



THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA

A POLICY ROADMAP FOR STUDENT SUCCESS | JULY 2025



CONTENTS

2
INTRODUCTION

3
ENROLLMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS

9
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

22
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
& WELLBEING

30
TEACHER WORKFORCE

35
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

41
A CALL TO ACTION FOR
MINNESOTA STUDENTS

42
ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

For many years, Minnesota prided itself on education outcomes that beat the national average. However, like in all states, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the education landscape in Minnesota. Test scores dropped and have remained stubbornly low, attendance is down, and fewer students are taking rigorous coursework.

Beyond the pandemic-era changes in education however, are even more persistent concerns: Minnesota has some of the worst disparities in educational outcomes in the country and this was true before COVID-19. Even when statewide assessment scores placed Minnesota in the top portion of U.S. states, children of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners scored far below their peers.¹ In many cases, COVID-19 learning loss made these disparities worse.²

The statewide conversation around improving educational outcomes is warranted and necessary, but it's critical to remember that the most urgent issues in public education existed before the pandemic and will persist without bold action. This report explores data and trends in education in the years preceding and following the COVID-19 pandemic within four topics:

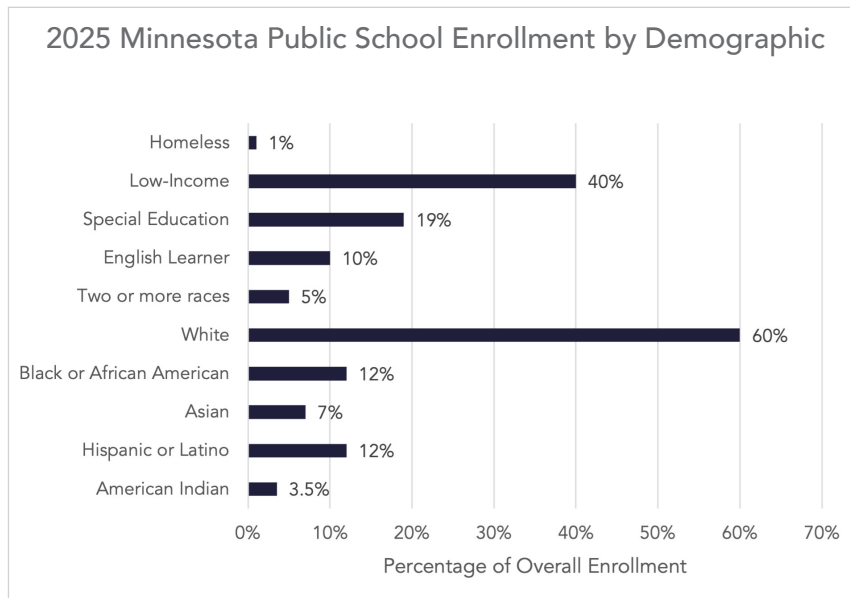
- Enrollment and demographics,
- Academic achievement,
- Student engagement and wellbeing, and
- Teacher workforce.

A thorough and nuanced understanding of statewide education data is the critical first step in identifying effective solutions for the problems facing our public education system. Here, we walk through key trends, opportunities, and challenges, and provide a series of concrete recommendations for statewide action to improve education outcomes across the state.

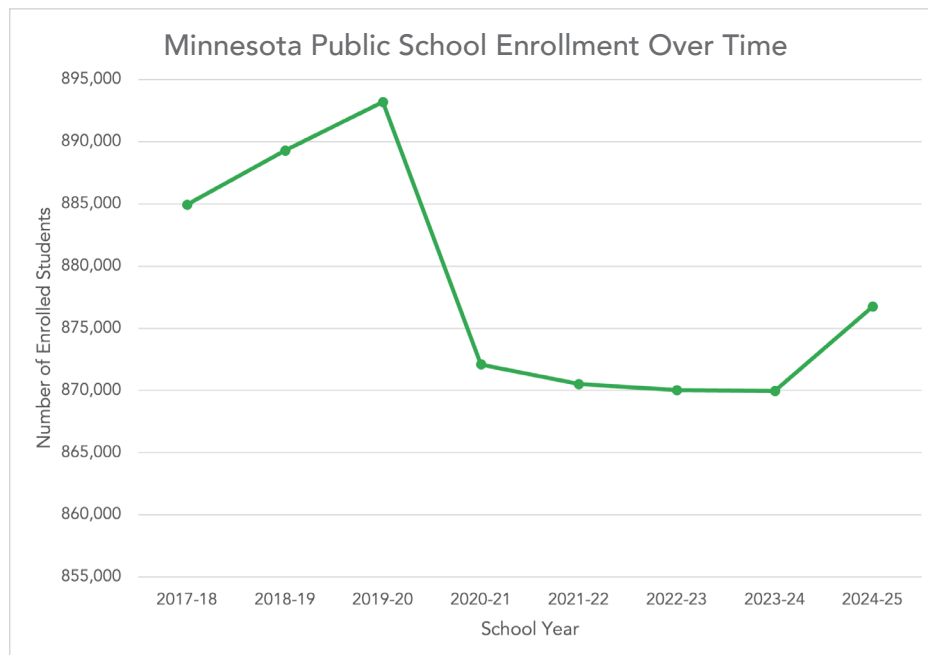
A SNAPSHOT OF ENROLLMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS IN MINNESOTA SCHOOLS



Minnesota is home to a diverse student population that continues to evolve. In 2025, 333 school districts and charter schools across the state serve 876,746 students, plus more who attend independent and homeschool options.³ Due to a variety of factors, overall school enrollment is shifting. Post-COVID, public school enrollment dropped sharply with some temporary shifts to private and homeschool options. While enrollment has started to inch back upwards, there are potential longer-term shifts to monitor in terms of birth rates, regional distribution, and overall enrollment patterns.

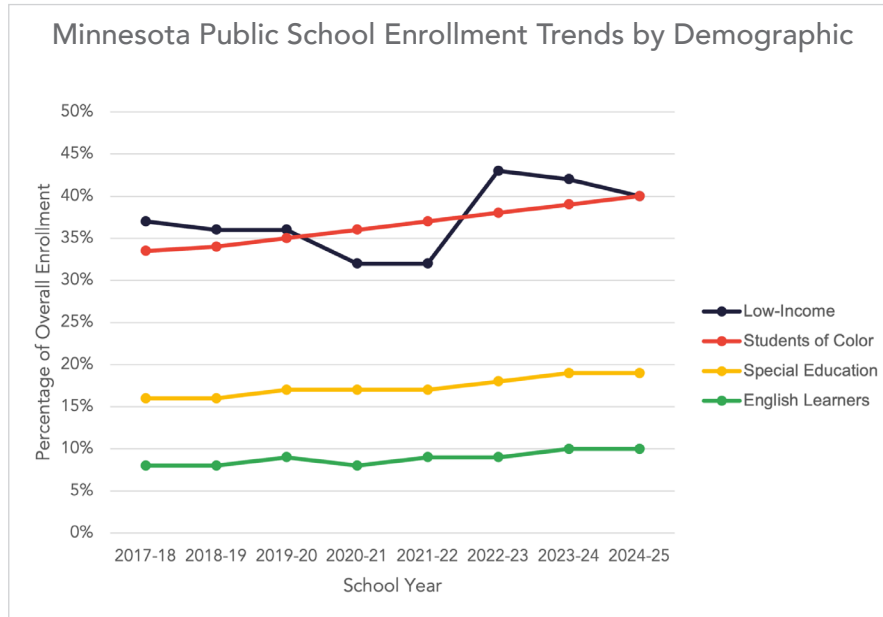


DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DATA CENTER

At the same time, enrollment for special education students, English learners (EL), students of color, and low-income students have increased in recent years in all corners of the state. These shifts require changes in budgeting, staffing, and service needs in schools. Our schools must continually evolve and adapt to ensure welcoming schools with appropriate services for the students they serve—for example, special education programming for students with disabilities and multilingual support for EL students. In this section, we explore these broad needs before digging deeper into academics and school climate later in the report.



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

Overall, about 11% of Minnesotans fall below the poverty line.⁴ A large proportion of those in poverty, plus many more with incomes above the threshold but still struggling to make ends meet, are families with children. In 2024, 42% of students attending public school, or almost 370,000 children, were from low-income families, based on free or reduced price lunch qualification.⁵ Children of color in Minnesota are more likely to live in poverty than their white peers. Seven-percent of white children live below the poverty line in Minnesota, compared to 31% of Native American children and 28% of Black children.⁶ These students live in all corners of the state, both urban and rural, and in some cases have additional support needs both in and out of school.

