

Closing Minnesota's Opportunity and Achievement Gaps

**We Know What Works
Why Don't We Take Action?**

February 2022



**Ciresi
Walburn**
Foundation

Introduction

The impetus for producing this booklet came from a presentation our foundation gave at a board meeting for one of our long-time grantees that “hit a nerve” for many in the room. Some were surprised to learn that Minnesota is behind other states in educating our Black, Latino, and Indigenous students. Others struggled to understand how proven solutions are right in front of us, but we lack the political will and leadership to successfully implement them. We hope that this booklet will elicit a similar reaction—that you’ll view Minnesota’s education system in a new light and also learn about solutions that produce results for all kids.

We know what works to help all Minnesota children learn.

Research and experience have validated successful educational interventions that are concrete, actionable, and proven to work, most prominently:

- High-quality early childhood education
- Research-informed tutoring programs
- Science-based literacy instruction (explicit phonics)
- Increasing teacher diversity
- School performance transparency

Why don’t we take action?

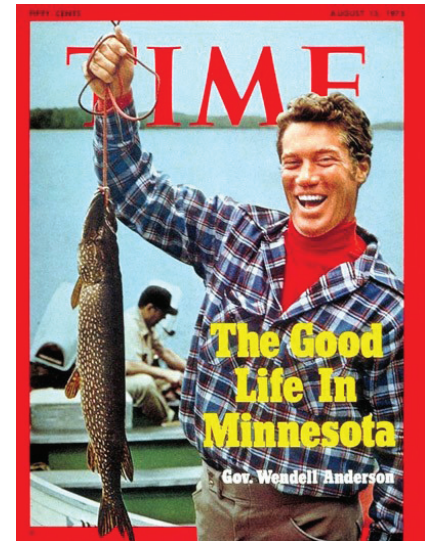
The Myth

For years, Minnesota had a reputation for a high quality of life—most notably in the era of the “Minnesota Miracle” and national media proclaiming us as “a state that works.” That led many here to adopt a “we’re-better-than-other-states” attitude.¹

This sense of exceptionalism extended to our perceptions of education in Minnesota, with a belief that our schools ensure all of our students are academically achieving and graduating prepared for success.

Unfortunately, this myth of Minnesota masks stark racial and economic disparities, fuels complacency in addressing our challenges, and hampers our ability to meet the needs of students who have been least well served in our schools.

Creating a Minnesota where all children can thrive requires a sobering examination of how we’re failing to meet the needs of our most vulnerable populations.



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<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-miracle-of-minneapolis/384975/>

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<http://strib.mn/3fkqZDo>

The Reality

Minnesota has some of the largest gaps in the nation on academic outcomes measured by race and socioeconomic status. Achievement gaps—between white students and students of color and between students from higher and lower income families—are evident across a variety of measures, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college readiness indicators.²

Not only are our gaps large, but our students of color also perform worse in direct comparisons with students of color in many other states. This counters the oft-used rationalization that our gaps are attributed solely to the performance of Minnesota’s white students.

Our graduation rates continue to be the worst in the nation for children of color. In 2018-19 (the most recent uninterrupted school year before the pandemic), Minnesota ranked 49th out of 50 states for Black students, tied for 50th out of 50 states for Latino students, and had the lowest rates in the country for Indigenous students graduating on-time from high school.⁴

Too often, even when Minnesota students of color graduate from high school, they are unprepared for success in college and increasingly need remedial coursework. Even as graduation rates have gradually increased in recent years, college readiness indicators—students meeting ACT benchmarks and students who do not need remedial coursework once enrolled in college—have declined.⁵

Black students in some deep south states have higher academic achievement scores than their peers in Minnesota. On 8th-grade reading assessments given to students across the country, Minnesota’s Black students rank near the bottom (tied for 36th out of 41 states); Black students in Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi performed better than in our state. For 8th-grade math, Minnesota’s Black students rank only 30th out of 40 states, with average scores below the national average for Black students.³

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5. Grunewald, R. & Nath, A. (2019) “A Statewide Crisis: Minnesota’s Education Achievement Gaps.” Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/-/media/assets/pages/education-achievement-gaps/achievement-gaps-mn-report.pdf?la=en>

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What Works: High-Quality Early Childhood Education

Research shows that investments in early learning scholarships—targeting low-income families and sending children to high-quality programs—provide the highest return of any public expenditure.⁶ In fact, Minnesota pioneered ground-breaking research into the benefits of early childhood education and is home of the Four-Star Parent Aware rating system, which serves as a national model. Star ratings help families identify early childhood programs using research-based practices that prepare children for school and life.

