

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

16 Solutions that Deliver Equity and Excellence in Education

By Jermaine Toney and Hillary Rodgers

In 2010, the Organizing Apprenticeship Project (OAP) launched a series of policy briefs to weigh in on Minnesota's most pressing policy issues. The series is a proactive response to a growing body of research that says the failure to address racial disparities in core infrastructure like education, economic development, and health care will undermine Minnesota's long-term economic growth and vitality.

OAP works collaboratively with racial and economic justice leaders to research and develop solutions to expand opportunity and reduce disparities. In this policy brief, OAP and its partners take a hard look at the disparities in student achievement and offer 16 solutions to deliver equity and excellence in education outcomes for the state.

OVERVIEW

Minnesota's education system is a national leader in providing opportunity to our white students. As a result, our white fourth and eighth grade students outperform other students on national math and reading assessments.

Meanwhile, Minnesota's education system is not a national leader for delivering opportunity to our American Indian students, students of color and immigrant students. The prevailing overall benchmarks do not reflect the same type of educational achievement for our students of color. For example:

- ✦ 2010 statewide eighth grade math assessments reveal that 64 percent of white students measured above the required level of proficiency, while for students of color, proficiency levels were reached by only 29 percent of American Indian, 35 percent of Latino, and 28 percent of Black students. Although Asian Pacific Islander students' rates (60 percent) were aligned with whites, this masks gaps among Minnesota's broadly diverse Asian population.
- ✦ By 12th grade, students of color are more likely to be a couple of years behind their classmates. With each passing grade level, hope and faith disappears in the communities of students of color and their parents. Learners lose motivation, slide into meaninglessness and no longer fully apply themselves. Today, we have thousands of children of color who walk around with an educational hunger that has not been fully nourished by Minnesota's education system.

The disparities in education outcomes are well-known and publicized in our state. What are less known are the causes that are contributing to the devastating educational gaps.

Some claim that poverty is the leading reason for the prevailing stark inequities. However, racial disparities in education hold regardless of economic standing. According to data from National Assessment of Educational Progress, between 2003 and 2009, Minnesota's poor white fourth graders were more likely to do better on standardized reading tests than Black students in the same grade who were not poor. Similarly, from 2007 to 2009, poor white fourth graders had matched or outperformed on reading tests Latino students in the same grade who were not poor.

Others might say it's about who is smarter. But that is simply not the case. The hard truth is that these inequities are deeply grounded in complex decisions and multiple systems. Our state's unequal opportunities in access to employment, wealth, health, child care, transportation and housing have ripple effects on disparities in education. As a result, many guardians and parents of color who may have to travel long distances to hold down low-wage jobs, or who may be learning a new culture or language, sometimes don't have what they need to support their children in school.

Education funding, policy decisions and institutional practices can have a large influence on shifting the achievement gaps. These decisions and institutional practices can harm students by driving a bigger wedge between students of color and access to resources, teachers, curriculums, and good schools. Or, alternatively, they can be designed to help students by closing gaps and creating the environments where kids get the resources they need to flourish. To get there, though, we have to address not only the achievement gaps between students of color and white learners but the equity gaps as well.

WATCH THE EQUITY GAPS

We can watch the equity gaps between institutional performances and learners by paying close attention to the gaps in opportunity and treatment driven by the state's budget, policy decisions, and institutional practices. Here are some to consider:

- ✦ As the state's proportion of students of color increases, the state government's commitment to funding Minnesota's schools is decreasing. Between 2003 and 2011, students of color and immigrant students increased by 34 percent, from 159,892 to 214,915. Within that time, the total state aid to Minnesota's school districts dropped by 14.7 percent, or about \$1,400 per student.
- ✦ That drop in state aid to schools has been coupled with an aggressive increase in local school property taxes. But the property tax increases have not been enough to replace the decline in state aid. Between fiscal years 2003 and 2011, school property taxes increased by 136 percent, or from \$663 per student to \$1,563.