Research consistently demonstrates the impact that family income has on a student’s educational outcomes—from lower test scores to higher rates of absenteeism. Moreover, there are systemic barriers facing lower-income communities—for example, students being more likely to have an inexperienced teacher than their higher-income peers.^{7,8} Schools and districts serving large numbers of students living in poverty face unique challenges, such as reduced teacher and staff retention and more concentrated student need that can make it more challenging (and more costly) to provide educational opportunities to the students they serve.^{9,10}

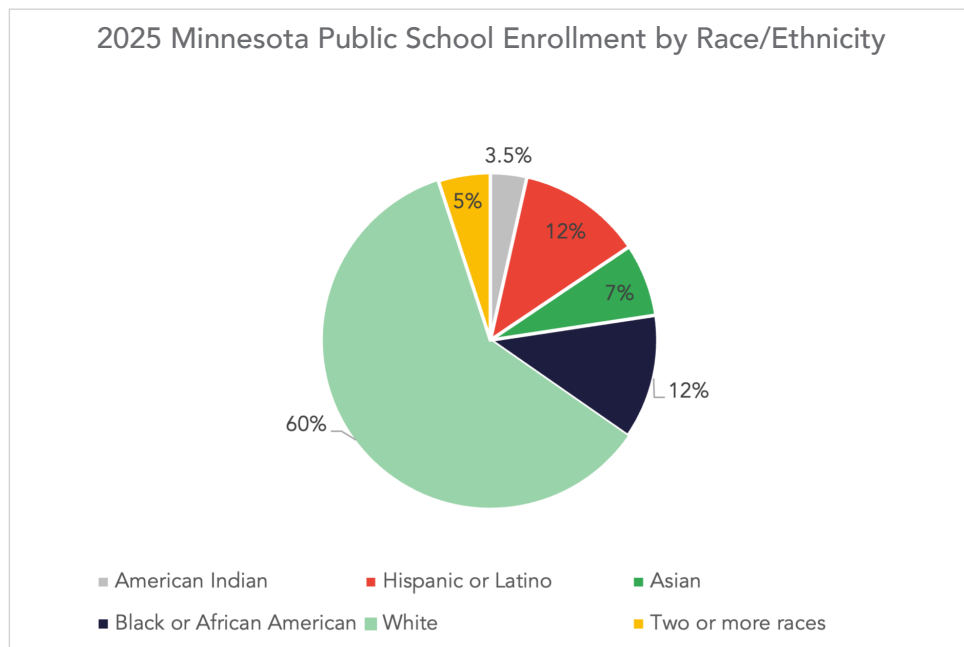
While Minnesota has a more equitable school funding model than many states, with limits on the proportion of school district budgets that may come from local property taxes in order to reduce funding gaps between schools in wealthy vs. lower income districts, there are still gaps and unmet needs that persist in Minnesota. Schools need to be adequately funded across the board, along with better targeting of resources toward schools with high concentrations of student poverty and other specific student needs. In 2024, the Minnesota Department of Education convened a task force on school funding as part of a lawsuit settlement. The group’s final report recommended shifting to a weighted student formula which would target more funding to students who need it most, including low-income students. This is a research-backed approach that has been successful in other states at improving equity and fairness in school funding.¹¹



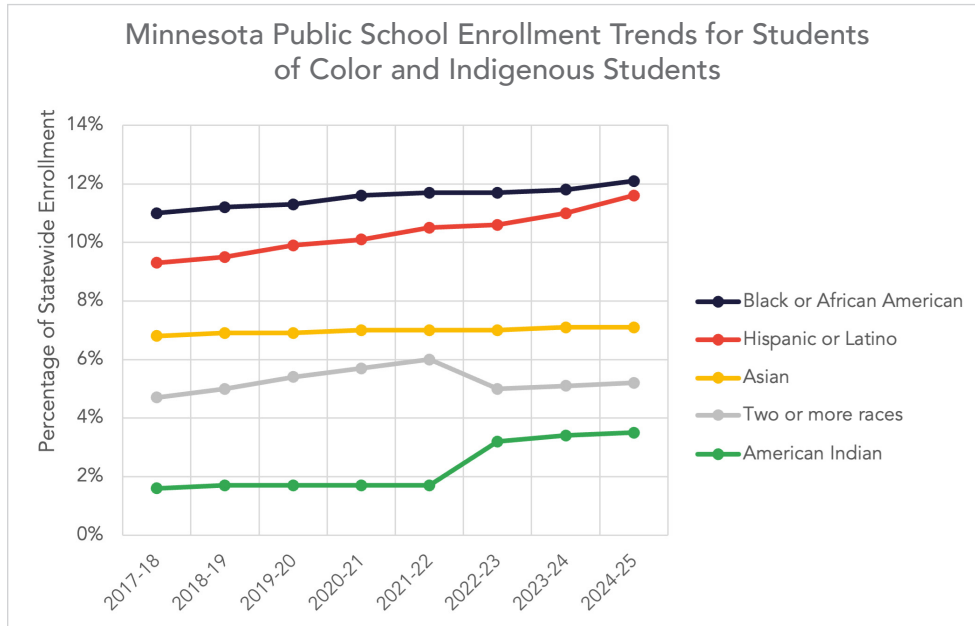
STUDENTS OF COLOR AND INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

As our nation continues to diversify, the share of students of color in Minnesota has grown. In 2010, students of color made up 25% of the population in Minnesota schools. In 2025, that number is 40%.¹² Despite this growing diversity, students of color and Indigenous students are still underserved and not experiencing the same levels of academic success as their white peers, with lower rates of grade-level proficiency, higher rates of exclusionary discipline for subjective behavior, and lower rates of graduation and college enrollment.^{13,14}

The roots of these issues are complex, and they require intentional solutions. As we discuss later in the report, our schools still do not reflect the diversity of our students. For example, teachers of color represent only 6% of the educator workforce.¹⁵ This is one factor that drives school climate, as well as the biases that can impact students when it comes to discipline, rigorous coursework access, and the relevance of what is being taught. Importantly, it also impacts whether students are able to forge the strong adult relationships we know are critical to student success.



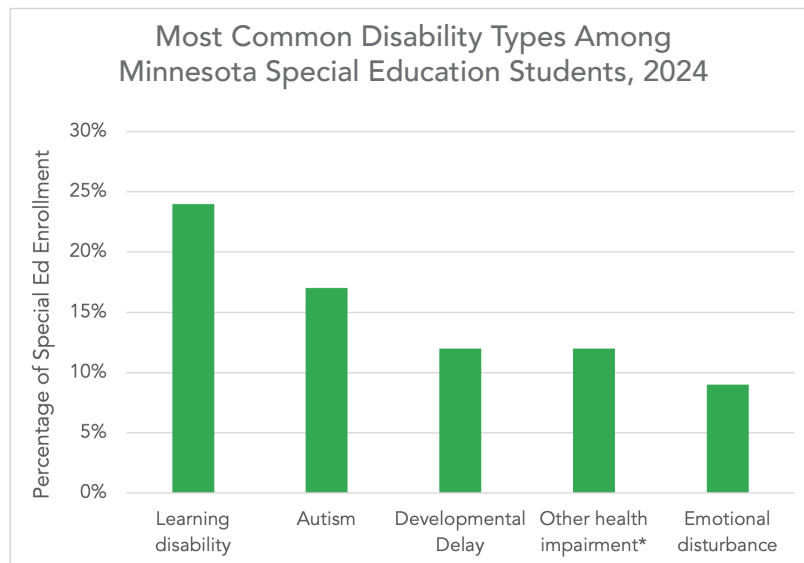
DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DATA CENTER

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Schools are serving an increasing share of students with disabilities. Currently, 19% of all students in Minnesota qualify for special education services, up from 15% in 2018 and 13% in 2010.¹⁶ This represents a diverse mix of disabilities including autism, learning disabilities, and speech or language impairment. Providing effective services aligned to these diverse needs should be a top priority for Minnesota to ensure students with disabilities have full access to the same quality of education as their peers.



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

* Under IDEA, "other health impairment" includes "acute or chronic health problems" that result in "limited alertness with respect to the educational environment" including asthma, ADHD, diabetes, epilepsy, and others.

Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), children with disabilities are entitled to a “free appropriate public education.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, many factors contribute to Minnesota not living up to this promise to special education students. Many districts struggle with a shortage of qualified educators: Minnesota’s teacher licensing board reports that special education positions are the hardest for districts to fill, in addition to being the largest proportion of teachers holding an out-of-field permission, Tier 1, or Tier 2 license.¹⁸ The need for effective support rather than punitive discipline is also a notable barrier for students with disabilities. As we explore later in the report, special education students are subject to exclusionary discipline practices at far higher rates than their peers.

At both the state and federal level, there is a long-standing underinvestment in special education. In order to meet requirements under IDEA, school districts in Minnesota are left to plug in budget holes that government funding leaves unfilled; this is referred to as the special education cross-subsidy, which was nearly \$800 million in 2023.¹⁹

Like all Minnesota children, special education students deserve a high-quality education that meets their needs. The structural problems within special education must be addressed with meaningful solutions to ensure special education students no longer lag behind their peers. The growing proportion of special education students only serves to make the need for solutions more urgent.

ENGLISH LEARNERS

As of early 2025, English learners (EL) accounted for 10% of students in Minnesota, up from 8% in 2018 and 5% in 2001.²⁰ In fact, post-pandemic, EL students were the sole driver of enrollment growth in the state: multilingual enrollment went up while enrollment for non-English learners continued to decline.²¹ As the share of multilingual students continues to grow, schools need to respond accordingly with staffing and programming.

In 2014, Minnesota passed the Learning English for Academic Proficiency and Success (LEAPS) Act, aiming to set a clear, high bar for EL instruction in the state. It stipulates that multilingualism is viewed as an asset, classroom instruction is differentiated for English learners, and school staff receive ongoing professional development to support multilingual learners.²² Despite this legislation and the growing number of multilingual students in Minnesota schools, English language learner achievement metrics remain stubbornly low.

