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15 years later, MN schools are more segregated, and achievement gap has barely budged

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PUBLISHED: August 18, 2017 at 7:00 am | UPDATED: August 21, 2017 at 10:46 am

Fifteen years into a nationwide push to provide every student with an equal education, Minnesota schools have grown more segregated and the state's nation-leading academic achievement gap refuses to close.

Minnesota now has more than 200 schools where students of color make up 90 percent or more of the enrollment, state data shows. That's more than double what the state had in 2002, when the federal No Child Left Behind Act reinvigorated the national campaign for school equity.



Woodbury High School senior Kamal Suleiman raises his hands while discussing diversity with other students at a roundtable in Falcon Heights in February 2017. Others pictured include, from left, Isra Hassan (hands folded) from Anoka High School and Nawn Maxamed (purple scarf) from Burnsville High School, while Andy Baran from Orono High School writes down their ideas. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press)

At the heart of that effort are annual academic tests that measure students' progress. In Minnesota, students of color routinely score at much lower rates in reading and math than their white peers. Since 2014, when Minnesota began using online tests, the state's achievement gap has barely budged despite a commitment from state leaders to cut it in half by this year.

That doesn't mean Minnesota hasn't made some progress. High school graduation rates are up, other measures show achievement gaps are slowly closing in some areas, and more low-income and minority children have access to quality early-learning programs to improve their school readiness.

Yet Minnesota's educational disparities are in clear view as a collaborative of Twin Cities superintendents looks for better ways to integrate schools and ensure every student receives an adequate education. And as state education officials put the finishing touches on yet another new system to hold schools accountable.

“I’m concerned about my kids’ education. I want them to get a better education and have a better life,” said Alex Cruz of St. Paul, one of the plaintiffs in [a 2015 lawsuit against Minnesota officials and local schools that alleges state policies “facilitate and support” segregation and exacerbate the achievement gap](#). Poor and minority students end up concentrated in schools without enough resources to meet the academic and personal challenges they face, the plaintiffs argue.

“I live in a poor neighborhood. I want my kids to have access to other options,” said the Frogtown father of five. “I want them to be with kids from different backgrounds. When you see these huge (achievement) gaps, you have to wonder: Why aren’t some kids able to make the most of their education?”

Cruz’s case faces tough odds of ever seeing a courtroom, let alone changing policies. Those named in the lawsuit have denied its allegations and successfully asked for it to be thrown out, a decision that will be reviewed by the Minnesota Supreme Court later this year.

SUPERINTENDENTS HAVE IDEAS

Cruz’s lawsuit did get the attention of Twin Cities superintendents. Earlier this year, nearly 50 of them decided they needed to work together to come up with a plan to improve education equity, whether the Cruz case moved forward or not.

“I think it was a catalyst,” new St. Paul Superintendent Joe Gothard said of the lawsuit. He added that educators have long been aware of the challenges students of color face. “We want to make sure we are able to provide the basis for everyone to be a success in our district.”

The collaborative launched the Reimagine Minnesota initiative to develop recommendations schools could use to improve “integration, access, equity and excellence in educational achievement for each and every student.”

The group spent much of last winter [hosting 10 “World Cafe” meetings](#) across the metro area to get input from students, parents, educators and community members.

Participants offered thousands of suggestions, including improving communication between schools and families; increasing student support services; and diversifying the educator workforce.

That advice, along with initiatives superintendents have found successful in their districts, will inform recommendations the group had hoped to complete by summer. Due to leadership turnover in some districts, they're now expected later this year.

"It is going to take some strong effort to disrupt things that have led to outcomes none of us feel good about," Gothard said. "We want to have a common, pragmatic approach."

In addition to the community meetings, the collaborative brought together students from across the metro for a daylong conference. It was a welcome opportunity for students like Kamal Suleiman, a Woodbury High School senior at the time, who said too often education leaders make decisions without the input of students.

"If it is about you, it needs to involve you," Suleiman said.

Students filled the walls with sticky notes full of ideas, with a consensus centered around improving relationships with staff and giving students more ownership of their learning.

"I know change is possible if we put effort into it," said Ann Doan, who will be a junior at Southwest High School in Minneapolis. "It's our education. Why shouldn't we have more of a say?"

INTEGRATION FUNDING NEEDS FOCUS

Once completed, the Reimagine Minnesota recommendations could help fill a state policy void. Minnesota now spends about \$75 million a year on programs to integrate schools and close the achievement gap, but the funding has no clear direction.

In 2015, Brenda Cassellius, state education commissioner, tried to revise the rules for how integration aid was spent, but the effort was opposed by some integration advocates and charter school leaders. Cassellius' plans were aimed at improving overall student achievement and less focused on bringing racial balance to schools.



“We need to accept all cultures and respect all kinds of personalities,” said Francis Koshay, from Park High School in Cottage Grove, before roundtable discussions begin to discuss diversity in schools at TIES Education Center in Falcon Heights on Friday, Feb. 17, 2017. Hundreds of students from around the metro area participate in roundtable discussions about ways to make schools more integrated and equitable. Koshay is in 11th grade and is originally from Liberia. (Jean Pieri / Pioneer Press)

As Minnesota’s student population has grown more diverse, with the number of students of color nearly doubling in the past 15 years, the number of schools where minority students make up 90 percent or more of the enrollment also has doubled to more than 200.

