

Blueprint for Education Policy Reform

Historically, Minnesota’s K-12 public education system has been recognized as one of the top performing systems in the nation, with our students generally performing well on national exams. However, Minnesota’s demographics have masked large achievement gaps between white, non-white, and low-income students.

In addition, as the state continues to focus on reducing economic and workforce disparities, it is important to focus on the connection between education and economic opportunity, and work with greater urgency to eliminate achievement gaps. This urgency is heightened by the pressures of a global, knowledge-based economy that increasingly requires people to complete at least some level of post-secondary education.

There is significant room for improvement given that only about half of Minnesota high school graduates complete a post-secondary certificate or degree within six years of high school graduation.

Not surprisingly, gaps in post-secondary attainment reflect the achievement gaps we see in our K-12 system. By closing K-12 student achievement gaps we can help more graduates be prepared to complete a post-secondary education – and begin to address growing concerns about workforce shortages and economic disparities.

Reading and Math Proficiency (2018 high school MCA results)		
	Reading	Math
All students	60%	48%
White students	67%	55%
Students of color	42%	29%
Low-income students	40%	25%

Recognizing the importance of education, E-12 education spending comprises 41 percent of the state's general fund budget and is the largest general fund spending area. Since 2005, inflation-adjusted state aid per student has increased 11 percent.

Two strengths of Minnesota's system are that 71 percent of school funding comes from state (as opposed to local) sources, the fourth highest compared to all states; and Minnesota provides 19 percent more in state and local funds to the highest poverty districts compared to the lowest poverty districts.

Nonetheless, many schools face financial challenges stemming from factors such as declining enrollment, contract settlements that exceed funding increases, and the federal government's unwillingness to meet its obligation for funding special education.

To help create a dynamic education system that allows for innovation and customized instruction, the state should emphasize world-class expectations for all students; provide information on student progress towards standards; give educators the flexibility to design effective instructional strategies; and allow families to choose the school that best meets their needs.

Education Funding At a Glance

- 11 percent**
State aid increase per student since 2005 (inflation-adjusted)
- 41 percent**
Share of the state budget devoted to E-12
- 4th in the nation**
Minnesota ranks #4 among all states for state share of education funding
- 19 percent**
High-poverty districts receive 19% more state/local aid than low-poverty districts

GUIDING PRINCIPLE



Set rigorous world-class academic standards for students and measure progress towards those standards.

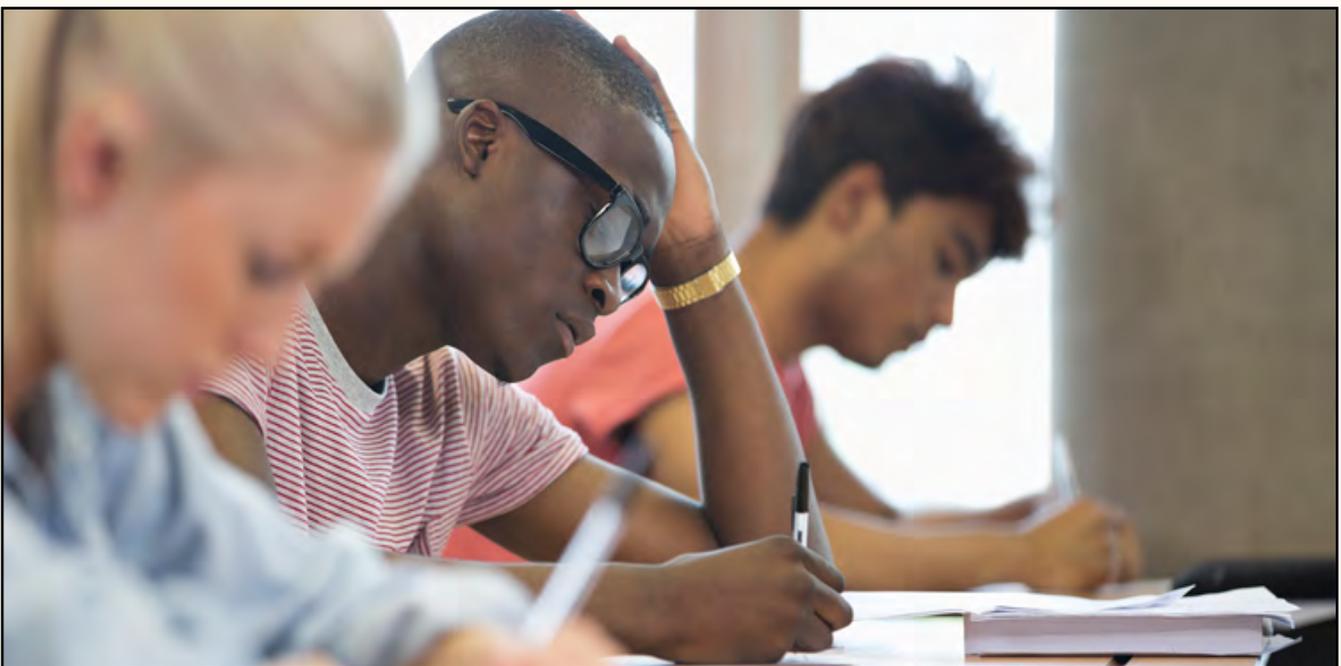
Setting Standards and Measuring Progress

