



2014-2015 MPHA “Public Health Matters” Policy Forum Series



Zip Code Matters!

Zip Code Matters! Where we learn: March 13, 2015

Moderator: Ken Bence, Director of Public Health for the State Public Programs division of Medical Health Plans, based in Minnetonka, MN.

Panelists:

Joe Nathan, Director of Center for School Change

Ron Anderson, President of Century College

Ken: We know that where we live impacts our opportunities for health. Today we’re going to talk about where we learn and the connections between education and health. This is a timely topic. We are amidst the legislative session and several bills have been introduced. Education impacts so many tracks of a person’s life. A person’s life circumstances can influence their opportunities to learn and the level of education they receive.

Opening remarks:

Ron: I’ve been the President of Century College for 9 years. As a part of the MnSCU system, Century is the largest 2-year community and technical college in Minnesota. In terms of demographics, 55% of students are female and 37% are students of color. The Century campus is located in White Bear Lake, MN in a white middle class community. 22% of students last year were first in their families to attend college. 47% of incoming students last fall were recent high school graduates. Century draws students from immediate surrounding areas. We offer certificates, diplomas, Associate in Applied

Science (AAS), and Associate in Science (AS) degrees in programs that prepare students for employment in over 40 high demand fields. Programs range in length from three months to over two years.

Joe: I've spent half of my career in elementary/middle school settings and half in college settings at Macalester/University of Minnesota. The New Brighton Community Center is an example of how the world is changing, taking advantage of new changes and new collaborations. This building has a library, WIC Center; children's play area, track, senior program, and yoga classes. This is fostering connections between learning, teaching, and schooling. There are not nearly enough public facilities like this one serving low-income families. Brooklyn Center schools now house medical clinics within their school buildings, which demonstrate this intersection I'm talking about. Minnesota currently has the 5th highest student debt rate for college graduates at > \$31,000. For white individuals, it's a 13-point difference in terms of those who take college credits prior to college (PSEO or concurrent enrollment course) and those who don't. Among African Americans in Minnesota, there is a 32-point difference between these 2 groups. Gordon Parks schools have made significant improvements in this area for their students. The relationship between health and education is that those who earn more advanced degrees are healthier, and this is better for society.

Panelist Questions:

Let's talk about early childhood education (ECE), which gives people a great head start in life. Today we are pushing the age this refers to further back. There are now efforts in the ages 0-3 years to identify and address issues early so when kids start school they are prepared and all benchmarks can be met. With all demographic issues that have been talked about, what do you see as some of the efforts that will be most successful in addressing the ECE issue?

Joe: Research says some programs are more effective than others. Not all dollars put in are effective. I'm very disappointed in the proposals that have been made by our governor to ensure that every low-income child will make it through ECE. We need to set priorities because we are not going to get it all. We need to prioritize high quality ECE for all low-income kids.

What other traits do you look for in high quality ECE?

Joe: Teachers who have been trained, certain adult to student ratios, a curriculum that does not involve putting a kid in front of a TV like what happens in some day cares. Using age-appropriate curriculum.

Does your school work with English language learners?

Ron: We have a large program for students of language backgrounds other than English. It's a key priority for us. We don't have direct involvement with ECE. We hear encouraging things from young parenting students who say that they see positive habits they learn at Century trickle down to their children. Our students are often not at a college reading level. We have seen positive results from our reading program that works to rewire the way you read. Overall, this is not just an issue of race and ethnicity, but rather poverty and lack of equity.

Joe: On the issue of high quality, one of the characteristics of ECE is it works with the entire family rather than just the child. The development of shared facilities creates collaborations to meet the needs of families within the same building.

You've been part of the charter school movement. What sets them apart, what's the mission they are built to fulfill?

Joe: I am an advocate of excellent public education, regardless of where it takes place. The charter idea developed in Minnesota. The idea behind charter school is a structure that gives teachers, parents, and communities the opportunity to create a new type of un-structured curriculum to cater to the needs of the student population. Charter schools operate through a clear mission, vision, multiple forms of assessments, and significant collaborations. They are not just interested in test scores, but surveying graduates and families.

We see quickly emerging nontraditional issues of learning. How is this impacting education?

