

Praise for MN taxpayers, legislators

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A reader's letter inadvertently produced this week's praise of the beleaguered Minnesota taxpayer, and the often-criticized Minnesota legislature. This woman, responding to last week's column, described a truly horrendous a New York City public school. Sadly, the problems she reported are not unique to New York City. But never, in my experience of more than 30 years, have I heard about such a situation in Minnesota.

Here's how the mother described her daughter's New York City school: My daughter teaches in a middle school. The water is brown, the school is infested with rats (in fact one of them became caught in her fan in her room), there aren't enough textbooks (my daughter has 30 students and 20 textbooks), no teacher guides, no music, no art, PE once a week, not enough computers, lunch begins at 9:40 a.m., violence (murder) occurs outside the building, no copy machine is available to the staff (it is out of order and has not been repaired since last spring)...not enough desks?

Unfortunately I've seen others as bad in New York City. One had a huge net on an outside wall, to catch brick that fell periodically.

Several years ago the Ohio Supreme Court decided the state simply HAD to put more money into school buildings. Didn't surprise me, because I had been in some Ohio public schools, urban and rural, that were 80-90 years old, and looked older. It wasn't just the peeling paint. Plaster was falling and plumbing in some bathrooms that had failed years earlier, had not been replaced. Disgraceful.

That brings me back to Minnesota. We have standards for our public schools. That does not mean they are gleaming palaces. But it does mean that taxpayers and legislators have insisted that funds be allocated to worn out buildings to be replaced or restored.

This is not a plea for higher taxes. Let's leave that discussion for another day.

Minnesota public schools, on average, have among the nation's highest achievement, on all kinds of measures. This includes graduation rates, college entrance tests, and international tests.

Minnesota schools are not perfect. But as I wrote recently, fairness and progress require acknowledging successes as well as shortcomings.

Many strong families in this state helped contribute to school's success. There are many talented, hard working educators. Some of the credit for Minnesota's success goes to innovation and smaller schools that have been produced as part of our open enrollment, charter public schools, and other public school choice programs. And part of the reason is Minnesotans have been willing to tax themselves at a somewhat higher rate than many states.

Money is not the solution to all the problems. But this has been a state that has produced a state where some things others accept are not tolerated. That includes the outrageous conditions that the mother described above, in her daughter's school.

So let's keep our schools, and ourselves in perspective. We have plenty to work on, lots to improve. But this also, on balance, is a darn good state.