Minnesota's student academic standards are designed to prepare students for post-secondary and career success. They were cooperatively developed by K-12 and post-secondary educators, employers, and the public. By adopting a standards-based strategy the state has created more flexibility for teachers to provide instruction by focusing on what students should know, not how teachers should teach. In addition, standards help achieve equity by setting consistent expectations. To ensure Minnesota's standards continue to meet student needs, they should be revised on a regular basis.

Minnesota measures student progress with a set of reading, math, and science tests specifically aligned with state standards called the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs). Student participation in the MCAs is critical to help parents and educators accurately gauge student progress and inform the public on student achievement and school performance.

Meaningful Data

Education data is a critical tool for evaluating progress, identifying effective practices, and addressing disparities. Data should be accessible, transparent, and meaningful to parents and educators. To that end, lawmakers should consider ways for the state to improve its collection and dissemination of school and district-level performance data. Examples include improving the Department of Education's website and developing a school rating system to help families assess relative performance of schools and districts. Policymakers should also use data to identify and replicate effective practices - and discontinue ineffective programs and practices.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE



Give educators and districts flexibility to offer the programs they believe will be most effective, and allow families to choose the schools and programs that best meet their children's needs.

Choice and Access for All Families

When Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law, the state recognized the benefits of giving educators greater input in school operations and providing more flexibility to design instructional strategies. This recognition continued with laws providing flexibility for district teachers and schools through school-based governance and Innovation Zones.

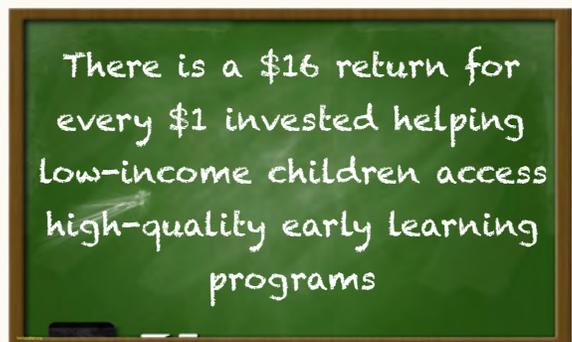
Giving families the ability to choose their children's school empowers parents and allows educators to customize instruction. A number of independent evaluations have shown that expanding school options for low-income families can improve educational outcomes and encourage school districts to improve school performance. Minnesota has a history of enacting innovative choice reforms, including open enrollment, PSEO, and charter schools. In addition to fostering choice within the public school system, policymakers should seek to expand access to non-public educational programs. This expansion should include use of the MCAs to report student progress.

At schools with persistently low academic performance, families should be given a voice in school improvement. Federal law requires each state to identify the lowest performing 5% of public schools that receive Title 1 funds, then provide support to improve those schools. In addition to state support, families at these schools should have a stronger voice in directing changes in the school, similar to California's Parent Empowerment Act.

Early Learning

Minnesota's business community has been a leading advocate for expanding access to high quality early childhood education for low income families. According to the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, "early health and education programs targeted to disadvantaged children have been shown to improve school readiness, reduce grade retention and special education, and increase high school graduation rates and college enrollment." Early childhood education is also linked to higher earnings later in life.

Through the work of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF), a quality rating system (Parent Aware) and scholarship program for low-income families was developed. Based on the success of MELF's work, the state adopted Parent Aware and scholarships. The state should continue to increase the number of scholarships so that all low-income families have access to a high quality early education program of their choice. By contrast, universal school-based pre-K is a cost prohibitive approach that does not reduce achievement gaps or help families with children younger than four years of age.



To further improve the state's early education system, policymakers should also enact reforms to streamline the state's disparate pre-K programs and make it easier for families to navigate the early education system.