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## Building Leader-proof Teams: *An Interview with Brenda Cassellius*

by John J-H Kim

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# Building Leader-proof Teams:

## An Interview with Brenda Cassellius

MINNESOTA COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION DR. BRENDA CASSELLIUS has held just about every possible position in education—she began her career as a paraprofessional, became a social studies teacher, worked her way through the administrative ranks, served as an academic superintendent in Memphis Public Schools, and was superintendent of Minnesota’s East Metro Integration District. As academic superintendent of middle schools in Memphis, Dr. Cassellius is credited with making reforms at the middle school and district levels that helped to narrow the achievement gap. As an associate superintendent in the Minneapolis Public Schools, she was responsible for leading the implementation of the Minneapolis Secondary Redesign, an effort designed to better prepare students for college by increasing alignment between middle schools, high schools, and colleges.

Now as Minnesota Commissioner of Education, Dr. Cassellius has worked with Governor Dayton to launch *Better Schools for a Better Minnesota*, a plan for education reform focused on improving funding for education, closing the achievement gap, and developing a more effective system to measure student performance. The state is working on systems to increase teacher and principal effectiveness, improve literacy, and expand access to quality education for all of Minnesota’s school children, particularly those in the rural areas of the state.

Dr. Cassellius is simultaneously spearheading a reorganization of the state Department of Education away from a compliance-driven organization to one that offers better support for teachers, superintendents, and district leaders.

Dr. Cassellius graduated from the University of Minnesota, earned a master’s degree in secondary education from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, and received her Ed.D. in leadership and organizational policy from the University of Memphis. She is the first person of color to serve as education commissioner in Minnesota. In her spare time, she plays in a women’s hockey league and water-skis.

In this edited interview with DMC CEO John J-H Kim, Dr. Cassellius discusses Minnesota’s recent legislation that opened the door for alternative pathways to teacher licensure, the importance of working in teams, and her ideas for assessing student academic performance. ▶

**I understand that Governor Dayton was a former teacher. How does his having that background affect your role? What's it like working for him?**

It's wonderful because he understands teaching and education. And, he didn't just teach anywhere—he taught in New York City, through an alternative certification program. He has a passion for kids, understands what it takes to be a teacher, and knows the importance of parental and community involvement. It's unique; he really understands what we do, and he's a great partner to me.

**Minnesota recently passed a bill to allow alternative pathways to certification for teachers. Why is this bill so important, and what do you hope to accomplish with it?**

Governor Dayton set the vision out of the gate: he wants better educational outcomes for students, and the way to do that is to get better teachers. This bill is about getting better teachers. We currently have about 80 Teach For America corps members in Minnesota, so there's already a precedent for alternative licensure in the state. They've been trying to get alternative pathways approved for the past three years, but the legislature had not been able to pass anything; this is a big step for us. This is important to us in terms of recruiting. We want to engage mid-career professionals, bring people with different backgrounds into the mix, and get some new blood in the profession. We don't have a lot of new teachers coming into the profession in Minnesota, so we need to be able to recruit new teachers, and this is

one way to do that. I think having a mix of people from different backgrounds keeps people innovating and doing great work.

**So, it's not just about needing more teachers. It's about needing a new mix of teachers and getting some new blood. You have a diversity of schools in the state; Minnesota covers a large area and there are some urban districts and some very rural districts. How do you see alternative pathways to licensure playing out differently in urban and rural districts?**

It's still a long process—this is not something that's going to happen overnight. We have strict requirements in our state for becoming a teacher, and this legislation is not lowering them. But, our rural districts that are having difficulty finding teachers can use alternative pathways for people who are mid-career and want to become teachers, or for teachers who want to renew their licensure, or get licensed in a different subject area. Urban districts can do the same. It's really all about finding new teachers and creating better opportunities for all our students whether they are in rural or urban districts.

