



Bob Wedl of Education|Evolving

Keep students motivated and save money by redesigning high school to offer grades 11-14

A Civic Caucus Focus on Human Capital Interview

October 16, 2015

Present

John Adams, Dave Broden (vice chair), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (executive director), Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (chair), Paul Ostrow, Bill Ridelius, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Bob Wedl. By phone: Janis Clay, Clarence Shallbetter.

Summary

Education|Evolving Senior Associate Bob Wedl makes the case for redesigning high schools for the 21st century by creating grade 11-to-14 schools. Those schools, he says, would eliminate the overlap between high schools and postsecondary institutions, which often offer the same courses. And the 11-to-14 schools would offer high school students the opportunity to earn free college credits and credentials, possibly even A.A. or B.A. degrees, while still in high school.

Wedl says that Minnesota's Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) program, created by the Legislature in 1985, is a step in this direction. It allows high school students to take college classes for free, while earning both high school and college credits. He points out the large savings PSEO offers families whose students are earning free college credit and the savings to the state from paying out less for some college courses than for per-pupil aid to school districts. High school Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs have also offered the *potential* for high school students to earn college credits. But Wedl says high schools should drop those programs in favor of students taking actual college classes through programs like College in the Schools, PSEO and partnerships with postsecondary institutions, so students get *guaranteed* college credits.

Although Wedl says we should try to improve the current system, he doesn't see that as really creating the system change the 11-to-14 schools would create. He believes those schools would offer more personalized and more motivating learning opportunities for high school students and even potentially draw back to school students who have dropped out. He points to a number of Minnesota school districts and chartered schools that have developed ways of merging high school and

postsecondary education. As in those examples, Wedl sees openness to the redesign coming from creative school superintendents and school boards, but not from the state.

Biography

Bob Wedl is senior associate at Education|Evolving (E|E), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Minnesota that works nationally on helping public education with the difficult process of change. Most recently E|E has been involved in the redesign of schooling by urging that teachers be provided greater autonomy and flexibility to create and lead schools. This model is referred to as "Teacher-Powered Schools."

Wedl's career in public education includes experience in district and chartered schools, Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) leadership, and higher education. He served as Minnesota's Commissioner of Education in the late 1990s, leading the state's innovative standards and measurement initiatives, use of new electronic data collection systems and adoption of new finance models, including having revenue follow students to the school sites they attend.

In the late 1980s, Wedl served as deputy commissioner of education in the Gov. Rudy Perpich administration, where Wedl was a leader in the development of much of Minnesota's education choice policy. That policy includes open enrollment, postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO) and "second chance" programs for at-risk students. In the early 1990s, he assisted in the development of the nation's first chartered school law.

Wedl served as executive director of planning and policy for the Minneapolis Public Schools. There he led the development of new models for serving students, expanded the Response to Intervention (RtI) model and assisted in developing a "value-added growth accountability model." He also provided direction to the district's nine chartered schools and 33 contract alternative schools.

Because Wedl found persuading the district sector of public education to innovate so difficult, he led the development of Innovative Quality Schools (IQS) an authorizer of chartered schools. When he left as managing partner, IQS was authorizer for 23 of the state's most innovative schools.

He has served as an adjunct faculty member in the education administration departments at the University of Minnesota and the University of Saint Thomas. He has undergraduate and graduate degrees from Saint Cloud State University.

Background

The Civic Caucus has released two recent statements on human capital: [one in September 2014](#) laying out the human-capital challenges facing the state today and in coming years and [a follow-up paper in January 2015](#) offering recommendations for maintaining a high-quality workforce in Minnesota. The Civic Caucus interviewed Bob Wedl of Education|Evolving to learn more about his proposal to merge the last two years of high school with the first two years of postsecondary education by creating grade 11-to-14 schools.

Note: In 1998, towards the end of his role as Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner, Wedl wrote a paper on redesigning the high school of the 21st century by creating grade 11-to-13

schools. (In his discussion below with the Civic Caucus, Wedl said he now talks about this restructuring as creating grade 11-to-14 or even grade 9-to-14 schools.) In the paper, he asked four key questions:

1. What is the purpose of high school?
2. What is the significance of acquiring a high school diploma?
3. Must one complete high school before attending postsecondary school?
4. Can parts of high school and postsecondary school actually be combined, thereby impacting the mission of both?

