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## ***Failing Grades in Transparency and I.T. at State Education Department***

By: Tom Steward

It's only the first week of school but the grades are already in for the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) achievement in information technology systems and online transparency. No parent would want to see results like this on a child's report card.

Minnesota's legislative auditor recently released a report revealing the MDE computer system that controls billions of dollars in school funding and stores students' private data fails on security grounds. Despite some 60 I.T. employees, the system remains vulnerable to infiltration and accepts grade school level passwords that put everything from payments to sensitive personal information at risk. "Very concerning" according to the department's spokesman, Josh Collins.

These acknowledged shortcomings relate to a second report just out that should also be of concern to Minnesota parents, taxpayers and educators. MDE gets an "F" in CATO Institute's comparison of state education departments' online transparency in reporting public school spending and other key data.

*"Public schools are usually the most costly item in state and local budgets. Yet despite tremendous and persistent spending growth in the last half-century, the public vastly underestimates the true cost of public education,"* states the *Cracking the Books* report.

The MDE website's many shortcomings sound familiar in the context of the legislative auditor's troubling findings. According to CATO, MDE is missing the most recent year of per pupil and total education expenditures, fails to provide the latest key pension and statewide salary data, does not adjust for inflation or make key comparisons between districts possible.

Bottom line: Not exactly user-friendly for parents or taxpayers. *"Minnesota's financial data are not consistently formatted. Most of the pre-2011 reports are provided in Excel spreadsheets only, which limits the readability of the data. More recent reports are provided in HTML format only, which limits the ability*

*of users to analyze the data. The reports occasionally contain jargon that might confuse a layperson, such as “Expenditure Per Average Daily Membership (ADM) Served” rather than “per pupil expenditures,” states the report.*

I guess it's understandable that MDE has yet to respond to my inquiry emailed last week. Maybe it got lost in the servers the state auditor identified as not being scanned regularly.