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Achievement gaps persist for students of color in Minnesota, report shows

By Dana Ferguson Forum News Service Aug 30, 2019

ST. PAUL — Gaps remain in academic outcomes for Minnesota's American Indian and students of color despite efforts to combat the divide, according to a state report.

A data released Thursday, Aug. 29, shows that four-year graduation rates across demographic groups showed little improvement between 2017 and 2018. American Indian students, as well as students of color, faced more frequent disciplinary actions in schools as compared to their white peers and reported lower rates of attendance and outcomes in academic achievement.

Across the board, students' math and reading achievement rates also dropped in 2018 as compared to the year prior, the report showed. On standardized tests, students' reading proficiency scores decreased, with 58% meeting state standards on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. And in math, just 54% of students met state standards on the MCAs last year.

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Moving forward, the state's response needs to change to better address the "pernicious gaps" in student achievement, Education Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker said. The education commissioner in her first year on the job said Minnesotans need to look past test scores to the broader picture of who students are and what they can accomplish in school.

"Gaps need to be closed," Ricker said in a statement. "Minnesota students face gaps in learning, housing, household income, health and more. That's why I'm committed to finding ways to serve the whole child, so all children have the support they need to succeed in the classroom."

For the first time this year, the Department of Education also released a review of schools that were receiving support or need additional support to align with federal guidelines of the Every Student Succeeds Act. They found that schools receiving additional support should keep receiving that help.

4-year graduation rate reaches all-time high

The four-year graduation rate among all students reached a record high in 2018 at 83.2%, up 0.5% from the year prior, but that figure remained lower for American Indian students and students of color. While there were slight improvements in graduation rates among groups of minority students, they weren't substantial.

Fifty-one percent of American Indian students in Minnesota's public schools graduated in four years, up just 0.3% from the year prior. And 66.8% of Hispanic students graduated within four years, a 0.4% boost from 2017. By comparison, 67.4% of African American students graduated high school within four years, a 2.7% increase from the year before, and 86.8% of Asian students graduated on time.

Meanwhile, 88.4% of white students, a 0.4% increase from 2017, graduated within four years.

The data shows lower-income students, those facing homelessness, special education students and students learning English were less likely than their peers to graduate in four years. Those numbers remained nearly flat between 2017 and 2018. Most notably, 46.8% of students experiencing homelessness completed high school within four years.

The group that saw significant improvement in terms of four-year graduation trends was Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, who saw a 12.9% improvement from the year prior.

Disciplinary disparities

American Indian students and students of color also faced disparities in terms of attendance and disciplinary outcomes which likely affected their results in math and reading achievement, as well as their decisions to take the ACT or Advanced Placement tests.

While 3.5% of Minnesota students missed at least one day of school last year due to disciplinary actions, 10.3% of American Indian students missed at least one day of school because they were disciplined, and 11.1% of black students missed at least one day of school due to disciplinary actions.

Black students, who make up 11.2% of the student body, were subject to 40% of disciplinary actions at school. By contrast, white students, who make up 65.7% of the student population, faced 34.2% of disciplinary actions.

Ricker said she hoped to find areas or courses that engage students and find ways to connect those to other learning. She said it was key to ensure that the department, as well as schools, make sure that students see themselves represented in their curriculum and in their teachers.

"We can't do the same thing and expect different results," she said. "These gaps that seem so consistent across so many areas of measurement really just reaffirms my commitment to diversifying the teaching profession."

Denise Specht, president of Education Minnesota, said she was pleased to see Ricker reformat the report to pull the focus beyond test scores. Moving forward, Sprecht said, taking a broader look at students' backgrounds and how they do in school could help move the needle on policy decisions.

"One thing our state can do to meet the challenges facing Minnesota's most diverse generation of students is understanding that there's not just one thing to do and there never will be," Sprecht said in a statement. "The comprehensive 'State of Our Students' report shows the need for an array of additional supports for students when they are in school and at home."

Math and reading scores down, more students taking ACT

The decrease in reading and math scores on Minnesota's standardized tests will require a multi-faceted approach, Ricker said. And educators around the state are already testing new methods of teaching reading.

"Every school district I worked with, every school I had the opportunity to interact with is rethinking the way it's delivering its reading instruction," Ricker said. "These are the sorts of things that happen when you start looking at our data more holistically."

Education Department officials in the report also highlighted efforts that were gaining traction. Among them was a boost in the number of American Indian students and students of color taking the ACT. The number of American Indian students that took the test nearly doubled since 2014, while the number of black students who took the college-preparedness test increased 70% in that timeframe.

Lawmakers earlier this year debated the best ways to reduce the achievement gap in Minnesota schools but weren't able to reach an agreement in the divided Legislature. Republican lawmakers who hoped to set up a program that would let businesses donate to fund private and parochial

school scholarships said that option should again be on the table.

"We need to pass our opportunity scholarship bill next session and dramatically rethink our education priorities so we can ensure a great education for students in every corner of Minnesota," Rep. Ron Kresha, R-Little Falls, said.

Follow Dana Ferguson on Twitter [@bydanaferguson](https://twitter.com/bydanaferguson), call 651-290-0707 or email dferguson@forumcomm.com

