



Blueprint for Education Policy Reform

Minnesota students deserve great schools and quality education. Our continued economic growth as a state depends on maintaining our highly skilled workforce. However, worst-in-nation education gaps continue to leave too many Minnesotans behind and unable to unlock access to economic opportunities.

Historically, Minnesota’s K-12 public education system has been recognized as one of the top-performing systems in the nation, with students generally performing well compared to peers in other states. However, our results mask wide disparities in our own state - Minnesota has some of the largest education gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the nation.

Minnesota has struggled for generations to provide quality education to low-income students and students of color. Unfortunately, little progress is being made. Racial and income gaps in standardized test scores and college readiness have increased over time. Overall graduation rates have increased but wide disparities still remain. Our global, knowledge-based economy increasingly requires people to complete at least some level of post-secondary education, yet Minnesota is graduating an increasing proportion of students who are unprepared for college.

Minnesota needs to work with great urgency to eliminate education gaps. This urgency is heightened by the need to act to address racial disparities and remove the systemic barriers in education that are a root cause of racial inequity.

EDUCATION GAPS IN MINNESOTA

	Percentage of students scoring at grade level		Graduation rates	College readiness
	Grade 4 Reading	Grade 8 Math	%	%
Across race				
White	65.3	65.0	88.4	68.9
American Indian/Alaska Native	31.0	25.3	51.0	27.8
Asian	47.5	62.7	86.6	49.0
Black	30.6	28.7	67.4	24.7
Hispanic	32.1	35.3	66.8	36.2
Across socio-economic status				
Eligible for free/reduced-price meals	35.8	36.3	70.2	36.0
Across urban and rural school districts				
Urban	56.0	57.0	84.5	NA
Rural	57.1	59.1	89.0	NA
All Students	55.5	57.0	83.2	58.8

Sources: Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Office of Higher Education, ACT Research

Recognizing the importance of education, education spending is the largest spending area in the Minnesota state budget, with 42% of the general fund budget dedicated to E-12 education and 7% dedicated to postsecondary education.

Key strengths of Minnesota's education finance system:

1. 68% percent of school funding comes from state sources (as opposed to local property taxes) and Minnesota ranks 4th in the nation for state share of education funding.¹
2. Minnesota has successfully reduced variation in education inputs, such as per capita expenditures across districts and class sizes across schools.²
3. Minnesota provides more in state and local funding to the highest poverty districts compared to the lowest poverty districts.³

Education Funding At a Glance

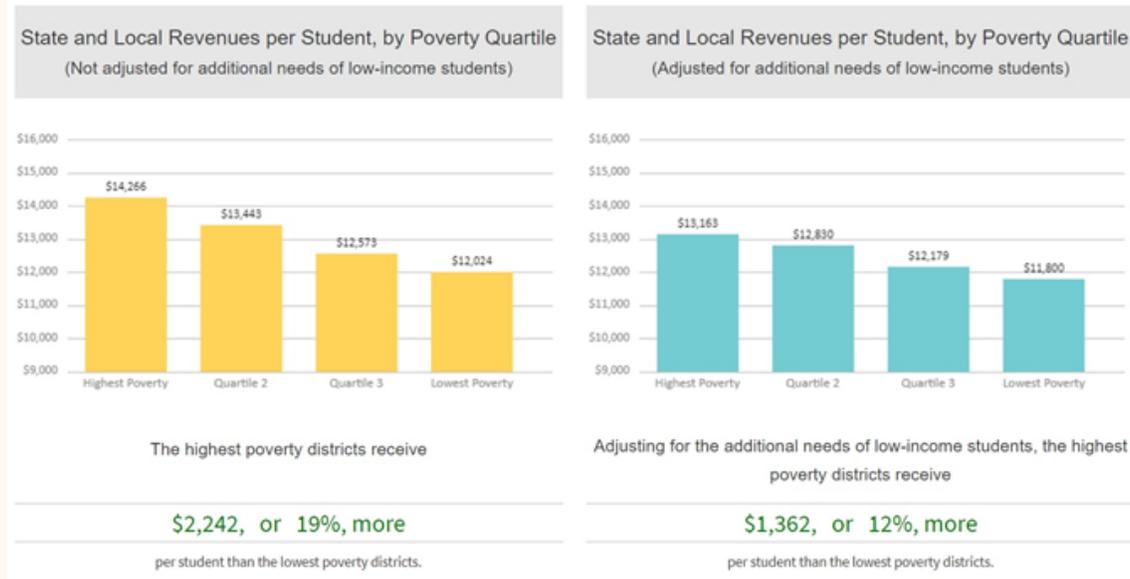
\$13,512 average annual per student spending

