Evolving, Hamline University

**Present:** Verne Johnson, chair; Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland, Ted Kolderie (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), and Wayne Popham (by phone)

**A. Context of the meeting** —The Civic Caucus is in the early stages of conducting a number of meetings on issues related to education.

**B. Welcome and introduction** —Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced **Joe Graba**, with wide experience in education: as a teacher, a union leader, a legislative leader, official of the Minnesota Department of Education, a higher education leader in teacher preparation, and a consultant.

Graba began his career as a science teacher at Wadena Public Schools, and served three years as Vice President of the Minnesota Federation of Teachers. Most recently, he was Dean of Hamline University's Graduate School of Education. In between, he served three terms in the Minnesota House of Representatives; four years as Chair of School Aid Committee. Following his legislative service, Graba was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Education for the State of Minnesota, Director of Minnesota's Technical College System, Deputy Executive Director of the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Interim Executive Director of the Minnesota Higher Education Services Office. Beyond Minnesota, Graba was Chair of the Education Committee of the Midwest Conference of the Council of State Governments and a member of the Education Task Force of the National Conference of State Legislatures. He received his undergraduate degree from Bemidji State University and has done graduate work at Northern Colorado University and Bemidji State University.

**C. Comments and discussion** —During Graba's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus, the following points were raised:

**1. Description of Education Evolving** —Education Evolving is a small, informal think tank on education policy, supported by foundation grants. It is a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University. Education Evolving works nationally to help public education with the difficult process of change. Initially it was involved mainly with states on the architecture of the K-12 system. More recently it has been involved increasingly in urging the fundamental redesign of schooling.

**2. The changed assignment for education** —Asked to talk generally about the state of education in his introductory remarks, Graba said the assignment to education changed about 17-18 years ago. He quoted a leader nationally of school superintendents who said that all through the 20th century until

about 1990 the assignment was accomplishing universal access. In 1900 about 10 percent of the U.S. population graduated from high school. That percentage moved up, as did percentages based on civil rights access and handicapped access. Even as late as the early 1960s many high school students left school before graduating because well paying jobs that didn't require high school diplomas still were available.

In 1983 a famous report critical of education "A Nation at Risk", was issued by a national commission that included Al Quie, former governor of Minnesota, among its member.

As a result of that report and other concerns, by 1990 assignment to education had shifted from universal *access* to universal *achievement*—expecting every child to be a successful learner.

**3. The system can't meet our escalated expectations** —We've escalated our expectations for educating all children, but the education system can't do the job, Graba said. In addition, the system can't control its expenses, said. Asked about educators' attitudes about the system, Graba said no matter with whom you talk—teachers, principals, superintendents, school boards, teacher training institutions, legislators or the public—there's almost universal agreement that the schools aren't meeting our escalated expectations. .

**4. Not a matter of lack of initiative and commitment**— The system's problem isn't because of lack of initiative and commitment by educators, he said. The problem, Graba said, is that the education system has perfected essentially one model. That model is based on assumptions that (a) every class, regardless of subject matter, should require the same amount of time over a quarter, semester or year, (b) every student, regardless of ability, requires the same amount of time to assimilate the material to be learned (c) every student must come to a building called a "school" to take the class, and (d) every class has approximately the same number of students, about 30, and (e) students are expected to learn in essentially the same way, by using the same textbook and listening to the same teacher convey information largely by lecture. That model fits some students, and some others can learn from it, but far too many students are lost in the standardized approach. What's needed is an approach that customizes education for each student. The teacher's role changes to becoming more of an advisor and coach, he said. It's not possible, he said, to mandate uniform success.

**5. Turn to Disrupting Class, by Clayton M. Christensen**— A full discussion of the change from standardized teacher-centered to customized student-centered learning is contained in a new book just published by McGraw Hill in 2008, titled Disrupting Class, Graba said. A co-author with Christensen is Curtis Johnson, an associate of Graba's at Education Evolving. Not an author, but quoted in the book is Ted Kolderie, founder of Education Evolving.

Christensen, a professor of business administration at the Harvard Business School, had originated an idea of "disruptive innovation" in a 1997 business book. Christensen applies that concept in his current book, Graba said. Education Evolving has been working with Christensen since 2001.

Christensen contends that it's impossible for large systems to fundamentally change themselves, Graba said. He outlined several examples from various business sectors where major change started slowly outside established businesses, but then gathered steam, disrupted the businesses, and in many cases, led to their demise. One example was that of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), a mini-computer company that couldn't accommodate itself to the personal computer, Graba said.