Multilingual learners require additional services like regular assessments to monitor language progress, educators trained in English as a Second Language instruction, school materials for families translated into their home language, and more. These services can be cost- and time-intensive for schools to implement, but they are critical in closing the achievement gap between multilingual learners and their peers. Unfortunately, as for special education, there has long been a “cross-subsidy” for EL services—essentially required and critical programming without ample funding. Moreover, while detailed teacher shortage data in Minnesota is not reported, the Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) reports that English as a Second Language is an area with a large share of teachers working on an out-of-field permission or Tier 1 or 2 license.²³

As discussed in the following section, multilingual learners score well behind their peers on standardized assessments, miss school more frequently, and are less likely to enroll in rigorous coursework. Without targeted investment and solutions at both the policy and school levels, multilingual learners will continue to fall behind.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT



In discussions of how schools and students are faring, academic achievement almost always leads the conversation and rightfully so. The primary goal of public schooling, after all, is to ensure every child has the skills necessary to succeed in our society. While schools do much more than teach children reading and math, developing academic skills is the core of public education. Test results, like those on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), are an important component of assessing academic achievement, but they are not the sole measure. Other metrics of academic opportunity for students, such as college and career readiness or access to rigorous coursework, also provide key indicators of student access and success. Here, we summarize key data to paint a more robust picture of academic achievement in Minnesota schools.

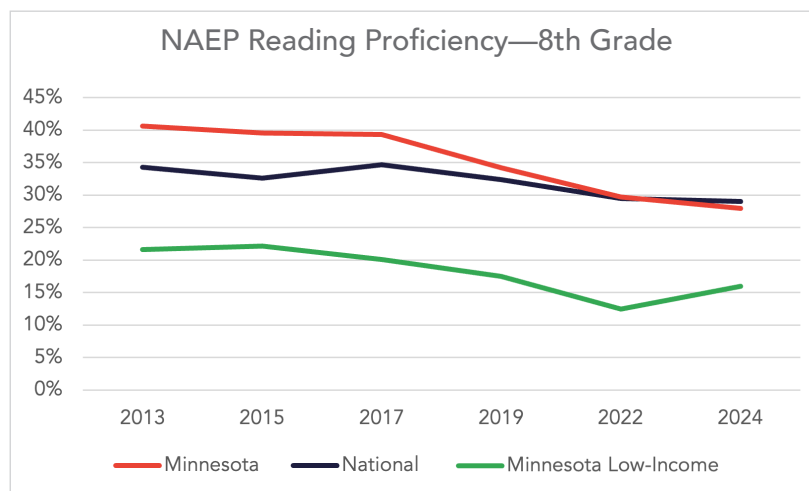


LITERACY

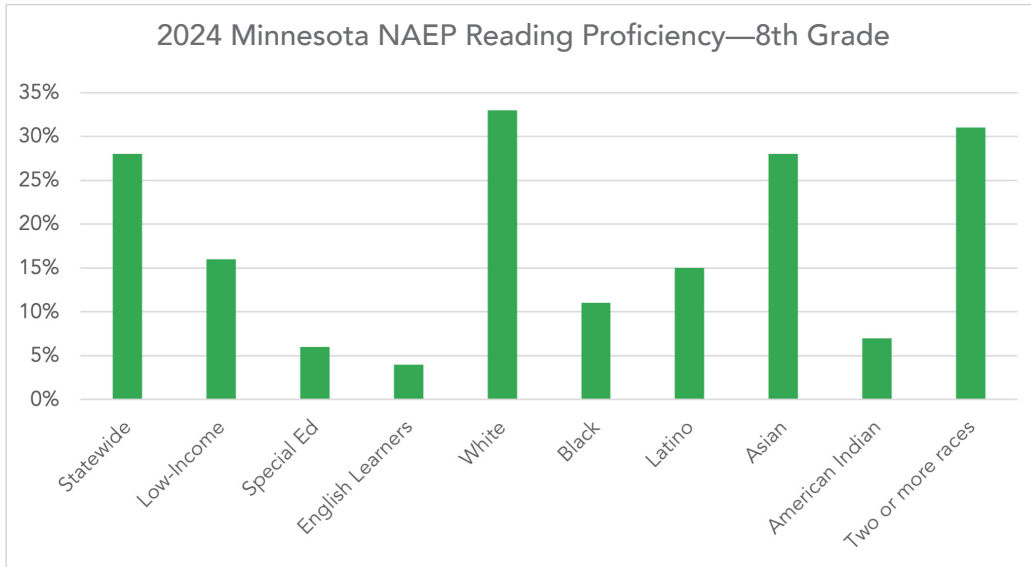
In recent years, literacy has dominated much of the educational achievement conversation in Minnesota. Reading assessment scores slipped post-COVID, coinciding with a nationwide reckoning around how children are taught to read.²⁴ In 2023, the state legislature overhauled Minnesota’s literacy instruction with the Read Act.²⁵ That legislation aims to ensure evidence-based literacy curriculum, require better training for teachers, and provide enhanced screening for all Minnesota students, including for dyslexia. A glance at student test scores paints a picture for why such a sweeping piece of legislation was necessary.

From 2013 to 2019, eighth-grade students in Minnesota scored higher than the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).²⁶ During the same period, however, scores were falling in Minnesota while they remained relatively stable nationwide, and in 2022, statewide reading scores in Minnesota fell in line with national averages. Beyond this dip in reading achievement, both pre- and post-pandemic, it is worth noting that despite beating the national average, in 2013, 60% of eighth-graders in Minnesota were not reading proficiently according to NAEP. By 2024, that number grew to over 70%.

Furthermore, the disparities between student groups in Minnesota are staggering: in 2013, just 22% of low-income eighth-graders were reading proficiently. In the same year, only 16% of Black eighth-graders met NAEP standards. In 2024, the share of proficient readers on the NAEP dropped to 16% of low-income eighth-graders and 11% of Black eighth-graders.

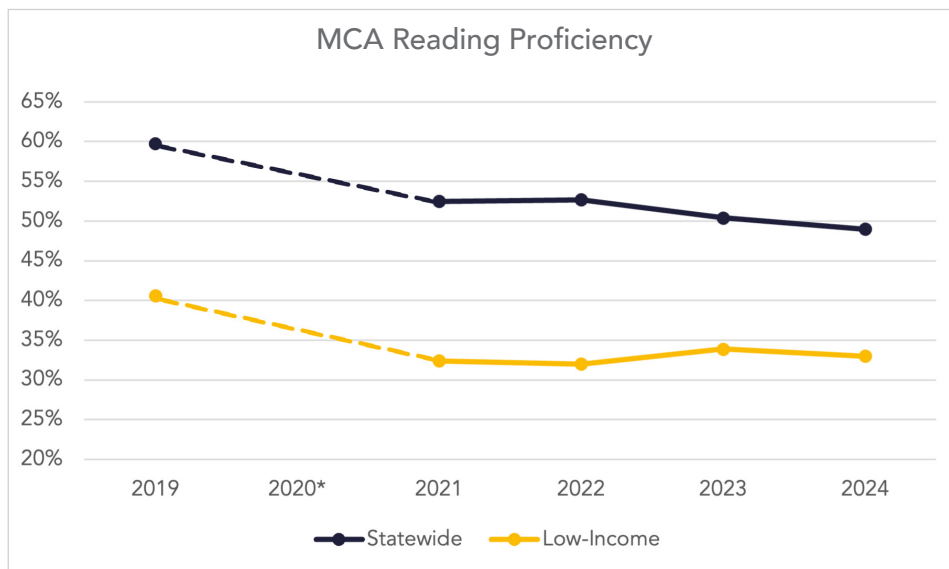


DATA SOURCE: THE NATION’S REPORT CARD, STATE PROFILES: MINNESOTA

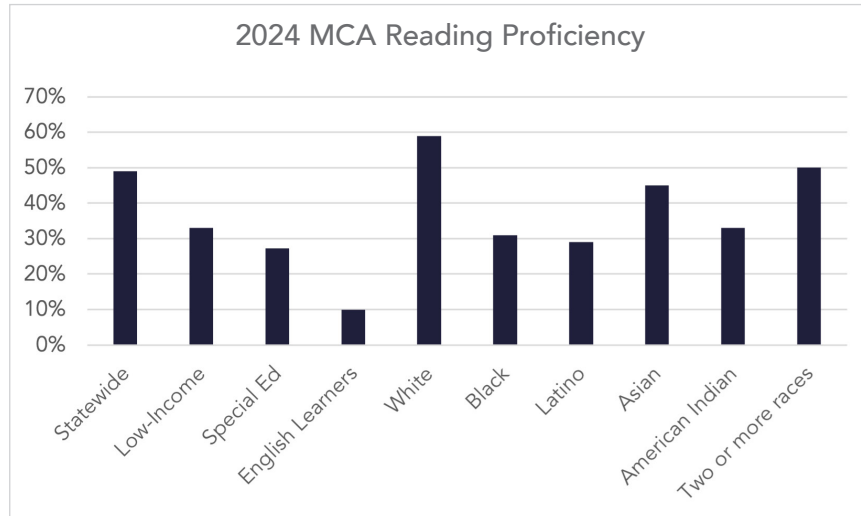


DATA SOURCE: THE NATION'S REPORT CARD, STATE PROFILES: MINNESOTA

Minnesota’s own standardized test, the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA), paints a similar picture. In 2019, 60% of Minnesota students were reading at grade level but by 2024, that number dropped by 10 percentage points. As with NAEP, those aggregate numbers hide serious disparities. Only one-third of low-income and Indigenous students were reading at grade level in 2024. Among Black students, just 31% met grade-level expectations, while only 29% of Latino students did. For students receiving special education services, the number was even lower—just 27%.²⁷



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD
*Data not collected in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

These sobering statistics were the main driver of the passage of the Read Act in 2023, with the primary goal of ensuring all Minnesota students are reading at grade level, every year.²⁸ With a \$75 million original price tag, and \$37 million more allocated in 2024’s legislative session, the Read Act represents a huge investment by the state. The bulk of this money was allocated to professional development for teachers on evidence-based literacy instruction, as well as reimbursement for high-quality reading curriculum. It also requires schools to universally screen students in grades kindergarten-3 for dyslexia, as well as older students if they are not reading at grade-level. Its policies are promising, but it will take several years to implement them with fidelity. Under the law’s current timeline, the first year the full impacts of the Read Act will be measurable through MCA data is 2030.