He noted in the paper that these questions are rarely addressed in a substantive way during discussions on school reform. But he said they should be, if significant reform is to occur. "Although learning is indeed a life-long process, how to best arrange for the initial preparation, including high schools and postsecondary, is at a critical juncture," he wrote. Because the value of a high school diploma is now negligible, Wedl suggested that it is just a matter of time before a high school diploma is replaced with a diploma that serves as evidence of career preparation or pre-preparation.

Discussion

The world was different back in the days of Minnesota Governor Rudy Perpich's administration (1976-1979 and 1983-1991) especially in the field of education. According to Wedl, in those days, people could earn a living with a high school diploma. "There was little competition from the rest of the world," Wedl said. "The U.S. was number one, although Japan was entering the car industry. Higher education was pretty cheap. Kids were kids, so there was one size of education made to fit all. Eleventh- and 12th-grade students were still kids, which they aren't anymore." All of these things were a lot different back then, he said.

The 3-R's were the top priority of the Legislature then. That has now changed to where the six S's are taking their share of available revenue. They are: sickness (health costs), seniors, safety (because of 911), systems infrastructure, save the environment, and scoundrels (in the corrections system). Students are competing with these for funding. Wedl suggested the financing of the current E-12 model is not sustainable and that we must adopt Ted Kolderie's concept of the "split screen": Continue to improve the current system while at the same time engaging in restructuring.

Lots of systems in both the public and private sectors were and continue to be resistant to change, Wedl said. He pointed to Digital Equipment Corporation's refusal to embrace the personal computer as the reason for its demise and Dayton-Hudson's willingness to develop Target as its reason for survival. Public education, too, was and is extremely resistant to change in any significant way, he said. In 1983, Independent-Republican State Rep. Connie Levi shepherded a law through the Legislature that enabled high school students to attend college at their own expense, even without a high school diploma. She had naturally assumed, Wedl said, that high schools would give these students high school credit for the college classes completed successfully. Levi was shocked when many high schools refused.

So, in 1985, when Governor Rudy Perpich proposed that students in 11th and 12th grade could attend college at district expense as a part of his "Access to Excellence" proposal, Levi became its

champion, Wedl said. As House Majority Leader, she ushered that part of the Governor's bill through the House. The bill also required that high schools give high school credit for college classes successfully completed, which is what Levi expected to happen with her 1983 bill. Had high schools embraced Levi's 1983 law rather than fighting it, Wedl wondered if PSEO would even have been necessary.

Underneath the PSEO discussions was the idea of how to use PSEO to really merge grades 11, 12, 13 and 14. Wedl pointed to the significant overlap of high school and college courses, like pre-calculus, British literature, advanced chemistry, Spanish 4, etc. He said kids take those courses in high school and end up repeating them in college, so the state ends up paying twice for the same classes.

Although the primary purpose of PSEO was to enable high school students to access postsecondary courses, there was always the underlying idea that PSEO was actually a systems redesign law, Wedl maintained. That is what his 1998 paper was about. "How could we build a new system that would eliminate that overlap?" he asked. "How do we merge systems? That's a lot different from getting a kid to take college classes. That's very easy to do, but how do you get systems that are in competition to merge? How can we create a new kind of system that would meld grades 11 to 14 into a single system?"

The policies driving those questions, Wedl explained, include the following:

- The purpose of high school must be clarified. The high school diploma is a creation of the 20th century. Up to 1950, eighth grade was the terminal degree for many people. But in the 21st century, a high school diploma alone will be of little value, Wedl remarked. Postsecondary education of some sort will be the new "minimum diploma."
- There was a myth that students can't be successful in grade 13 without completing grade 12. PSEO really destroyed that myth, he said.
- Learning now has to be personalized. Under this new model, Wedl said, the students' needs and aspirations are the drivers of schooling. In the 20th century model, students take what schools have to offer. In the new grade 11-14 school, students will be able to personalize their learning. This will lead to students who are more motivated to learn, students achieving more and more students staying in school. "When schooling is personalized, it has a sense of purpose," Wedl stated. "When learning is purposeful, students become engaged."
- The majority of students who go on to postsecondary are successful in their freshman and sophomore years of college. Wedl hypothesized that at least 25 percent of kids could be successful if they enrolled in those college classes full-time in 11th and 12th grades. "Now with PSEO, student success is validated," Wedl said. "A high percentage of the high school kids who go to PSEO full-time don't have any problem. In fact, their grade-point averages are higher than the college freshmen."

