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## Encouraging the education of our youth



“The universe is made of stories, not atoms,” according to poet Muriel Rukeyser. In this, my first year as director of Prairie Creek Community School, story has been a recurring theme. Thanks

to a Minnesota Historical Society grant, local historian Bruce Colwell has been unearthing historical documents about our building and program. It’s quite a drama! After a tornado leveled the original township school in 1920, a new community school was constructed. Since then, Prairie Creek has functioned as a traditional Castle Rock school (my father-in-law attended in the 1940s), a private school and, for the last 10 years a progressive public charter school. In time, we will be able to share the narrative of a place that has greatly influenced the lives of many local children.

Recently, I’ve been pondering the significance of a more immediate education story. Last week, state Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius announced that Minnesota was one of 11 states granted a waiver from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The significance of this change is still to be determined. For now, schools and districts will be exempt from some of the more punitive consequences of not attaining the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standard.

I’m hopeful that this news will make room for a more inclusive and supportive discourse; a discourse that encourages teachers, students, parents and all who care about education to discuss and debate the best ways to share a child’s strengths and challenges, the story of their learning. I’m looking forward to a conversation that considers ways to articulate

students’ ability to communicate, collaborate and connect with each other in a global society.

Where better to have this dialogue than among Northfield’s community of learners? Our town, brimming with excellent schools and colleges, is a marvelous place to explore big innovative ideas that center on what is most important — our youth’s future.

If you believe, as I do, that creativity, imagination and play are important elements of a child’s learning, then we must wrestle with the question of how we authentically evaluate student success and the success of schools and educators. The standardized assessments in reading, math and science will continue to be a key component of school accountability — regardless of the waiver from NCLB. However, these test scores will inevitably fail to provide much of an insight into whether students can think critically about questions, develop problem-solving skills, or acquire the kind of knowledge that will enable them to recognize and respond to questions of social justice.

These are skills that are part of a process of learning, and therefore difficult to measure with a snapshot assessment tool. Yet, authentic evidence of student achievement abounds. In this paper, for instance, you will find many stories of children’s creative performance, academic accomplishment, community service and resilience. Without fail, I’m inspired by what children can do. Part of our responsibility as educators, parents and community members is to evaluate, support and share the complex story of how young people learn.

*-Simon Tyler, Director  
Prairie Creek Community School*