Just such a change is beginning to occur in education today, Graba quoted Christensen as saying. That change has its beginnings in what Christensen calls "the non-competitive" parts of education. Some classes just can't be offered in standardized schools, so individual students are beginning to take advantage of online customized courses. The movement has started slowly. It's still imperfect, and much better software is needed. Only 54,000 students were taking such individualized classes in 2001, but that number had grown to 1 million by 2007, and Christensen projects that 50 percent of all elementary and secondary students could be receiving such individualized learning by 2018.

**6. Why change can't happen from the inside** —Returning to the example of DEC, Graba said that the corporation was making 40 to 45 percent profit on large computers, so the culture of the corporation made it impossible to comprehend much smaller margins on personal computers—which at that time still were in their infancy. Moreover, DEC customers wouldn't have permitted such a change.

The same circumstances exist within education, Graba said. The system favors the people who do the best, and they, including parents of the children who succeed as well as their school systems, resist change. We can't expect that schools today will change from organizing themselves around teaching to organizing themselves around learning, he said.

Think, Graba said, about a school curriculum. It's neatly divided among specific courses, all of which begin and end at the same time. If one-third of the students in a class could do all the class work by December, they need to patiently wait out the rest of the year for everyone else. Those students who need more than a September-May school year, just get pushed ahead, irrespective of whether they learned the material or not.

**7. Higher education might even be more vulnerable** —Moving from standardization to customization might be having even more impact on traditional colleges and universities, Graba said. Expenses are rising very fast. It's increasingly difficult for students holding down regular jobs to devote a specific amount of time every day to go to a specific location for higher education classes, he said. Self-directed computer-based classes provide a very attractive option for such individuals because they can go to "class" at whatever time and location is most convenient for them. He cited the popularity of such computer-based learning institutions as Capella University, Walden, and University of Phoenix. Many traditional colleges and universities have no idea of how to cope with the new reality.

**8. Charter schools, too, are part of the established system** —Noting that Education Evolving largely originated the concept of charter schools, of which there now are some 4,300 nationally, including 145 in Minnesota, Graba said that those schools, too, are largely unable to shift from standardization to customization. He said about 20 of Minnesota's 145 charter schools have some aspects that would place them in the forefront of change.

Specifically, Graba highlighted New Country School in Henderson, MN (<http://www.newcountryschool.com/>), which organizes learning around students' projects. Students, teachers and parents develop the projects, each of which would include many learning disciplines, such as math, writing, research,

and literature. Teachers call themselves advisors, not teachers. A key aspect of New Country is that its board is run and operated by a professional practice of teachers, similar to professional practices found among lawyers and doctors.

**9. Support from teachers' unions?**— Teachers unions traditionally have complained that school boards and administrators never gave professional teachers sufficient influence, Graba said. He cited a development in Milwaukee in which union teachers in 12 different schools have organized themselves into professional practices, along the lines followed in Henderson, MN, and still have retained their union membership.

**10. Interest from struggling school districts** —Graba said that he and Bob Wedl, a former Minnesota Commissioner of Education now an Education Evolving associate, are working with an out state school district that has lost 300 students to surrounding districts under open enrollment. The question is whether such a school district can customize learning for students, along the Christensen model, he said. The customized school will call for a radically different organization of teachers and students.

**11. Disruptive technologies are imperfect in early years** —The disruptive technology of customized learning still lacks quality in many respects, Graba said. That is almost always the case, he said, using again the analogy of the personal computer replacing the mini-computer.

**12. Support for pre-kindergarten efforts** —Graba said he supports pre-kindergarten but said it doesn't need to be universal. For many children it is best to let their families provide whatever preparation is needed. Education Evolving through its associate Bob Wedl has helped start a age three to grade three school for lower income children, he said.

**13. Budget problems facing the Minnesota Legislature** —The 2009 session will be very difficult for the Legislature, Graba predicted, with the possibility of starting with a projected deficit of \$1 billion to \$1.5 billion. It has been 17 years since the state passed the first charter school law in the nation. Education Evolving is reviewing the charter school law and will likely be recommending substantial changes. Education Evolving has visited with Governor Pawlenty about possible changes. One objective of Education Evolving will be to lay out some principles to be followed by any charter school, he said.

**14. Importance of motivating children to learn** —Referring again to Christensen's book, Graba said that students need to be internally motivated to learn, rather than simply being externally motivated by others. It's not possible to develop excellence through regulation or command.

**15. Some openness to change among educators** —Asked whether organizations of teachers, superintendents, principals or school boards will be supporting change, Graba replied that some individuals, rather than the organizations themselves, will be supportive. Most organizations aren't change oriented, he said. Unless public education finds a way to be fully involved in moving from standardization to customization, it already might be too late for the public education system to survive, he said.

**16. Thanks** —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Graba for meeting with us today.