**And, you're pairing this new alternative certification with a new system of teacher evaluations.**

Yes, it's really about developing a whole human capital system—looking at recruitment, induction,

**Minnesota Fast Facts**

- ~837,000 students statewide (2009-2010)
  - 75% White
  - 9.7% Black
  - 6.7% Hispanic
  - 6.3% Asian
  - 35% Free/reduced price lunch-eligible
  - 7.3% ELL
  - 14.5% have an IEP
  - 78.8% live in a rural school district

- 52,839 teachers
- 493 school districts
  - 143 of which are charter schools
  - Largest district is Anoka-Hennepin, with 39,904 students
  - Only 15 districts have more than 10,000 students

Minnesota Department of

Education

- The state spent \$6.9 billion, representing 66.8% of total K-12 funding in FY2009 for Minnesota.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, and the State of Minnesota Management Budget Office

professional development, developing a career ladder, and putting in place evaluation and support systems, all the way up to the superintendent level.

We're really focused on every aspect of leadership. It's about building school culture, engaging the community, and developing high teaching standards with high-quality professional development. I'm not interested in drive-by professional development; I want to develop tools that teachers can use to continue to practice their craft, like professional learning communities. And, I want to create regional centers of excellence where teachers can go to work together and learn from each other. That's part of our *Better Schools for a Better Minnesota* agenda; we're planning on starting with three regional centers of excellence and expanding from there.

It's also about technology and using technology to help teachers develop their craft. We want to have teachers host meetings and webinars that anyone can attend, and have meetings that are video broadcast so that teachers everywhere can watch and learn from each other. It's about using technology to develop different strategies in human capital, engaging the teachers in Minnesota, and getting them excited about these new opportunities. One really exciting part of the law has been how the pre-service agents and non-profits have to get together to share best practices in teacher education and development. I'm really excited about that—I wrote that part in!

**Given your background working within districts, what is your vision for how the state Department of Education will interact with districts to help them?**

I want us to be a collaborative agency. I want us to really partner with districts to help them in their work. We are working with great teachers and principals to expand the capacity of the agency; they are responsible for helping us change the system. We no longer want to work in vertical silos; we want to work together with districts horizontally across silos and be supportive of their work to really make change happen.

**Is it hard to be supportive and hold people accountable at the same time?**

No, you just have to give people enough time to do what you're asking them to do. Nobody fails to meet a deadline on purpose—you have to help them where they need support. You have to invest time at the beginning to get to know districts and let them know that you're there to support them. The relationship has to come first. Accountability increases because you've had those early conversations. I'm not coming in with a stick; I'm coming into a district to help them and support them, and they know that.

“I'm not interested in drive-by professional development; I want to develop tools that teachers can use to continue to practice their craft, like professional learning communities. And, I want to create regional centers of excellence where teachers can go to work together and learn from each other.”

**One of your priorities is developing new assessments. What's driving that decision?**

Minnesota has great overall student performance, but that's not the case when you look at specific groups of students. Minnesota has a huge achievement gap. AYP is a broken system; it's narrowing the curriculum, and schools end up focusing on reading and math at the expense of other things that keep kids interested and motivated in school, like art, music, world language, and physical education.

I have this crazy idea of assessing kids completely differently—having them work in teams to solve problems and assessing them on how well they worked as a team, but that's way down the line ▷

right now. That's something I'd like to see implemented in a few years, but I think we're far from that now.

“I'm not coming in with a stick; I'm coming into a district to help them and support them, and they know that.”

**You're talking about assessing skills that people have to have to be successful—it doesn't sound that crazy.**

Exactly. It's about looking at the skills that people have to have in a real job. No matter where you go or what you do, you have to work together as a team to solve problems. Most jobs don't come with an orientation manual; you have to figure out what you're supposed to be doing when you get there. And, you have to work together.

Humans love to solve problems—it's in our DNA. That's why people get really into Sudoku

and crosswords and board games. It's engaging and motivating for people to solve problems. So, what I want to do is assess students on how well they solve problems, and how well they can work together as a team. How well do you problem solve? How well can you communicate what you're doing to solve a problem? How well do you work with other people?

More fundamentally, I think that we need to get to a point where the assessment is aligned to the instruction; that's always been part of the teaching and learning process. As long as you've had teachers, teachers have been assessing students; it's not new that we want to know that they've met the objective or they've met the standard. And then, teachers determine, "Well, what do I do next?" That's part of the craft—figuring out what to do next to either stretch their thinking further or help them understand the concept better. And so, making sure that tests are aligned with the goals of instruction is crucial.