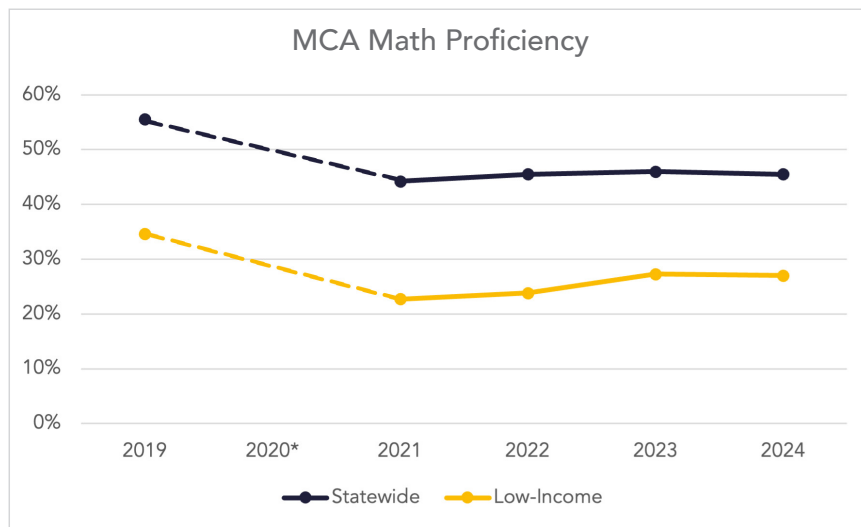
One provision of the Read Act, the Local Literacy Plan, requires each school district and public charter school to publish information about the reading curriculum they use, how many of their teachers have met training requirements, and the percentage of students reading at grade level or showing characteristics of dyslexia. Despite being required by law, some districts have posted incomplete data or did not publish an initial Literacy Plan on the required timeline. Among those that have posted plans, many districts still report using curriculum that is not considered “highly-aligned” to evidence-based literacy instruction under the Read Act. While the state will only reimburse districts for curriculum with the “highly-aligned” rating from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), districts are not required to use approved curriculum—a policy design choice that requires local monitoring and advocacy.²⁹

To make meaningful improvements in literacy, Minnesota can start with ensuring effective implementation of the Read Act. This will require continued statewide investment in teacher and staff training and evidence-based curriculum for school districts. It necessitates that teacher preparation programs are aligned with Read Act provisions to avoid snags in the system as new teachers enter the classroom. Furthermore, it requires strong district-level reporting and monitoring by the MDE to ensure the law is implemented with fidelity. Another strategy to improve literacy rates is high-dosage tutoring, which research consistently supports as a strong strategy for learning recovery and gap closure.³⁰

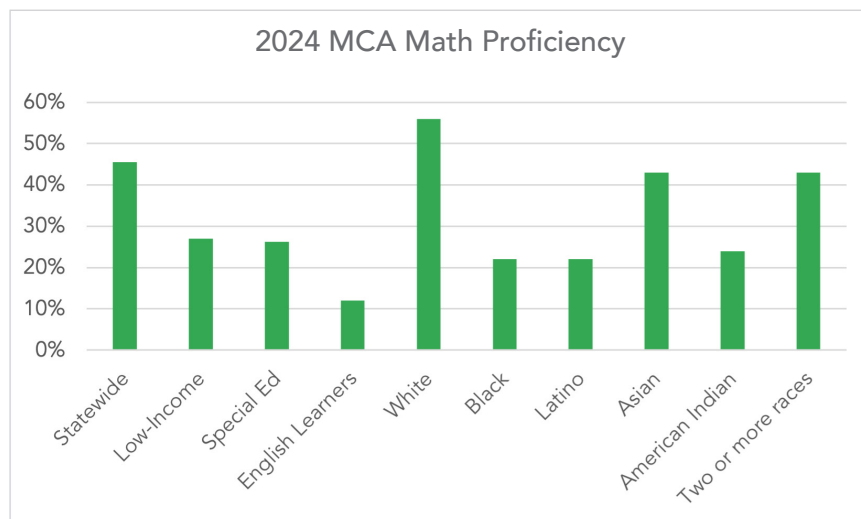
MATH AND STEM

Though literacy has occupied much of the focus in education policy and the media, Minnesota’s math and science achievement rates have been similarly concerning over the past several years. In 2019, 55% of Minnesota students were proficient in math on the MCA, but as of 2024 that number dropped to 45%. MCA science achievement is even lower, with just 39% of students meeting grade level standards in 2024.

As with literacy, disparities in math and science achievement are stark in Minnesota. While 56% of white students met or exceeded math standards on the most recent MCA, only 22% of Black students and 27% of low-income students did. When it comes to science, there is a 25 percentage point disparity between white and Native American student achievement, with less than a quarter of Native students testing at grade level in 2024.³¹

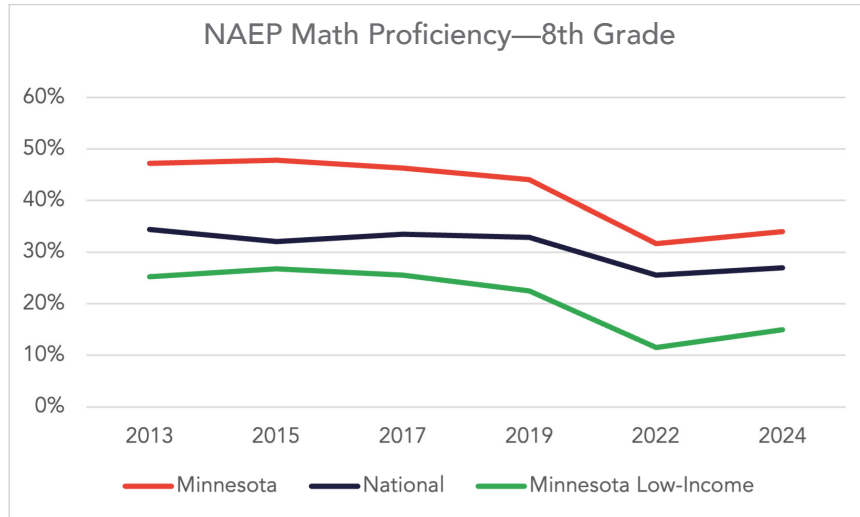


DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD
*DATA NOT COLLECTED IN 2020 DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

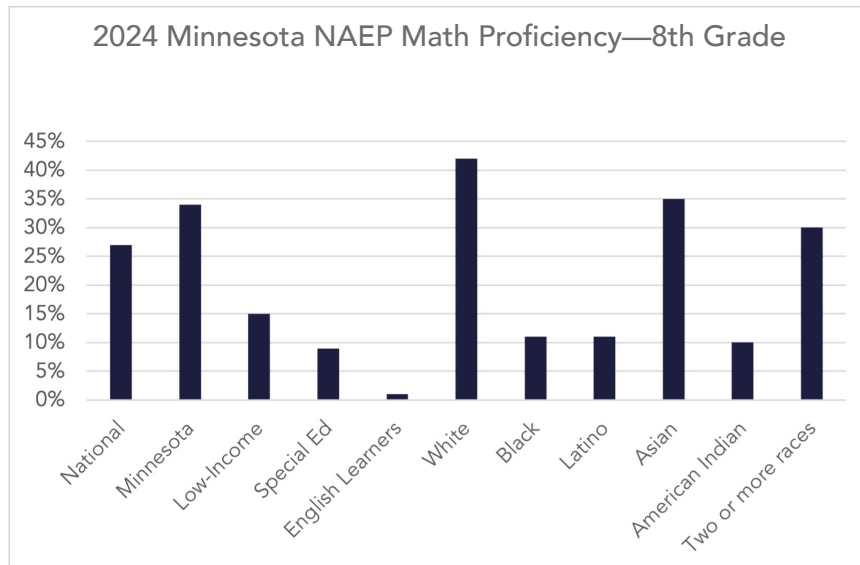


DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

On national assessments, Minnesota students outperformed the national average both pre- and post-pandemic—in fact, we ranked fourth in the nation on the most recent NAEP for eighth-grade math.³² On the one hand, this means we are doing better than many peer states, but at the same time, our raw scores are still alarmingly low. Only 34% of Minnesota eighth-graders scored at grade level in math on the NAEP in 2024, and even that small number hides extreme gaps. While 42% of white eighth-graders met math standards, just 11% of Black and Latino students did. A sobering 85% of low-income eighth-graders in Minnesota are not proficient in math.³³ The 2024 NAEP math scores show a slight increase compared to scores in 2022, but scores are still lagging behind pre-pandemic numbers.



