

ISAIAH/GRIP Public School Funding Legislative Statement January, 2005

Our Vision and Values: The Promise

ISAIAH is an assembly of 81 faith based congregations and non-profit organizations in the metro area and central Minnesota. We are committed to basic human rights and economic and racial justice for all people. We promote a vision of vital, thriving, and hopeful communities, where all people are welcome, and where the equality, dignity, and opportunity that are everyone's God-given rights are acknowledged by all.

This vision is also at the heart of our democracy and of our way of life in Minnesota. We believe in a Minnesota where everyone has a chance for a better life, where everyone has equal opportunity and access to the things that make Minnesota great.

Nowhere is democracy's vision made more concrete than in the fundamental promise to children implied and stated in the founding documents of our state and nation. This is the promise that all children, including the poor, the immigrants, the students with special needs, and the kids of color will have equal opportunity and access to a quality public education which will give them a high level of success.

Broken Promises:

Minnesota has a great education tradition. We have invested in our children's public education and, as a result, in our state's well-being. We know that our continued prosperity requires a strong educational system, E-12 through college. But today we are at a crossroads. There has been a series of policy decisions at the state and federal level to disinvest, under fund, and cut funding for public schools. These policy decisions put our children and the future of our communities in jeopardy. They are eating away at our schools and setting them up for failure.

1. Federal Under funding:

- a. Special Education (IDEA): the federal government promised to fund this mandated program at 40% above the regular per pupil state allocation. The funding has never been more than 17%, but the costs have been much higher – \$250 million higher statewide. Public school children pay the price. The promise was broken.
- b. No Child Left Behind: this federal mandate promises that all children will reach high goals for educational achievement. However, NCLB only provides new resources for costs of its required tests plus selective grants to a minimal number of schools. It provides only 3-4% of school districts' budgets. It does NOT provide revenue to pay for specialized teaching and supplemental curriculum to help children of poverty, special needs children, English Language Learners, or other at-risk children meet high standards. Once again, the promise is broken.

2. State Under funding and Cuts:

- a. Lack of Inflationary Increases: over the last 14 years, public schools got an average real revenue increase of 1% a year per pupil when almost every expense from paper to fuel rose far more steeply. This came at a time when the needs of students in public schools were increasing dramatically and under funded federal mandates were draining revenue from school budgets. The state has not met its responsibility to fund public schools adequately. The promise is broken.
- b. Tax Shift: in 2001, a plan to decrease the portion of local property taxes which funded public schools and shift the responsibility to the state level was instituted. But no new state revenue was created to pay the bill. This funding shift and the resulting state budget problems led to freezes in the per pupil funding and \$622 million cuts in targeted funds. 30% of these were cuts in services for at-risk students. Needed programs in other community-building health and human services were cut. Again the promise was broken.

Keep The Promise:

Demographically, Minnesota's population of high needs children is growing. As children's needs, educational expectations, and costs are increasing, education funding has not kept pace. Class size across the state has increased; programming for at-risk and gifted children has been cut; extra-curriculars have been reduced, and schools have been closed.

At the same time the following is true:

1. Minnesota ranks 26th in the nation in size of tax payments measured as a percentage of personal income. (Minnesota Budget Project)
2. Of the upper Midwestern states, Minnesota enjoys the fastest growing economy and the highest per capita personal income. (Corporation for Enterprise Development)
3. Minnesota ranks only 23rd among all states in its per pupil spending for 2001-02 (the latest year for which data is gathered), and over the period 1992-2002 Minnesota's per student expenditures were less than the national average. (Education Week, January 6, 2005)
4. Lack of financial support is seen by the public as the major problem facing public education. (36th Annual Gallup Poll on Public Education)

It is time that our governor and other elected leaders demonstrate bold leadership – accountable to the fundamental values and beliefs of our country and our state. We call on them to join with us to keep the promise. Provide the resources to meet the ACTUAL COST of a high quality education for each child in our state. Assure that each child in Minnesota has equal opportunity and access to a high quality public education.