- ✦ Meanwhile, at the school levels, almost all white students in Minnesota are routinely taught by and see people in authority—in front of the classroom and in textbooks—who share their culture, language, and history.
- ✦ Nearly all students of color and American Indian students in our schools rarely have this experience or advantage in Minnesota’s educational institutions. However, if this situation were reversed, this would accelerate progress on turning around Minnesota’s achievement gap.
- ✦ Disparities in academic achievement, declines in state aid, over-representation in special education, and discrimination in school discipline are all elements that force students of color into the school-to-prison pipeline. Inequity in school discipline is a key factor in the disproportionate number of students of color who are undereducated and over-incarcerated.

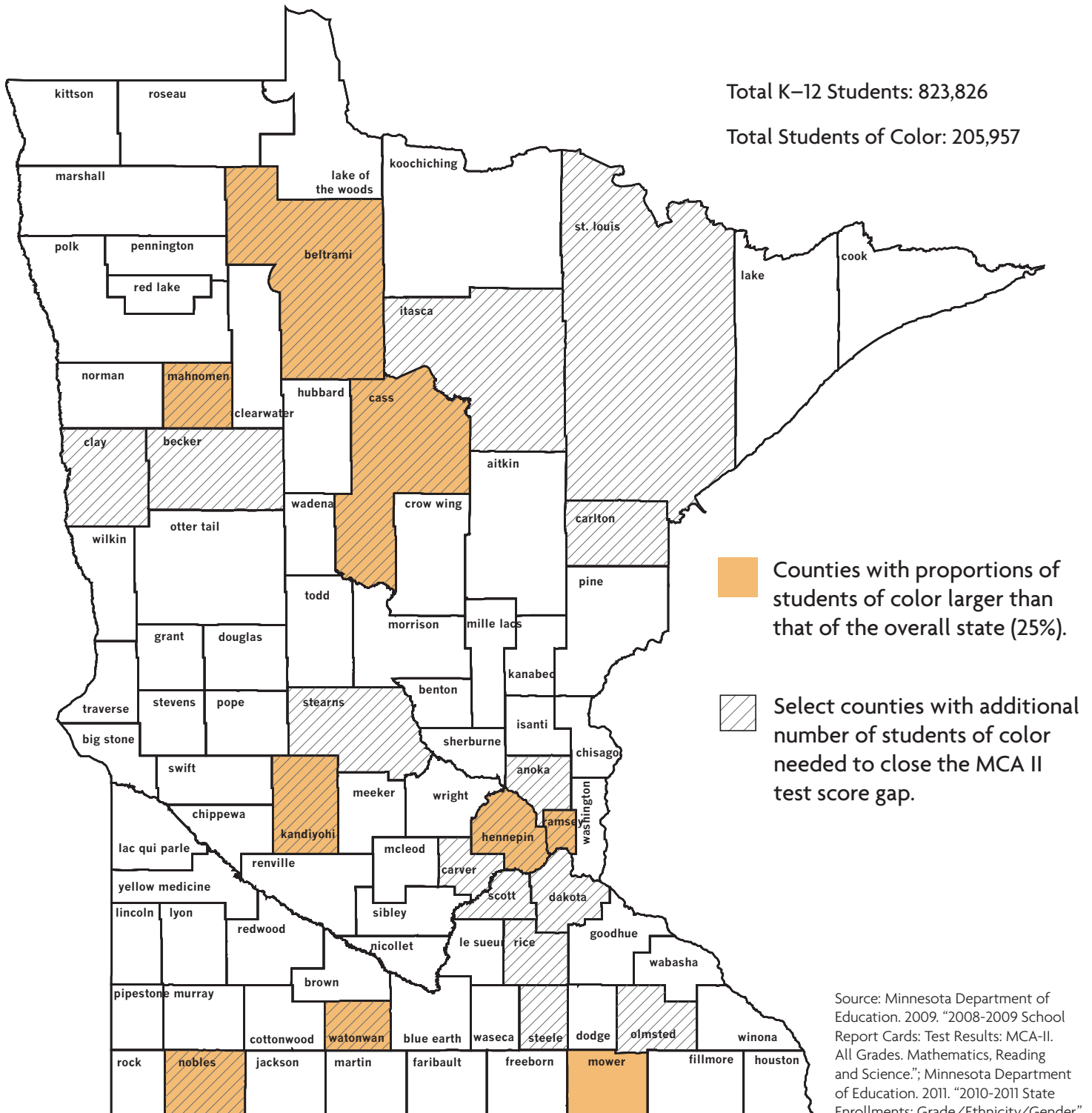
These are equity gaps built by policies or practices at the state, district or school level that impact the quality and effectiveness of educating students of color. Acknowledging, understanding and closing these gaps are critical if we ever hope to close the more publicly recognized achievement gaps.