DATA SOURCE: THE NATION'S REPORT CARD, STATE PROFILES: MINNESOTA



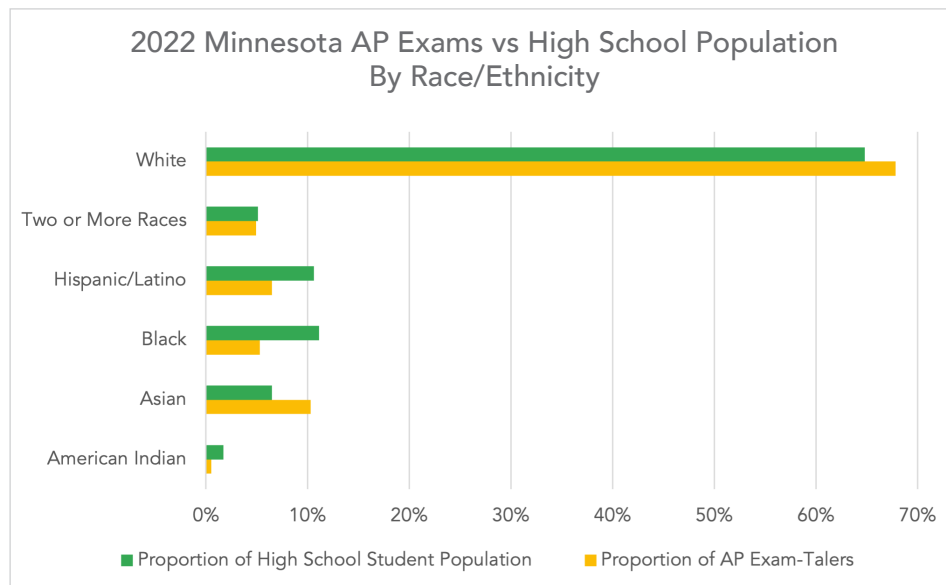
DATA SOURCE: THE NATION'S REPORT CARD, STATE PROFILES: MINNESOTA

There have been some efforts to improve STEM achievement at the statewide level in recent years—and Minnesota has maintained high standards for math instruction—but as previously discussed, literacy has dominated the education policy conversation in Minnesota’s post-COVID era. A handful of state lawmakers have introduced bills aimed at academic recovery beyond literacy, including investments in tutoring, which research shows to be one of the most successful strategies for learning gains in the post-pandemic context.³⁴ While tutoring can be helpful in many subjects, the results for math are some of the strongest.³⁵ These programs can be costly, however, since the most effective tutoring programs require a small student-to-tutor ratio—and therefore, more staff.^{36,37} Given the research on the link between high-dosage tutoring and measurable gains for math when implemented correctly, statewide investment would be one strategy to improve math achievement.³⁸

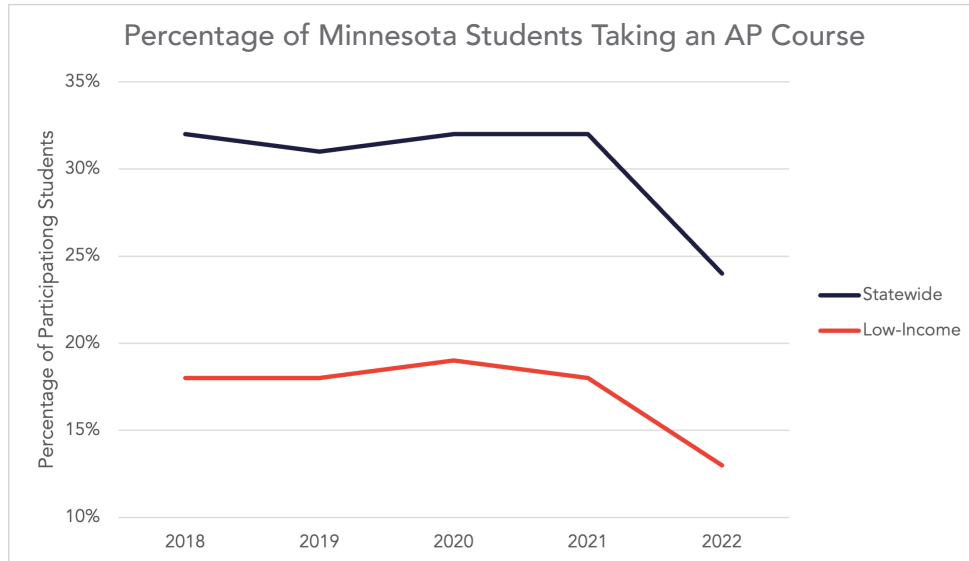
ACCESS TO RIGOROUS COURSEWORK

While generally discussed less than test scores, students’ access to rigorous coursework is an important measure of academic opportunity. Studies show students who enroll in rigorous coursework in high school are more likely to graduate, enroll in college, and succeed in college classes.^{39,40} In Minnesota, rigorous coursework includes Advanced Placement (AP), Postsecondary Education Options (PSEO), International Baccalaureate (IB), and concurrent enrollment programs (college-level classes taught within the high school).

Research shows that nationally, Black and Latino students are consistently underrepresented in advanced coursework, despite being successful in these classes when given the opportunity to enroll.⁴¹ Recent data on enrollment patterns in Minnesota echo these disparities: white students outnumber Black, Latino, and Indigenous students in all rigorous coursework programs except IB. Low-income students make up 28% of the student population but only 10% of students taking end-of-course AP exams.⁴²

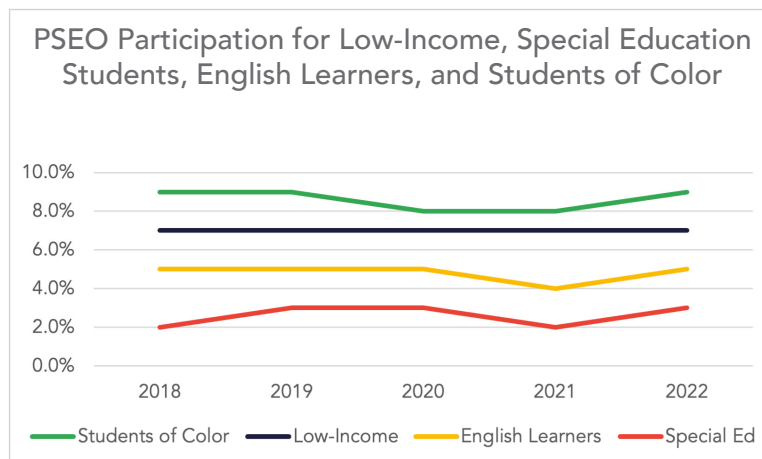


DATA SOURCE: RIGOROUS COURSETAKING REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE, MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



DATA SOURCE: RIGOROUS COURSETAKING REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE, MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

In addition to race- and income-based disparities in rigorous coursework, there has been an overall decrease in Minnesota students participating in these programs since 2020, with the largest drop in AP and IB participation.⁴³ The only exception to this trend is a small increase in PSEO participation among English learners, special education students, and students of color. Although the increase is quite small, it should be explored further to understand if barriers were removed during COVID, or whether other changes influenced students' enrollment choices.



Closing disparities in advanced coursework is an essential component of realizing educational equity in Minnesota. This will involve both increasing the rigorous coursework offerings at schools that serve large shares of students of color and low-income students, as well as addressing the bias that can prevent those students from enrolling.⁴⁴ Whether implicit or explicit, perceptions of which students are ready for or worthy of advanced coursework can perpetuate existing race- and income-based gaps in rigorous coursework enrollment. Practices that mitigate the effects of this bias, such as automatically enrolling all qualified students into the most rigorous course available, can help reduce gaps in student participation and distribute the benefits of advanced coursework more equitably.⁴⁵



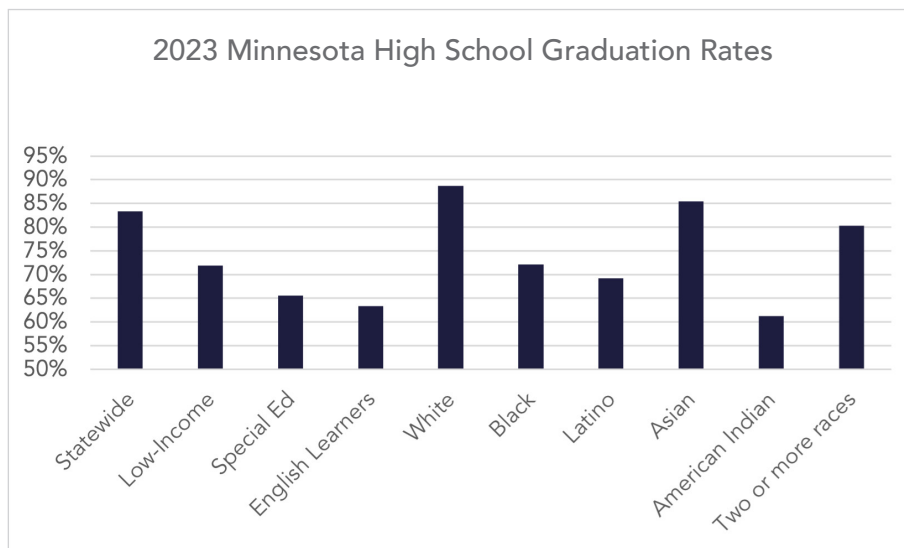
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

While access to rigorous coursework is one aspect of ensuring students are ready for their path beyond high school, there are other markers of how prepared students are for college and career.

High School Graduation

The most basic indicator of college and career preparedness is high school graduation. Nationwide data shows Minnesota hovering around the average for how many students graduate on-time, at 83% in the 2022-23 school year.^{46,47} That number has stayed consistent since at least 2019, making average graduation rates one statistic not outwardly affected by COVID-19.