There are an estimated 35,000 low-income children in Minnesota still in need of access to quality early learning to provide a firm grounding for entering kindergarten.⁷

According to a new report, Minnesota meets just five of 10 quality benchmarks, and ranks only 29th in preschool access for 3-year-olds and 37th in access for 4-year-olds.⁸

The 2021 legislative session ended with \$1 billion in unspent Covid-relief funds, but virtually no additional investment in early learning scholarships. Going into the 2022 session, the projected budget surplus is \$7.7 billion. Now is the time to act.

6. Meloy, B. et al (January 2019) "Untangling the Evidence on Preschool Effectiveness: Insights for Policymakers." Learning Policy Institute. https://edworkingpapers.org/sites/default/files/Untangling_Evidence_Preschool_Effectiveness_REPORT.pdf
7. Rolnick, A & Otis, T. (September 1, 2021) "We need to fund the next Minnesota Miracle: Early childhood education." MinnPost. <https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2021/09/we-need-to-fund-the-next-minnesota-miracle-early-childhood-education/>
8. "The State of Preschool 2020 – State Preschool Yearbook." National Institute for Early Education Research. https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Minnesota_YB2020.pdf

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What Works: Research-Informed Tutoring Programs

Trained tutors can drive significant academic gains, especially in elementary schools. Decades of rigorous evaluations have consistently found that tutoring programs yield large, positive improvements in math and reading achievement and can also lead to greater social and motivational outcomes.⁹ One recent study examined interventions for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Of all the programs examined—including feedback and progress monitoring, cooperative learning, computer-assisted instruction, and mentoring—tutoring was the most effective.¹⁰

In the wake of the pandemic, national leaders have called for a massive investment in tutors. Other states have begun to act. For example, Tennessee is devoting \$200 million for a statewide tutoring program for 150,000 students in reading and math.¹¹

Here in Minnesota, state and district leaders should invest in tutoring programs with design characteristics demonstrated to lead to effectiveness, including: trained tutors (including volunteers); tutoring aligned with classroom curriculum; high-dose, frequent tutoring; small group size; relationship-based (consistent tutor(s) over the course of a year); and tutoring that takes place during the school day.¹²

9. "The Transformative Potential of Tutoring for PreK-12 Learning Outcomes: Lessons from Randomized Evaluations." Abdul Latif Lameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL). https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/publication/Evidence-Review_The-Transformative-Potential-of-Tutoring.pdf

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11. D'Orio, W. (November 30, 2021). "Tennessee Goes All in on Tutoring with \$200M Statewide Program for 150,000 Kids Who Are Just Below Grade Level in English, Math" The 74. <https://www.the74million.org/article/tennessee-goes-all-in-on-tutoring-with-200m-statewide-program-for-150000-kids-who-are-just-below-grade-level-in-english-math/>

12. Robinson, C. et al. (February 2021). "Accelerating Student Learning with High-Dose Tutoring." EdResearch For Recovery. https://annenbergbrown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Design_Principles_1.pdf

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What Works:

Science-Based Literacy Instruction (Explicit Phonics)

Literacy is the foundation of all learning and the pathway to equity.

The research and science are clear: We know how to teach kids to read. However, most of Black, Latino, and Indigenous students in Minnesota do not read at grade level; more than two-thirds of Minnesota students of color sitting in a 4th-grade classroom are not reading proficiently.¹³

Explicit and consistent instruction in phonics and decoding is fundamental to developing skilled readers. Unlike learning how to speak, human brains are not automatically wired to learn how to read; students need to be taught syllables, phonemes (there are 44 separate units of sound in the English language), and spelling-sound correspondence.

Phonics instruction enhances comprehension; skilled readers must be taught to do both. A dedicated and effective phonics program leads to stronger comprehension. As readers become fluent at decoding text, they free up mental space to understand increasingly complex words and themes. Therefore, while phonics teaches students to read words, a robust curriculum with literature, history, science, and the arts is also essential.