In terms of the overall school accountability, obviously you're not going to get to 100% proficiency every single year for all of your students, unless you have a very low target; that's why AYP is such a mess. Some schools have other factors that are challenging for them, like students who are learning English, students who move around

## Better Schools for a Better Minnesota: A 7-Point Plan for Achieving Excellence

<b>Point 1</b>	<b>Funding Education for the Future</b> — investing in early childhood education and targeting resources strategically.
<b>Point 2</b>	<b>Better Early Childhood Education</b> — expanding K-12 to include pre-kindergarten; developing statewide all-day kindergarten.
<b>Point 3</b>	<b>Raise the Bar and Close the Gap</b> — setting targets to close the achievement gap and rewarding innovation and excellence.
<b>Point 4</b>	<b>Reading Well by 3rd Grade</b> — launching statewide literacy campaign to ensure all students can read by 3rd grade, focusing on literacy in early grades
<b>Point 5</b>	<b>Support Teaching for Better Schools</b> — creating alternate pathways to teacher licensure, and developing a statewide teacher evaluation and development system.
<b>Point 6</b>	<b>Better Testing for Better Results</b> — focus on developing better assessments to measure growth.
<b>Point 7</b>	<b>Department of Education that Provides Educational Leadership and Support</b> — repositioning the DOE to support teachers, schools, and districts.

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

a lot, students who are new to the country and have never had any education, kids in poverty, or significant racial segregation in a school district. There are all of these different elements that have to be overcome.

**While you were in Memphis leading the middle schools, you had an impressive record of closing the achievement gap. What are some of the things you want to accomplish in Minnesota with the initiatives that you've laid out?**

I hope that whatever I build in a human capital system is leader-proof.

**That's a great term. Tell us about what you mean by leader-proof.**

It means that it doesn't matter who's in the governor's chair or in the commissioner's chair. What matters is that the stakeholders think the work they are doing is so great that they want to continue to do it no matter who sits in these chairs. It's developing a team and a system that will live on. It's my job to build that internal capacity. In Memphis, we called it the Flywheel: you start building on your own personal mastery and building your own team, and then, that internal synergy starts to cook up and starts to extend out to teachers and stakeholders and parents and the entire district.<sup>1</sup> That kind of excitement is really contagious, and ensures that your systems and practices will continue.

In Memphis, we built a team. We had this really good mix of brand-new, first-year, excited, fired-up principals, and a very strong set of experienced principals. We divvied up these 31 principals into six cohorts; each cohort was led by one of the experienced principals, and then we also all worked together as a team of 31. We started by developing a high level of personal leadership and personal mastery, and really focused on improving our relationships with each other and with our staff and stakeholders. It's that kind of culture-building and teamwork that makes you care more about the overall success of your entire team than you do

about your own individual success. And that's what makes it leader-proof.

Building that culture is what I'm doing at the state level with the superintendents. They all have my personal phone number, and I call them back immediately if they call me. I've spent a ton of time going out to greater Minnesota to visit schools, build that relationship with the superintendents, and have them be part of the team. We had the Back-to-School Superintendents' Conference in August, and I was there facilitating it all day long. That had never happened before. They were so excited and thrilled. It's that personal engagement and caring about their work, really understanding the context of their work, and listening to them that allows you to build a team that's committed.

“And, you have to know that you will fail. You have to be okay with that. You get right back up again, maybe make some changes, and you try again.... You cannot continue to wait around.”