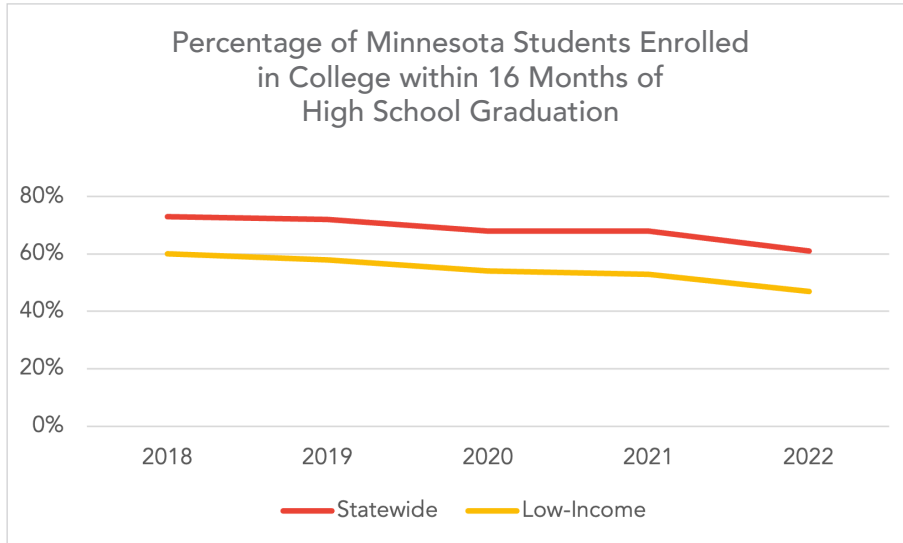
Despite the fact that graduation rates have been relatively stable for all student groups, there are still disparities between those groups. English learners graduate at a rate 20 percentage points lower than the state average. Furthermore, Minnesota ranks near the bottom of the nation when it comes to disparities in graduation rates between white students and their Black and Latino peers: 42nd and 45th, respectively.⁴⁸



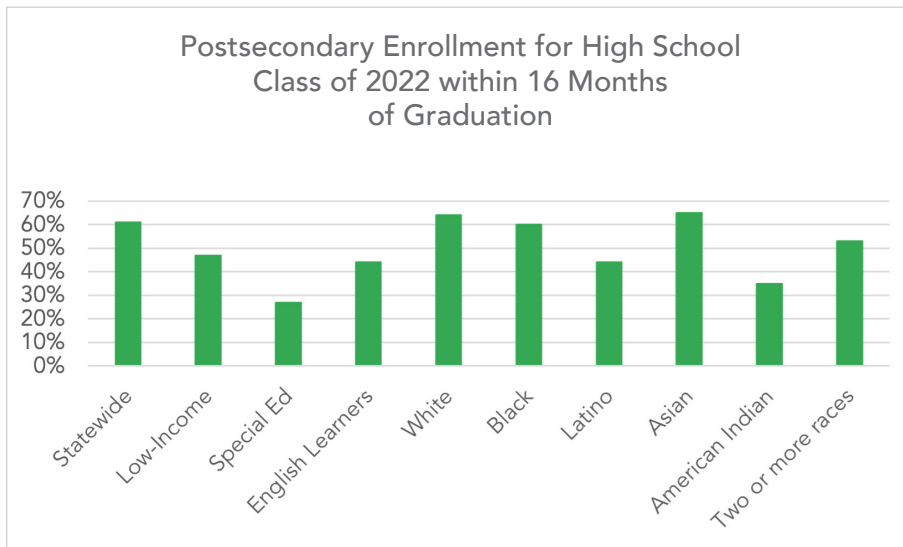
DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

Postsecondary Enrollment

When it comes to higher education, 61% of the graduates of the class of 2022 were enrolled in some sort of postsecondary program within 16 months of graduation. However, only 47% of low-income graduates and 35% of Native American graduates pursued higher education in the same period.⁴⁹ White students in Minnesota are more likely to stay enrolled in and graduate from college than their peers of color.⁵⁰ College enrollment is down overall nationwide and in Minnesota,⁵¹ and of course, higher education is not the only option for students post-graduation. However, the disparities in college enrollment and success show that there is work to be done to ensure equitable opportunities for all Minnesota students.



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

Access to Postsecondary Financial Aid

Financial aid information, a major contributing factor in how and whether students transition from high school to college, can provide another glimpse into how Minnesota students are doing. Data from the federal government shows that in the 2023-24 school year, just 51% of eligible students in Minnesota completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).⁵² That school year coincided with the federal government's redesign of the FAFSA, promising a simplified form; however, major delays and bugs in the system led to a troubled rollout. While those issues could have certainly contributed to this low number of FAFSA completions in Minnesota, data from the prior two school years show the statewide submission rate has been virtually unchanged—with Minnesota ranking 37th for FAFSA completion nationwide.⁵³ Some estimates would suggest this percentage of students completing the FAFSA results in Minnesota students leaving almost \$50 million of federal financial aid dollars on the table.⁵⁴ Furthermore, without completing financial aid forms, Minnesota students are unable to access state-based programs like the North Star Promise, where tuition is free at state colleges and universities for families earning less than \$80,000.⁵⁵

To improve access to higher education, Minnesota needs continued investment in strategies that support the transition from high school to post-secondary education. The legislature has recently made meaningful progress here—with North Star Promise as a prime example—along with Direct Admissions, a program in which qualified high school seniors, as determined by their GPA, are proactively accepted to up to 50 Minnesota colleges and universities. The colleges participating in Direct Admissions are a mix of two- and four-year and public and private institutions, and qualified students are invited to apply for free. Preliminary data suggest these programs influence more students to enroll in post-secondary education, removing both psychological and logistical barriers, particularly for low-income students. Increasing awareness and access to the program could make a meaningful difference for students and families.⁵⁶

Awareness-building campaigns and training for high school staff could address the gaps in public knowledge about these programs. It could also offer a solution to Minnesota's lackluster financial aid completion rates, given that students at Direct Admissions high schools complete the FAFSA at much higher rates than the statewide average.⁵⁷ However, high schools must opt in to Direct Admissions, and many have not, leaving students at those schools missing out on a resource that has the potential to open up new trajectories for them. Policymakers should consider strategies to expand Direct Admissions to more schools, or make it a statewide program.

Career Readiness

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been calls to expand post-secondary options for students beyond the traditional college path. With ballooning tuition costs and national student debt rising to what many believe are crisis levels, many are questioning the return-on-investment for traditional four-year degree programs. As a result, career and technical education (CTE) programs have been growing in prominence. Career pathway programs and CTE courses in high school can help launch students on the path to the workforce, with specific career-based skills training.

One 2021 analysis found that 44% of Minnesota high school students took at least one year-long CTE course, and they were more likely to be male and receive special education services.⁵⁸ They were also less likely to enroll in a four-year college but more likely to enroll in a two-year college. The same analysis found that students who completed several CTE courses in high school out-earned their peers during the first five years after high school graduation. Interestingly, CTE



enrollment is perhaps the only educational statistic in Minnesota that is racially representative of the student population as a whole.⁵⁹ Nationwide data suggests that CTE programs offer strong labor market benefits and drive moderate increases in college-going rates for their students, but it can be difficult for students to take advantage of college-level credit they earn in secondary CTE programs.⁶⁰

Minnesota can build on the opportunities CTE offers students by increasing access to CTE coursework and career pathway programs in high schools. An important component of this effort will be increasing the number of CTE teachers, which can be accomplished by opening more avenues to CTE licensure. While efforts have been made to get more community experts in classrooms, CTE remains a subject area with consistent teacher shortages. Furthermore, state agencies should work to establish statewide articulation agreements with public two-year colleges for students successfully completing CTE requirements in high school. This can ameliorate some of the difficulty students currently face in getting postsecondary credit for their high school CTE courses.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

While universal access to education programming doesn't begin until kindergarten in Minnesota, there is ample evidence that educational opportunities before age five are critical in a child's development and future success. The quality of early care and education, as early as birth through age three, can be predictive of higher scores on measures of kindergarten readiness in literacy and numeracy.⁶¹ While definitions can vary, high-quality early learning programs generally have effective educators, developmentally appropriate and varied physical environments, and programmatic support such as professional development for teachers and strong leadership.⁶² In addition to our statewide licensing infrastructure, Minnesota currently uses a public-facing quality rating and improvement system, commonly known as Parent Aware, to assess whether licensed early learning programs are safe and effective. Parent Aware provides basic star ratings to families for public programs, private centers and preschools, and in-home providers alike.

In addition to the educational benefits it provides, research shows access to high-quality early learning can improve non-academic outcomes for children from low-income backgrounds, including greater physical health, reduced rates of crime, and higher income in adulthood.⁶³ Furthermore, investments in early learning opportunities pay dividends down the line economically, resulting in taxpayer savings on special education services, unemployment benefits, health care costs, and more.^{64,65} Unfortunately, access to high-quality early learning is not enjoyed equally in Minnesota, with low-to-moderate-income families still facing significant barriers. Given what the research tells us about long-term benefits of early education, the gaps in early learning access are likely a driver of the disparities we see in educational outcomes for older children in Minnesota.