More than 20 states—but NOT Minnesota—ban “whole language” or “balanced literacy” instruction. Too many districts, schools, and classrooms across Minnesota use “whole language” or “balanced literacy” English Language Arts (ELA) curriculums, which ignore decades of research and do not include nearly enough explicit phonics instruction to ensure all students become strong readers.¹⁴

Proponents of “whole-language” instruction argue that learning to read is a natural process and that children will instinctively learn to read if they’re surrounded by books—similar to how humans learn to speak. But the scientific consensus is that whole-language instruction, as well as “balanced literacy” that is deeply rooted in whole language, are not as effective as a phonics-based approach.¹⁵

New York City’s new schools’ chancellor, David Banks, recently admitted that the nation’s largest school district has been teaching reading the wrong way for 25 years.¹⁶ Banks said that balanced literacy—although used in many Minnesota schools—doesn’t work, particularly for low-income students. Instead, Banks said, phonics-based instruction is what students need. **“We are in a city where 65% of Black and Brown children never reach proficiency and we act like that’s normal, it’s all right,”** said New York City Mayor Eric Adams. **If the same number of white children couldn’t read proficiently, he said, “they would burn this city down.”**¹⁷

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Mississippi: A State That Works (for Literacy Instruction)

In 2013, Mississippi passed a comprehensive literacy law designed to combat lagging reading scores and student literacy.¹⁸ The law requires districts to use a high-quality, phonics-based curriculum; provides funding to train teachers in the science of reading; and bans promotion of students not proficient in reading by the end of 3rd grade.¹⁹

The results are remarkable!²⁰ In 2013, Black 4th-grade students in Mississippi were reading over one full grade level behind the national average on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) assessment. By 2019, Black 4th graders in Mississippi performed slightly above the national average for Black students, and on assessment results released in the fall of 2021, Mississippi placed 5th out of 40 states for Black students on 4th-grade reading, well above the national average.²¹

Students of color in Mississippi are more likely to be reading on grade level than their peers in Minnesota. Black and Latino students in Mississippi score higher in reading than Minnesota Black and Latino students in both 4th and 8th grades. In fact, Minnesota now ranks only 22nd out of 40 states for Black students' 4th-grade reading, below the national average.²²

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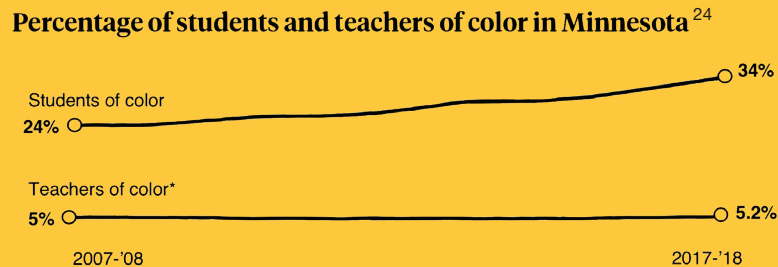
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What Works: Increasing Teacher Diversity

Minnesota has one of the largest gaps in the nation between our percentage of students of color and teachers of color.²³



*Combines part-time and full-time teachers

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

Graph Credit: Jim Foster of the Star Tribune

Having just one Black teacher in elementary school makes children more likely to graduate high school and more likely to enroll in college.²⁵ Research shows that teachers of color are more personally committed to the success of children of color and impact a wide range of academic outcomes. Teachers of color also serve as powerful role models and have a positive impact on learning for students of all races.²⁶

One solution that has faced significant resistance at the Minnesota legislature is expanding alternative and non-traditional pathways to teaching careers. Eliminating bureaucratic barriers to teacher licensure is a low-cost approach to attracting diverse educators to Minnesota classrooms. In recent years, policymakers have made some progress in this area, but not nearly enough.²⁷

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What Works: School Performance Transparency

Families deserve clear, understandable, and easy-to-access information about how their local schools are performing.²⁸ Whether to celebrate their school's successes, advocate for changes or resources, or explore the best options for their kids, families need a straightforward way to evaluate schools in their community and learn what different schools have to offer.²⁹

Minnesota collects a lot of information on student and school performance, but it's often difficult to find and interpret. The result is that many families have a hard time knowing how well their school or district is doing and if their child's needs are being met.³⁰

Minnesota's School Report Card needs improvements. The Minnesota Department of Education's website is a maze of confusing graphs and data that is difficult to make sense of and hard to navigate. Many states have adopted "summative" school rating systems, which typically use a number of stars or a 1-100 rating scale to tell families and the community how well schools are performing.³¹

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About the Ciresi Walburn Foundation

The mission of the Ciresi Walburn Foundation is to serve as a catalyst for creative, innovative, and societal-changing programs and policies to promote education and equitable opportunities for all of Minnesota's children and youth.

The Foundation was founded in 1998 with a \$30 million commitment as a result of fees earned from the Minnesota Tobacco Litigation. To date, the Foundation has granted more than \$30 million to more than 125 schools and nonprofit organizations.

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