The goal of the proposed redesign that would create grade 11-to-14 schools is that students should be either fully prepared for what they are going to do next in their lives or, at the least, be well on their way, at huge savings to families and also some savings to the state. Wedl

emphasized that postsecondary does not mean four-year liberal arts college only. He suggested the data demonstrate that more students will benefit from a two-year technical college degree in the future. Also, some of the lower-performing students will aspire to unskilled jobs, but even for those positions, the new school must make them prepared.

Wedl described the continuum of post-high school outcomes as the following:

1. Successfully completing an approved work-experience program that includes a semester of a work-preparation seminar and a semester of job experience, leading to a job following graduation. One example of such a program would be for a nursing home assistant.
2. Entering the military, which now requires a high school diploma.
3. Completing a one-year career certification in areas such as welding, construction trades, nursing assistant, cosmetology, etc.
4. Following a trades pathway, such as becoming an electrician or plumber, which requires an apprenticeship period following postsecondary education.
5. Completing a two-year postsecondary program (which may be #4 above). Following employment with the A.A. degree, many businesses will provide financial incentives for the student to complete a B.A. degree. Siemens Corp. in Europe leads with this model.
6. Completing a four-year postsecondary program.

In the redesigned grade 11-to-14 school, students could complete any of the above first five at either no cost to the family or significantly reduced cost. The only cost would be for a four-year postsecondary program. But even there, students could complete the first two years of the program at no cost. Wedl continues to be surprised at all of the discussion at both the federal and state level about providing two years of college free to students. "That assumes we do not redesign the current model," he said. "Heck, we can provide two years free right now. But we choose the status quo over redesign."

PSEO offers cost savings to parents and to the state. Assume, Wedl said, that a full 25 percent of the state's public school 11th- and 12th-graders participated in PSEO full-time. And assume that half of those students took their PSEO courses at state community or technical colleges, while the other half took their PSEO courses at state universities. (This assumption excludes the fact that under PSEO, students can take classes at private colleges and the University of Minnesota, as well.) Based on 2012 college tuition and high school revenue data, the families of all the students in the assumption would save a total of around \$200 million in college tuition and books paid by the state through PSEO. The savings are much higher when the cost of room and board is factored in, since many students would incur those costs if they did not attend postsecondary until they completed high school.

And, under those same assumptions, the state would save up to \$40 million, since the college tuition and books for those students attending state community or technical colleges would cost less than the state aid that would have been paid to the students' home school districts if they weren't enrolled in PSEO. Wedl pointed out that there is only a savings to the state for PSEO students who attend community/technical college, because tuition and books at state universities, the U of M and private colleges exceed the state aid.

These calculations, Wedl noted, include only PSEO students attending postsecondary full time. Clearly, when adding PSEO students who attend part time, the savings would increase.

Since Wedl wrote his paper, high schools and colleges are beginning to use College in the Schools models. In this model, students remain at the high school and high school teachers who are qualified to teach at a college are trained and mentored by a college teacher who also teaches that class at the college to freshman or sophomore students. The high school teacher uses the college teacher's syllabus, textbooks, readings, student assignments, student tests, etc. Students then receive high school credit and the same college credit as if they had taken the class directly from the college instructor.

With this model, the high school pays the college a reduced tuition amount for each student. The model would work as Wedl's suggested grade 11-14 school, except that colleges are often reluctant to permit the high school to offer too many courses, as this reduces the courses students would take at the college. This competition is what prevents the grade 11-14 school from moving forward, other than on a piecemeal basis.