Each year thousands of low-income children in Minnesota do not have access to quality early learning programs due to a shortage in available seats, with rural communities being especially impacted.⁶⁶ Beyond the issue of there simply not being enough seats to meet the demand for care, there is the issue of cost. Minnesota’s child care costs are among the highest in the nation. Infant care costs more than in-state tuition at the University of Minnesota; 31% more expensive than the average monthly rental payment. The average family with two children will need to spend 37% of its income on child care alone, 30% more than what is considered affordable by the Department of Health and Human Services.⁶⁷

Policymakers have made some attempts to address this issue, particularly in the form of early learning scholarships. Scholarships provide funding for families to access a variety of high-quality early learning programs, prioritizing children with teen parents, experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and with other barriers to early learning. Funding for this program increased in recent years thanks to a major infusion in the 2023 budget, however, the increase was not enough to meet the need of all students around the state, and much of the new investment was with one-time funds. In other words, the already-long waitlist for scholarships is expected to grow. While families also have access to federal programs like Head Start and the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), as a state we have a long way to go to address needs for children 0-5.

Investing in and coordinating these programs will not solve the large structural problems facing the early learning landscape in Minnesota—for example, low pay for the critical staff supporting our students in their most formative years—but they are an important piece of the puzzle. State policymakers should increase investment in scholarships, ensuring that funds are targeted to the most vulnerable children first, but also expanding eligibility to capture moderate-income families who either opt out or pay an outsize portion of their income on child care and early learning programs. Increasing access to high-quality early learning programs can help address achievement gaps in later years and contributes to the goal of all children in Minnesota having the skills and opportunities they need to succeed.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & WELLBEING



In the aftermath of COVID-19, increased attention has been given to the non-academic side of students' experiences, both in and outside of school. Fueled by reports of increased depression and anxiety, reduced school attendance, and fervor over smartphones and social media, people are giving more weight to the myriad factors that impact a child's experience at school.⁶⁸ Educators have long understood this, but it seems the public discourse on education is finally catching up.

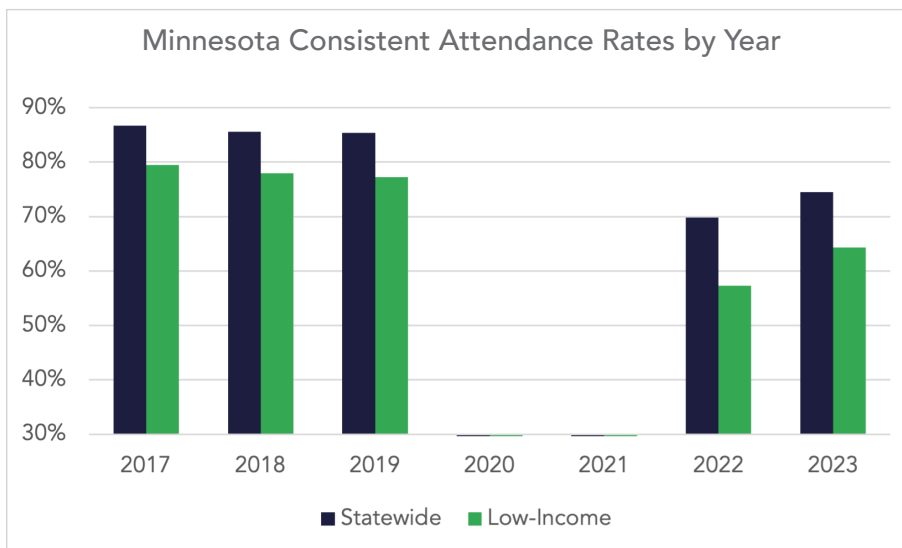
This section explores the confluence of factors that shape students' lives and inform their ability to learn, including attendance, rates of school discipline, mental health, and school climate. Understanding these non-academic data points is a critical piece of the puzzle, because students who are not engaged, safe, and healthy will struggle to learn effectively, regardless of the quality of their school's curriculum or skills of their teachers.



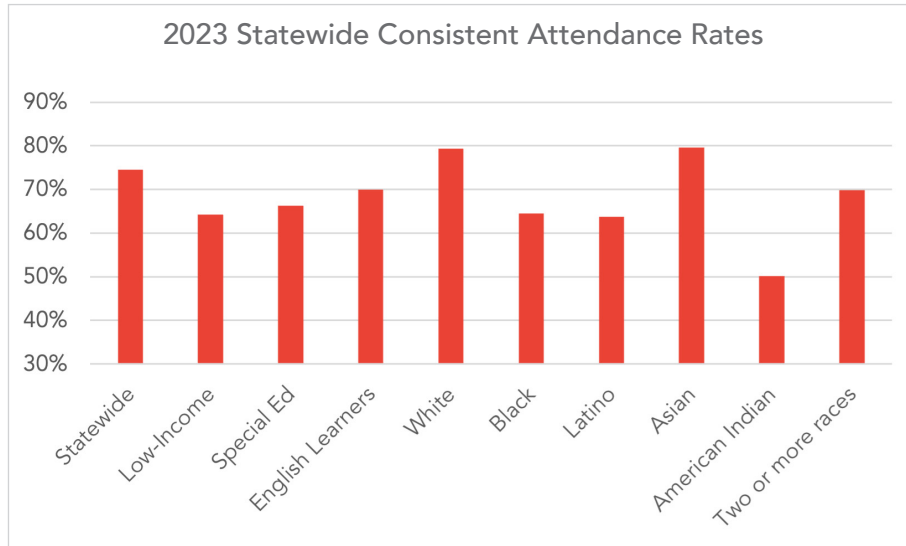
CONSISTENT ATTENDANCE

In the midst and immediate aftermath of COVID-19 school closures, the primary concern of lawmakers, the media, and the general public was learning loss. Now that schools have had a few years of the return to in-person instruction, a new problem is emerging: chronic absenteeism. Attendance is critical for student success, impacting a student’s grades, likelihood of graduation, and chances of attending college. Some research suggests that attendance is more determinative than background characteristics or test scores in students passing their classes.⁶⁹ Simply put, it does not matter how much the state invests in new curriculum, teacher training, meals, or any other service if students are not in the school building.

A student is considered chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of instructional days in a school year for any reason: illness, suspension, a family trip, or simply not coming to school. Compared to pre-pandemic years, chronic absenteeism has risen by 20% nationwide.⁷⁰ Minnesota is no exception: in 2019, 85% of students were regularly attending school. In 2022, the first year with consistent attendance data post-COVID, that number fell to 69%.⁷¹ While it ticked up to 75% by 2023, there is still a long way to go to ensure students have what they need to attend regularly.⁷²



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA REPORT CARD

As with most statistics related to academic outcomes, there are stark disparities in school attendance. Half of our state’s Native American students are chronically absent, as are one-third of both low-income and special education students.⁷³

The issue of chronic absenteeism has caught the attention of school leaders and legislators alike. The 2024 legislature appropriated \$4.6 million to 12 districts across the state in an attendance pilot program, where the districts meet regularly to share strategies and challenges and implement new tools to increase attendance.⁷⁴ The work of the pilot program is ongoing, but the group’s preliminary report shared several strategies participating districts have used, including using funds to hire dedicated mentors who build relationships with students and families and increase communication to families regarding attendance.⁷⁵ The legislature also created a Student Attendance and Truancy Legislative Study Group, a bicameral and bipartisan group of lawmakers who were tasked with analyzing the issue of attendance in Minnesota and providing policy recommendations to address the problem.⁷⁶ Their report laid the foundation for action in the coming years.

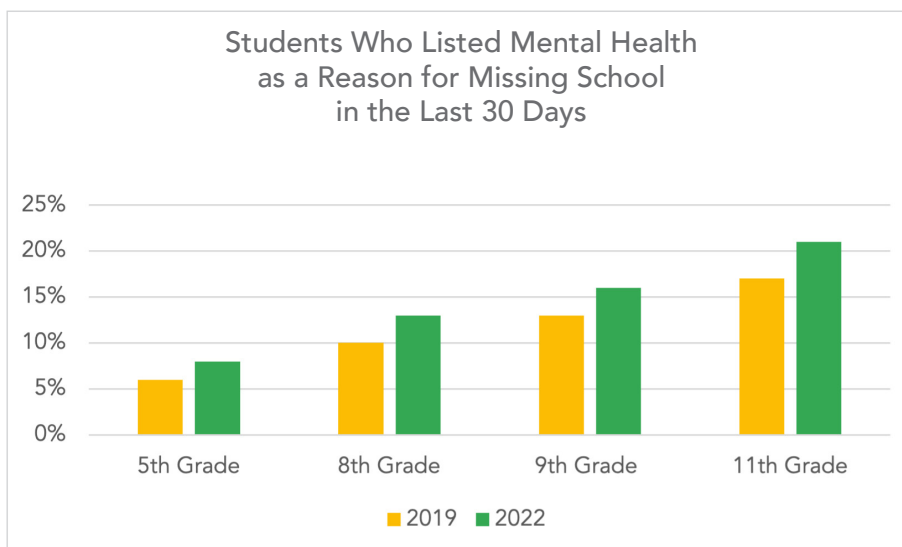
There are several next steps state leaders can take to address the issue. First, Minnesota should provide more detailed statewide attendance data, disaggregated by both age and frequency of absences, to ensure solutions are tailored to the drivers behind absences. Similarly, attendance data should be published on the same cycle as annual academic data, if not more frequently. Attendance numbers in Minnesota are currently reported on an 18-month lag, which hinders policymakers and community groups from responding to changing student needs. With a better infrastructure in place, Minnesota can begin to better identify and address the root causes of absenteeism and invest resources in aligned solutions within and outside of school walls. This will require breaking silos across agencies and sectors to support a variety of student and family needs, from mental health to housing to transportation and beyond.