Ron: We have a handful of fully online degrees. We see great interest but not a lot of readiness to take online classes. More students withdraw from online courses than traditional in-person courses. There is an assumption that online means easier which is not the case. Generally, we see that we have slightly larger achievement gaps among online classes. For students of color it can be an empowering environment. They say no one knows what they look like in an online environment, since they can choose to post a picture or not. It is often the first time they can interact in an academic setting where no one is making assumptions about them.

Joe: What we've learned about technology is mixed in its application and impact. Cyber crime is incredible in terms of the amount we see, and yet we can accomplish incredible things. There is debate over if we should have computer literacy. We need to talk about what we mean by effective learning and teaching and how does technology fit in?

There's a charter in Boston that shares space with a medical clinic. Is there any discussion in the MnSCU system of possibly reaching out so that there are medical facilities in some of the campuses?

Ron: It has been a case-by-case effort. Century has nurse present everyday on campus and a doctor one day a week. We struggle with meeting mental health needs. We have counselors that deal with emergency types of situation and referrals. We go back and forth with how much time should we spend on this but it continues to be a pressing need.

I went to a small liberal arts college in a rural community, which at that time most of the students were right out of high school and it was their first time away from home. What is different about the role of a 2-year college?

Ron: Century College is a non-residential institution and we are always in a balancing act of trying to plan events and activities that will attract all students. Our average student age is 26. We face the challenge of building programming to cater to the busy lives of our students. We have been trying to address the backgrounds and needs of particular student populations. We established veterans and LGBTQ centers.

Audience Q&A:

Could you give a few more examples of community partnerships that look at education and health in the same setting?

Ron: Boynton Health Service has done great work in this area. One takeaway we have is a huge issue with health insurance. 15% of students last year were uninsured. We brought Portico Healthnet to campus to help students get enrolled. We also have a Vista volunteer to work on health resources.

We are becoming a more mobile society. In your opinion, is where we live becoming less of a contributor?

Joe: There has been a debate about how much poverty impacts students. I'm on the side where we need to improve conditions inside and outside schools. Minnesota has a large achievement gap when it comes to education among races/ethnicities. We have wonderful examples of schools that close the achievement gap. Demography is not destiny. Low-income students don't do as well, but having said that, more and more proof points show that all kinds of kids can do well. Legislature is considering putting up more of these types of programs.

Ron: People are not as place bound as they were in the past, but where students go home to is still very important. We can't fix everything but how we build our systems policies and practices are largely build on traditional middle class values.

Many fields of employment are concerned about work force issues. What can be done to help prepare people for the health care field?

Ron: A big part of our work extends back to relationships with high schools and making sure we have ample opportunities to help students understand what their options are. Exposing students to different career opportunities, not just college. At some of our institutions our curriculum is so broad and there are so many choices that it becomes overwhelming for folks. It can be counterintuitive.

Throughout the conversation this morning there have been examples of helping students successfully in different parts of their education. What do you think is the single most important thing we can be advocating for to improve our educational system?

Ron: An important point you're bringing is how we get more custom relationship building. We know if students are engaged and have someone to go to that they know by name, they have a higher chance of succeeding. The best thing we can do is start partnering together in different ways. In early fall we declared that by 2020 we want to eliminate the racial achievement gap. The big fear is how we do this. It's about the systemic issues.

How do you define or measure the quality/success of your product?

We have a series of metrics that all schools in MnSCU system are held accountable for. We look at graduation and transfer rates, job placement, and student success in terms of how quickly students move through programs. We have a role in the community in workforce, community, economic development, and noncredit instruction.

Ken: Thank you to our panelists. This makes clear to me that education does not have an endpoint. We continue to learn how these issues affect us in our work and the communities in which we live.

Upcoming events:

The MPHA membership drive begins on Monday, March 16 and will run until March 27. Current members who refer new members will be entered into a drawing for a free MPHA annual conference registration or 2 free years of membership.

Nominations are open for Governing Council for next year and annual awards.

Next Events:

April 10: UMN School of Public Health Annual Health Disparities Roundtable- 9 am, Coffman Memorial Union Theater

May 8: Zip Code Matters... Where We Eat

May 28-29: Annual MPHA Conference in Duluth