If this country is going to maintain its world leadership position, it's going to have to rely on a highly educated workforce here and around the world. "But then we proceed to make higher education so expensive, you can't do it," Wedl said. "That alone should really be a reason to look at redesign. That's what this grade 11-to-14 concept is."

Wedl said there are various ways to move toward that redesign:

1. Continue to move our current schools into this model as we are currently doing with both PSEO on the college campus as well as College in the Schools. "We do want to continue to improve what we're currently doing," Wedl said. But that alone will fall short of what is needed."
2. Most, if not all, high schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs. Wedl reported that these models were introduced in the period when high school students could not participate in postsecondary learning. In other words, these programs served students well, but perhaps are no longer needed, he said. With AP and IB, students get certificates that can be exchanged later for college credit, *if* the college decides to grant credit. Some do not. Also, some may grant college credit, but not credit that meets any requirements. "Let's just go with models that award college credit and that provide a transcript just like any college student receives for classes taken," Wedl said.

Wedl pointed out that the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which accredits postsecondary institutions in the Midwest and South-Central states, recently imposed a new requirement on high school teachers who are teaching College in the Schools classes. To teach in the program, teachers must now have a master's degree in the discipline they're teaching or a minimum of 18 credits in the discipline plus a master's degree in education. Previously, the high school teachers could have any kind of master's degree in education to teach the college courses, without specific courses in the discipline.

"That requirement eliminates a lot of teachers in the College in the Schools program," Wedl commented. "It is uncertain where the pressure for this new HLC directive is coming from, but there is

obvious competition here. Every time a high school teacher teaches a College in the Schools British Literature class, a college professor doesn't get to teach it. And with on-college-campus PSEO, when the college professor teaches a calculus class, the high school teacher doesn't get to teach it."

"Why don't they work together?" he asked. "Their objective is to educate the kids. Adult needs frequently trump student needs."

There are other ways to redesign the system. Wedl suggested the following:

- At one time, Wedl said, Minnesota had the Area Vocational and Technical Institutes (AVTIs) that were part of the K-12 districts. AVTIs went through grade 14 and were tuition-free. "We could go back to that model, but that's not too likely," he said.
- We could enable all of the institutions-high schools and colleges-to teach in each other's systems. If we did that, Wedl said, both could be more entrepreneurial. A college could teach Algebra II or grade 11 American History and then get the state aid now going to the high school for each student in the class. Or, more likely, a high school could decide which college classes to teach from the course offerings of the college, using qualified high school faculty.
- The high school would no longer offer any advanced classes for high school credit. All advanced classes would be for college credit. The high school teaching college classes would remove the competitive nature that currently exists. Some high schools might become more "interdistrict" and offer the postsecondary learning models that motivate more students. Clearly the digital platform could be used where students access college-level classes online from anywhere in the world and have that learning validated. "That would really be a way to open this up," he said.
- The chartered sector could develop this model and thus fulfill one of the purposes intended by the 1991 Legislature: that chartered schools be laboratories of innovation.
- The Legislature could make far better use of the current law that created the "Innovation Zone" by enabling high schools and postsecondary institutions to create a new school where learning for students in grades nine to 12 is personalized, based on their needs and aspirations. The state graduation standards would not apply, Wedl suggested, meaning that all students would be required to attain high expectations, but not in the same areas of study as is required under current state graduation rules. Students would move at their own pace, which would mean that a few ninth-grade students would be earning college credit. Most students would complete a significant part of postsecondary education at no added cost to the state and significant savings to families. In this school, athletics and other extracurricular activities would not be an issue.
- We could follow the Japanese or European model, where corporations and unions do much of the training and/or cover most of the cost of advanced degrees.