THE PUBLIC WILL FOR EQUITY

One current roadblock to success is our collective perception of the achievement and equity gaps by the media, state legislature, community and civic leaders. The current public dialogue gives the perception that the gaps are restless, large, unruly—and frankly insurmountable.

Actually, though, OAP has mapped the gaps in math, science, and reading, and found that at least one leading gap is represented by a comparatively small number of students. According to the OAP’s new analysis, the number of students of color needed to close the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II test score gap with white students—the state’s basic standards test—is only 60,505 students across the entire state. In the chart below, it is easy to see where these students are, and where focused attention on students and equity opportunities in schools would make a huge difference. Surely, closing this gap is attainable. What we need is public will.

Students of color and American Indian students are widespread throughout Minnesota. The MCA II test score gap is statewide but considerably small. Expanding opportunity to just 41,399 students of color in 21 select counties will close the gap.



Source: Minnesota Department of Education. 2009. "2008-2009 School Report Cards: Test Results: MCA-II. All Grades. Mathematics, Reading and Science."; Minnesota Department of Education. 2011. "2010-2011 State Enrollments: Grade/Ethnicity/Gender."

MOVING FORWARD

Dismantling the current unequal outcomes in educational attainment and institutional treatment must become the state's top priority or the inequities will only grow in magnitude—right in the midst of school population shifts.

By 2025-2030, populations of color and the American Indian population will make up half of the estimated 169,000 increase in Minnesota's population. What this translates to is that Minnesota's students of color will become the face of education. Over the next 10 years, the number of high school graduates who are students of color and immigrants will increase by 98 percent, while white graduates will decrease by 17 percent, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Minnesota's leaders must drive institutional and policy change to deliver equity and excellence for all students. Investing in racial equity in education is essential to nourishing the soul of students of color, as well as contributing to Minnesota's long-term economic vitality.

Closing both the achievement and equity gaps is manageable and possible. There are local community leaders, schools, and districts making progress on closing the gaps, but they do so with little recognition or reward. A strong commitment to and public investment in racial equity in education from leadership within the state legislature, department of education and from the governor has some of the strongest potential to accomplish broader gains.

There are programs, policies and practical ways to make equity outcomes part of the solution. OAP researched and compiled 16 initiatives that represent the best thinking of leading groups in education opportunity.

16 SOLUTIONS

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP FROM THE TOP; CORE EDUCATION LEADERSHIP MUST COMMIT TO EQUITY AS A KEY LEADERSHIP STRATEGY.

1. Committing to strong school leadership to equity. Montgomery County Public Schools' institutional commitment to equitably educating students of color led the way for groundbreaking progress in closing the achievement gaps. In just seven years, proficient rates for Black kindergarteners rose 39 percentage points and Latino students' rose 46 percentage points. Enrollment in Advanced Placement courses jumped 59 and 56 percent for Black and Latino students, respectively.

2. School board and civic leaders partnering to implement new strategies for high student achievement. In September 2008, Rochester Public Schools teamed up with the Rochester Diversity Council to implement a SmartKids program as a strategy to target the achievement gap. Within 3 years, the program has trained 2,057 parents from diverse backgrounds. In this time, proficiency for Black and Latino students has risen in both math and reading.

3. Institutional practices that teach English language learning through content. Research indicates that the most-effective programs for English language learners are to learn collaboratively with their English-speaking peers and create a genuine collaboration among ELL and mainstream teachers. With the use of this Collaboration Model, St. Paul Public Schools have seen higher outcomes for ELL students which have closed gaps for ELL and non-ELL students on the MCA-II tests.

RACE EQUITY CONSCIOUSNESS AT THE POINT OF DECISION MAKING.

4. Changing school budget options to prevent disparities. In 2009, the Education Equity Organizing Collaborative negotiated with the board of Minneapolis Public Schools to revise their budget recommendations to reveal the race and economic equity dynamics *before* they adopted an option. MPS choose the option that would have the least negative impact on students and worked with the families and students most affected by changes.

AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS.