The Twin Cities metro is home to 86 percent of those schools and 39 of them are in the St. Paul district. About 40 percent of those schools are charters, many of which cater to students of one race or ethnicity.

Cassellius wanted those schools to submit plans for improving the academic achievement of students of color, just like traditional public schools have to do if they have high concentrations of students of color. Charter advocates opposed the idea, arguing that their schools couldn’t be considered segregated because parents chose to send their children there.

[An administrative law judge ruled in 2016 that the proposed changes were an overreach of Cassellius' authority](#), and she withdrew them. The department now awaits new directions from the state Legislature.

Charter school supporters have made a similar argument about school choice in response to Cruz's lawsuit, saying that some schools that predominantly serve students of one race or ethnic group are successful. School integration supporters characterize those schools as exceptions to the general finding that schools with racially balanced populations have better outcomes for all students.

NEW SYSTEM COMING FOR JUDGING SCHOOLS

Minnesota knows a lot about its academic achievement gap because for more than a decade, students have taken annual assessments and the results have been publicly reported. [The latest results, released Aug. 8, showed flat scores across the board with little change in the achievement gap.](#)

Minnesota leaders had hoped to cut the gap in half by this year, but some large gaps remain, and some have even increased.

The tests were first required under the federal No Child Left Behind law and will continue to be mandated under the new version of that legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA.

ESSA still requires annual tests but gives the state more leeway on judging schools and intervening when they don't make the grade. [Minnesota's proposed system](#) has been met with praise and concern.

Under the plan, test scores, student academic growth, graduation rates, the progress of English learners and an evolving measure of school quality would all be used to judge school performance. State leaders argue these measures — as opposed to test scores alone — give parents a better picture of their school's successes and challenges.

However, the measures would not be combined into a single grade or rating, which makes some fear that parents will struggle to understand their school's performance.

“As controversial as they are, we think some sort of summative rating is critical,” said Daniel Sellers, who leads Ed Allies, an education-reform group. “That shouldn’t just be based on (test) scores. We want to find a well-rounded way to come to a summative conclusion.”

Minnesota will also use its new system to identify the lowest performing 5 percent of schools so they can receive state help to improve. The proposed accountability plan uses a “funnel system” to examine performance indicators, such as test scores and academic growth, to identify the state’s most struggling schools.

The “funnel system” is less prescriptive than the state’s current accountability system and critics say it doesn’t present clear criteria for identifying struggling schools or for showing when they’ve improved.

“That just incentivizes weird behavior,” Sellers said.

State education leaders are expected to finish taking public comments on the plan by the end of this month, possibly revise the proposal and send it to the U.S. Department of Education for approval in September.

PARENTS NEED TO UNDERSTAND, TOO

The true test of the new school accountability system won’t just be about how the state measures performance, but how that information is presented to parents. Past systems have proven overly complex and confusing for parents and even some educators.

ThaoMee Xiong, a Brooklyn Park mother with two children in the Anoka-Hennepin district, hopes state and local leaders will make an extra effort to engage with families to help them understand the new system.

Xiong knows that may take considerable time, something teachers and administrators already struggle to balance.

“I feel like an informed parent and we still struggle with navigating all these school systems,” said Xiong, who added she realizes teachers are already “swamped” with meeting state and local mandates. “How do we ask them to provide a quality education and then bombard them with all these requirements?”

But parents and students need to understand what is at stake or all the testing has little real-world use.

“My hope is the changes have a positive impact,” Xiong said. “I think the community-engagement piece is important for all parents, and specifically for parents of color.”

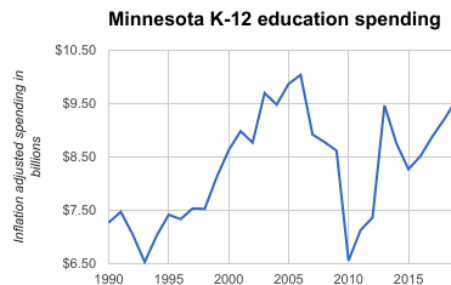
WHAT’S GOOD? WHAT’S NEXT?

As Minnesota students’ test scores remain stagnant, educators are quick to point out other successes and school leaders say they have an increasingly better understanding of ways to help all students achieve.

For instance, Minnesota’s high school graduation rates are on the rise for all student groups. Performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, has shown evidence of achievement gaps closing.

However, critics have pointed out that Minnesota students no longer have to prove a certain level of math and English proficiency on state exams to earn a diploma and not every student takes the NAEP.

Under Gov. Mark Dayton, Minnesota education spending has grown by about \$2 billion a year when adjusted for inflation, with the state pumping new money into all-day kindergarten and early-childhood education.



Education leaders hope those initiatives coupled with work to improve teacher diversity and increase academic and social supports for students should help improve school equity and close the achievement gap.

Minnesota education spending from 1990 projected through 2019. Funding fluctuations between 2010 and 2015 included a funding shift that delayed payments to schools. Source: Minnesota Management and Budget

Dave Webb is superintendent of South St. Paul schools, where the number of students of color has nearly tripled in 15 years. He says Minnesota is on the right track when it comes to improving all students’ achievement, but there is a lot of work to be done.


Webb has taken a lead role in the Reimagine Minnesota initiative and hopes the recommendations the group develops will provide districts across the metro with new ideas.

“Our state needs a new educational vision to support the success of all learners,” Webb said.

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