42 percent of the state budget devoted to E-12

Minnesota ranks 4th in the nation for state share of education funding

High-poverty districts receive 19 percent more state/local aid than low-poverty districts

DIFFERENCES IN FUNDING BETWEEN MINNESOTA'S HIGHEST AND LOWEST POVERTY DISTRICTS



Source: Education Trust

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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated education funding pressures on school districts - and it has highlighted systemic failure to equitably meet student needs. As Minnesota navigates changes in education delivery due to the pandemic, it is more important than ever that education funding be targeted to adequately and equitably meet the needs of students, especially those with extra challenges, and schools be provided with flexibility to make key fiscal decisions.

¹ Minnesota House of Representatives, Minnesota School Finance: A Guide for Legislators, November 2020

² Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Statewide Crisis: Minnesota's Education Achievement Gaps, October 2019

³ Education Trust, "The State of Funding Equity in Minnesota" and "Funding Gaps 2018"

GUIDING PRINCIPLE



Ensure all children have access to quality education and accelerate proven strategies to close worst-in-the-nation education gaps.

Significant systemic changes are needed to ensure all children have equitable access to quality education. One of the most impactful levers for education equity is to affirm that all children have the equal right to a quality education through an amendment to the Minnesota Constitution and elevate the state's requirement to provide education from "adequate" to "quality".

The State's duty toward its children is not satisfied unless it provides equal educational opportunities for all children.

– JUSTICE ALAN PAGE, DISSENTING, SKEEN V. STATE, MINNESOTA SUPREME COURT, 1993

Addressing systemic inequalities means advancing strategies that have demonstrated success in closing education gaps. Starting early is important. Improving early literacy will improve students' educational trajectory - students who do not achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade fall further behind and often never catch up.

Teacher diversity is important to closing education gaps. Accelerating teacher preparation programs that recruit, train, and mentor teachers of color will greatly increase diversity. "Last-in, first-out" (LIFO) policies adversely impact teachers of color - it is crucial to continue LIFO reforms so all schools are required to make retention decisions based on quality.

Another education gap that has come to the forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic is the digital divide. Many low-income students and students of color cannot access the technology or supports now essential for distance learning. To make certain students do not fall further behind, efforts to close the digital divide and support students in distance learning should be championed.

Looking forward, it is important that all students are prepared for college and ready for the 21st Century workforce. Closing college-preparation gaps and increasing the number of students who graduate postsecondary programs is important for Minnesota's future. Improving college-readiness and expanding programs that bridge school and work will help all Minnesotans access opportunities for bright futures.

Student-Teacher racial mismatch in Minnesota

The share of students of color in Minnesota's public schools has been rapidly growing, while the share of teachers of color has remained stagnant.

Percentage of teachers and students of color



*Combines part-time and full-time teachers

Source: Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board

GUIDING PRINCIPLE



Set world-class academic standards for students, measure progress towards meeting those standards, and use data for continuous improvement.

Minnesota's student academic standards are designed to prepare students for post-secondary and career success. Cooperatively developed by K-12 and post-secondary educators, employers, and the public, Minnesota's standards-based strategy 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.

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.

Education data is a critical tool for evaluating progress, identifying effective practices, and addressing disparities. Now more than ever, parents must be equipped with data on how schools are doing and how students are progressing. To that end, lawmakers should consider ways to increase the amount, relevancy, and accessibility of information available. Strengthening use of data will also help ensure investments in education are being used effectively to improve student achievement, support proven classroom practices, and narrow racial and socio-economic achievement gaps.



GUIDING PRINCIPLE



Empower families to choose the schools and programs that best meet their children's needs and empower educators with the flexibility to provide effective programs and services.

Minnesota's business community has been a leading advocate for expanding access to schools and programs that best meet the needs of families. Providing families with the ability to choose their children's programs and schools not only empowers parents but it also allows educators to customize instruction.

Starting with the earliest learners, expanding access to quality childcare and early education programs for low-income families is critical to closing education gaps. High-quality childcare and education programs have been shown to improve school readiness, reduce grade retention and special education, and increase high school graduation rates and college enrollment. Increasing childcare provider reimbursement rates and expanding early learning scholarships will empower more families with access to quality childcare and preschool programs.

Expanding options for low-income families improves educational outcomes and encourages school districts to improve school performance. An important option is charter schools – high-performing charter schools can greatly improve outcomes for students, especially for low-income students. Tuition tax credits also provide more options for low-and-middle income families by providing them with the means to select a K-12 school of choice for their children.