5. Engaging community organizers and civic leaders in education solutions. The inclusion of stakeholders frequently happens through community organizing efforts that “leverage the collective power of parents and community residents to alter existing power relationships and policies.” Chicago’s Grow Your Own campaign addressed the shortage of qualified teachers in low-income communities. Miami’s People Acting for Community Together influenced district policies and resource allocation while raising their students’ state scores.

CREATION OF EQUITY STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL.

6. Adopting innovative standards that improve institutional accountability on shifting achievement and equity gaps. The Minnesota Department of Education measures and rewards aspects of our education system, but left unmeasured are equity practices. The EEOC is currently working with community leaders to define equity standards and will be partnering with the Governor and the MDE to place equity standards at the center of excellence in Minnesota.

BEST PRACTICES AND DOCUMENTED STRATEGIES THAT HAVE THE CAPACITY TO ACHIEVE EQUITY.

7. Preserve and realign Minnesota’s commitment to integration to boost economic well-being and foster multicultural learning. To correct real estate policies that promoted segregated cities and schools, the state legislature adopted a rule which allowed districts and schools to voluntarily create desegregation plans. Although some lawmakers in the 2011 legislative session proposed to dismantle the entire program, the program must be preserved and realigned to result in student achievement.

8. Recommitting to adequately funding special education. Federal and state government underfunding of special education places a heavy financial burden on local school districts. In 2011 legislative session, the House and Senate have passed education omnibus bills that would freeze or deeply cut special education funding, while keeping all mandates intact. This will ultimately limit the ability of districts to equitably fund and provide quality education to all students and students of color.

9. Creating alternative licensure pathways for educators of color to teach a changing demographic. Minnesota recently passed legislation allowing for the creation of alternative pathways to teaching. But the state must not lose sight of the importance of maintaining quality in its quest to diversify the teaching force. Illinois' Grow Your Own campaign has been successful in creating an alternative pathway to teaching for adults of color and GYO teachers are performing as well as and in some cases better than other beginning teachers.

10. Updating textbooks to echo large shifts in student populations. Critical pieces of history are left out of students' learning from today's curriculums and textbooks. The Hmong Organizing Program of TakeAction Minnesota has taken steps to incorporate the history and lessons of diverse people into curriculums. Beginning in May 2011, the history of the Hmong people will be sitting alongside district-wide history courses in St. Paul Public Schools.

11. Promoting economic growth through funding early childhood education. Reaching an additional 18,000 children of color and low income children (0–5) with high-quality early learning opportunities would double the investment to two percent of the state's budget and build on existing infrastructure. Cost-benefit analyses show that for every dollar invested in early education programs returns range from \$3 to \$17.

12. Strengthening opportunity for boys, particularly Black boys. As a result of unprecedented state level efforts by the New Jersey Department of Education to broaden investment in early education and retain quality teachers in high need areas, New Jersey's Black male graduation rate rose from 48 percent to 69 percent.

13. Implementing tuition equity practices in higher education institutions. Minnesota has taken a step with its State College and Universities by instituting flat rate tuition policies. Data from eleven of these schools shows a 95 percent increase in the number of students who benefitted from this policy. As demographics shift and change the face of Minnesota, we must broaden tuition equity practices.

14. Harvesting the seeds of the urban American Indian community and Minneapolis Public Schools Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). Minneapolis Public Schools have a dismal track record with American Indian students. The American Indian community identified to correct practices and policies through an MOA. Yielding success, American Indian partners and Minneapolis Schools have signed an unprecedented agreement, the community has heavily invested in Minneapolis schools and Anishinabe Academy kindergarteners have seen top ranking scores on reading assessments.

15. Revitalizing Minnesota's American Indian languages. Language revitalization is a key strategy for the resurrection of Minnesota's native languages. Between the 2008 and 2010 legislative sessions former Governor Pawlenty signed a bill allowing for investment and a working group to inventory language revitalization efforts and recommend how to continue to preserve indigenous languages.

16. Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. In the wake of zero-tolerance policies, schools must put to rest the overuse of punishments that are linked to the school-to-prison pipeline. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is a comprehensive strategy that has been cited as a critical first step. Schools have seen reductions in suspensions from 11–22 percentage points and reductions in office referral rates from 13–76 percentage points.

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