**By leader-proofing, you mean you're creating a system and culture that outlive your tenure at the state. Ironically, you're doing that through incredible personal commitment and investment in building a team.**

Yes, I guess it is ironic, but when you have everybody working together like that, they come to know the value of what it is to work in a team as opposed to in isolation. After that experience, no matter where they go, they will search for a team. They will yearn to have that feeling again, and they will want to create it for themselves. ▷

**So, there are inherent benefits that you get from teamwork.**

Absolutely. I wrote my dissertation on teamwork and on professional learning communities, and how they are necessary to move a school from not-performing to high-performing. I created a team assessment. You need to have all these different elements to make things work. The team assessment evaluates whether people can articulate a shared purpose. It also assesses the strategy—

“I’m not afraid to move beyond niceties and really talk openly and honestly about the real challenges that we have in educating all children. If we don’t talk about our problems, how are we ever going to solve them? We have to be willing to talk about the hard topics.”

whether it’s clear and whether everybody understands what the core strategy is for change at the school. It assesses the structure and processes of a school and whether those are understood. It assesses how data is used, and how to recognize the effective use of data. It looks at the people and whether they are in the right spot, and the leadership and how effective that leadership is.

I assessed each of my 31 schools in Memphis because I wanted to validate the team assessment. What was amazing was that when you give this assessment, it tells you exactly what’s broken. And if you give it to a high-performing school, you can see that all these systems connect.

**So, what you are talking about is really the theory of action we talk about at DMC. We start with teachers being the most important. Then, a really close second is management. It’s the management systems to cultivate leadership and teamwork that you are talking about—the structures, strategy, and culture. One is not enough.**

Absolutely. We don’t spend enough time on processes and helping teachers understand the change management process, or how continuous improvement works once the data collection is embedded in the system. That’s a huge part of what we did in Memphis. How do you look at data? What data do you look at? And then, what do you do with it? How do you improve? How do you display that data so that it creates urgency? All of our schools in Memphis had data boards posted in their hallways so that everybody could see where they were. We had one school that did a fight-free school, and every day they were posting their behavior data for kids to be able to see. They were giving rewards based on what they were seeing in the data, and then kids were held accountable for it. It’s just this constant looking at how do we continuously improve?

For me, it’s based a lot on Deming’s work and on Glasser’s work.<sup>2,3</sup> It’s about what quality schools are, and how people relate to each other, and the choices we make every single day. Do we choose to show up and be present and give 100% of ourselves, or do we choose not to? That’s really what it comes down to. And then, how do we work together and celebrate when we are successful? How do we recognize and reward success that’s getting us to the big goal. I think you have to be able to cheer not only when you get results on student achievement, but also when you actually have new processes and new structures in place that help you move the needle.

**Shifting to a more personal note, you’re the quintessential Minnesotan — you play hockey and you water-ski. What position do you play?**

I play center.



Minnesota Commissioner of Education Dr. Brenda Cassellius and Governor Mark Dayton read to students.

### **That's very apropos.**

I've been very blessed, and I take my job very seriously. I also take my own personal learning about my profession very seriously. I'm constantly reading, researching, talking to other people, and trying to find out what's the best way, or what's another good way; then, as I learn, I spread it to other people. And, I'm not afraid to be direct. I'm not afraid to move beyond niceties and really talk openly and honestly about the real challenges that we have in educating all children. If we don't talk about our problems, how are we ever going to solve them? We have to be willing to talk about the hard topics. Why is it that we cannot reach all of our children? We need to say, "This is unacceptable, and now is the time." We're done with being nice; now is the time. We are losing lives everyday. If not now, when?

### **Absolutely true. Everyone wants to talk about reforming education, but doing it is really hard work.**

And, you have to know that you will fail. You have to be okay with that. You get right back up again, maybe make some changes, and you try again. I had eight Fresh Start schools in Memphis and one was not turning around. Well, now what do we do? We moved the principal, got a new principal there along with a second staff, and we Fresh Start-ed it again. You cannot continue to wait around.



**JOHN J-H KIM** IS CEO OF THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT [JJHK@DMCOUNCIL.ORG](mailto:JJHK@DMCOUNCIL.ORG).

<sup>1</sup> After a quote from Jim Collins's book, *Good to Great*.

<sup>2</sup> W. Edwards Deming's System of Profound Knowledge and 14 Points for Management are the basis of Total Quality Management, and focus on the importance of teamwork and leadership for teamwork.

<sup>3</sup> William Glasser's idea of choice theory focuses on the role of personal choice and personal responsibility.