A small number of schools in Minnesota are doing a good job of merging high school and postsecondary education. "There are schools where the model is working," Wedl said, highlighting the following:

- Wedl noted that the planning of the first such school in the Anoka-Hennepin School District started in 1999, shortly after his paper was disseminated. The Anoka STEP High School, currently led by Jessica Lipa, is a model that emulates the grade 11-to-14 school. ([See the February 27, 2015, Civic Caucus interview with Lipa](#) .) The school is located on the campus of the Anoka Technical College and students easily take both high school and college classes. The high school has no advanced classes, just as envisioned by the Grade 11-14 school. All advanced classes are college classes. While at STEP, most students complete their A.A. degree or at least a year of college, others complete their career certifications, others easily transition to four-year postsecondary education, while others move right into a livable-wage job.
- Recently, Wedl said, the Staples-Motley School District started Connections High School, in collaboration with Central Lakes College in Staple and the local business community, to put students on the road to completing their career certifications in the trades. The hope is that students will leave Connections High School and move into a livable-wage job in the Staples area, rather than moving to the Twin Cities. ([See the Feb. 13, 2015, Civic Caucus interview with Staples-Motley Superintendent Mark Schmitz](#) .)
- The Bloomington School District has created a new high school/college in cooperation with Normandale Community College and the Minnesota State University-Mankato's Twin Cities campus. Wedl said the program is for "the smartest of the smart," kids who are bored even in ninth grade. The students are taking a lot of classes at the high school, some at Normandale and some at Mankato State's Twin Cities campus. He said this will allow some kids to get their B.A. degrees in high school.
- Mounds View Public Schools followed Anoka in providing students the opportunity to earn a two-year associate degree for free, while still enrolled in high school. The district offers College in the Schools courses in partnership with the University of Minnesota and career and technical education programs in partnership with the Northeast Metro Tech Center.
- Wedl said the Long Prairie-Grey Eagle School District has had a program for the past seven years that allows its high school students who choose to participate to graduate with an A.A. degree. The program runs in cooperation with Central Lakes College in Staples. According to school counselor Jonathan Young, nine students, or more than 10 percent of the 2015 graduating class, earned A.A. degrees while in high school. Eight students in the class of 2016 are slated to do the same. He pointed out that a number of other students at the high school earn college credit through the College in the Schools program or through PSEO.
- The Alexandria School District has established the Academies of Alexandria as the core of its high school program. Students in grades 10 to 12 enroll in one of three academies: (1) engineering, manufacturing, technologies and natural resources, (2) business, communications and entrepreneurship, and (3) health sciences and human services. The district works closely with the Alexandria business community. (See the [July 31, 2015, Civic Caucus interview with Alexandria Superintendent Julie Critz and Alexandria business leader Doug Houska](#) .)

- Technical Academies of Minnesota, a chartered school, will eventually have four campuses in the state: one in Willmar, one in Owatonna that opened this year, and future campuses in Rochester and Jackson. Wedl said the objective is that students will be ready to go into an apprenticeship after high school.
- Academy of Construction and Engineering Sciences (ACES) School, a chartered school, will open in the Twin Cities next year.

"A number of these programs are starting," Wedl said, "but it's a little bit here and a little bit there, instead of saying, 'If we're going to have this highly educated workforce, we'd best get on with it.' That's not happening."

The personalized learning that the blending of high school and college offers can help motivate students who are lagging behind. Wedl said a lot of kids drop out because high school has no sense of purpose, no meaning. But the opportunity to create a personalized learning program by combining high school and college classes that meet students' needs and interests could draw high school dropouts back to school. "We can create the kinds of learning environments that kids are turned onto," he said. "We can set up motivating environments."

Where there is push for the grade 11 to 14 redesign, it comes from local school superintendents and local school boards, not from the state. "I see the continued push to help make the current system better coming from the Governor and Legislature, but I don't see redesign efforts coming from there," Wedl said.

People don't really know about what could be. Perhaps the best way to "move the system" is to inform the public, Wedl said. "What if parents knew that *they* don't have to pay a dime for community and technical college?" he asked. "Wouldn't they demand that the district school board redesign high school to make this happen? Likely!"

"During the recent school board campaigns around the state, have you heard any candidates say they will move to redesign high school so that students will complete two years of college at no cost to parents?" Wedl asked. "Or so students can complete their welding certificate or cosmetologist license or nursing assistant certification-all at no cost? No. No one is saying that. Why don't they say, 'Let's do it here?' We need to use the power of information to convey what could be."