MENTAL HEALTH

Another broad concern that has emerged in the wake of COVID-19 is student mental health. Longitudinal data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggests that youth mental health and suicidal behaviors have “worsened significantly” over the last 10 years.⁷⁷ Poor mental health is correlated with increased likelihood of missing school and having poor grades.⁷⁸ Furthermore, mental health challenges are not experienced equally. Female students are more likely to experience adverse mental health, as are LGBTQ+ students—70% of whom reported “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness,” and a quarter of whom attempted suicide in the past year.⁷⁹

Student mental health data in Minnesota paints a similarly bleak picture. The Minnesota Student Survey, an anonymous survey administered to students in select grades every three years, echoes many of the national trends. In 2022, across all grades, girls reported long-term mental health challenges at at least twice the rate of boys, and at elevated levels compared to 2019. Twenty-one percent of eighth-grade girls seriously contemplated suicide in 2022, up from 18% in 2019 and 15% in 2013, mirroring the nationwide increase of poor mental health.⁸⁰

Poor mental health also seems to be an increasing driver of the chronic absenteeism issue in Minnesota. In 2022, students in all grade levels reported missing school due to feeling sad, stressed, or angry at higher rates than in 2019 (this question was not asked in the 2013 or 2016 surveys). Furthermore, the older students are, the more likely they are to report missing school for mental health reasons.⁸¹ This highlights the need for targeted interventions for both mental health and absenteeism issues.



DATA SOURCE: MINNESOTA STUDENT SURVEY, 2019 AND 2022

While youth mental health is a complex issue that necessitates solutions from outside the classroom, there are steps the state can take to support schools in addressing their students’ needs. First, Minnesota should increase investment in targeted, in-school mental health support. Providing on-site mental health services can make support easier to access while also helping students miss less school in order to participate. Second, Minnesota should work to ensure ample support staff such as counselors and social workers. Currently, Minnesota has one of the worst student to counselor ratios in the nation; while the recommended ratio is 250:1, a recent estimate places Minnesota at 544:1.⁸²



DISCIPLINE

A school's discipline practices can have a large impact on students' experience in school, with effects in many areas including attendance, mental or emotional health, academic outcomes, and even future involvement in the criminal justice system.⁸³ For example, students attending schools with high suspension rates are 15-20% more likely to be arrested and/or incarcerated as adults.⁸⁴ In Minnesota, male students, students of color, and those with disabilities experience exclusionary discipline at higher rates than their peers.⁸⁵ Exclusionary discipline refers to an action that removes students from the classroom, typically suspension or expulsion. These disparities have been so stark that in 2017, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) entered into an agreement with 41 districts and charter schools to mitigate the racial and disability-based disparities in their discipline practices.⁸⁶

Specifically, MDHR found these schools to have large gaps in disciplinary action for subjective behavior, such as being disruptive, rather than objective behavior, like physical violence. This trend highlights how teacher and staff biases, whether conscious or unconscious, can determine disciplinary action for more subjective behaviors. National research suggests that Black students and low-income students are punished more harshly for similar behavior, even when controlling for other factors like disciplinary history.⁸⁷ These disparities hold steady across districts, across schools within the same districts, and within schools themselves.

Furthermore, the effects of biased and/or punitive discipline practices persist over time and negatively impact students from targeted groups, even if they themselves are not being disciplined. One analysis found that teachers exhibiting racial bias in discipline negatively impacted the attendance and achievement of Black students in their class, whether or not those students had received a disciplinary referral. The researchers found no similar effect for white students. Moreover, the negative effects persisted years after the students left the classroom of the teacher in question.⁸⁸ When taken together, the data suggest such disciplinary practices can be very harmful to students, especially those from marginalized communities. Such findings underscore the rationale behind MDHR's actions.

MDHR's agreements with the 41 districts ended in 2022; the most common strategies used in the settlement agreements were implicit bias training, community engagement, and relationship building.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, we cannot yet determine the efficacy of these approaches due to significant delays in the reporting of statewide discipline data, with no data from 2022-2024 available until mid-2025.⁹⁰ The lack of timely public data raises concerns about transparency and accountability, especially in monitoring the outcomes of districts who have historically had the greatest disparities in discipline.

Recent legislative action has also aimed to address this issue. As of 2023, it is no longer legal to suspend students in grades K-3. While schools may send K-3 students home for less than a day to deescalate, they must then reintegrate the student and focus on non-exclusionary strategies within the school setting to support these younger learners. Legislators also prohibited two specific practices that negatively impact student behavior and development: the use of seclusion rooms for young learners, and withholding recess as a punishment. We still have a long way to go; first in using good data to track the impact of these policies, but also in improving the process for parent notification and resources around discipline. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, more work is needed in the expansion of alternative practices that better support student development and outcomes.

Minnesota can start by improving transparency and accountability in discipline reporting by releasing timely data. Furthermore, the recent restrictions on exclusionary discipline should be closely monitored in order to expand on areas of success and address any gaps in the policy.

SCHOOL CLIMATE & CULTURAL RELEVANCE

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly high absenteeism rates and sluggish academic achievement, invigorated a conversation about the value that students and families find in school. Whether COVID changed how students view school or simply accelerated an existing trend, educators and policymakers alike are seeking ways to make school meaningful, relevant, and a place students actively want to be. In Minnesota, that effort has taken many forms, from non-academic resources like access to school meals to expanded course offerings and requirements. This effort is broad and necessarily so; schools do so much more than teach reading and math, and student needs extend far beyond the academic. Making schools welcoming spaces for all kids—places they truly want to be—is critical for student success and wellbeing, academic or otherwise.

Ethnic Studies and Indigenous Education Requirements

One change aimed at creating more welcoming schools that emerged from the 2023 legislative session was the addition of ethnic studies and Indigenous education requirements. Given Minnesota's severe educational and economic disparities on the basis of race, an ethnic studies curriculum provides a clear benefit in tackling those disparities: it teaches students about the history and assets of diverse groups, allowing more students to feel seen and understood in and beyond school walls. Moreover, it offers academic benefits to students of all backgrounds by expanding the depth, breadth, and applicability of learning. Quantitative analyses show ethnic studies coursework shows increased academic achievement and engagement with school for all students, regardless of race or ethnic background, though the effects can be particularly pronounced for students of color.⁹¹ Beginning in the 2026-27 school year, schools in Minnesota are required to offer at least one ethnic studies course that can be used towards high school graduation requirements.

Furthermore, statewide education standards were amended to include "historically accurate, Tribally endorsed" Indigenous education for all students in an effort to embed the history, language, culture, and experiences of Indigenous people in Minnesota's education system. This is an important step, as Indigenous students still face significant barriers in our schools. Lawmakers also added a requirement for middle and high school social studies curriculum to develop an understanding key social events, including genocide of Indigenous people in the United States and the Holocaust.



LGBTQ+ Students

While Minnesota does not collect data on students' gender and sexual identity, national data suggests that 10% of people aged 13-17 identify as LGBTQ+ nationwide.⁹² The Minnesota Student Survey, administered every three years, asks students about their experiences in and out of school and sheds some light on statewide trends regarding queer students. In 2022, nearly a quarter of eighth-graders reported being bullied for their gender expression, such as their clothes or the way they talk; 14% of eighth-graders reported being bullied for their sexual orientation.⁹³ These statistics are alarming on their own; taken with the fact that queer students are at higher risk of adverse mental health, including suicide, there is greater cause for concern.⁹⁴

Furthermore, there has been a nationwide increase in negative rhetoric surrounding the transgender community, including around transgender girls' ability to play school sports. Currently, 27 states have a ban on transgender athletes in youth sports via state law or agency policy.⁹⁵ Minnesota is not one of those states, but the issue has been raised in the Legislature with multiple bill introductions and a floor debate in the House in the 2025 session. Furthermore, the Trump administration released an executive order in February of 2025 banning transgender participation in sports, but the Minnesota State High School League and the state Attorney General said it was in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act.⁹⁶ A related lawsuit is ongoing at the time of publishing.

While the issue of transgender athletes has become rife with partisanship, it's important to remember that these extremely public debates are about children; children already at increased risk of poor mental health and death by suicide.⁹⁷ Students, regardless of their identity, deserve to feel safe and cared for in schools. Without targeted action aimed at protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ students and affirming their belonging in schools, these students are at increased risk of poor mental health and educational disengagement.

Universal School Meals

A landmark effort to make schools welcoming for all students was the passage of universal school meals in 2023. This policy guarantees every child in Minnesota free breakfast and lunch while they are at school, regardless of family income. Research shows universal school meals provide savings to individual families, reduce food insecurity, improve academic achievement, and can positively influence student behavior in school.^{98,99} Furthermore, it reduces stigma for low-income students and eliminates the need for schools to manage lunch debt.



The law's passage also highlighted a longstanding problem: accurate measures of students in poverty. Formerly, Minnesota used free and reduced price meal forms to count students in poverty, but the passage of universal school meals has rendered those forms obsolete. Furthermore, using such forms to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in additional aid to schools is an annual burden on schools and families and can be inaccurate. Best practices in other states include using student characteristics through direct certification programs and census data to identify students in poverty, coupled with adequate funding levels and formula provisions that account for the effects of concentrated poverty. These strategies are more accurate and allow for the flow of revenue to go towards schools and students who need additional services most.

TEACHER WORKFORCE



While the nation was in the throes of the pandemic, the age-old conversation about teacher pay and working conditions was reignited, with many states reporting teacher shortages at increased levels.¹⁰⁰ While COVID-19 certainly introduced new challenges to the teacher workforce, many of the problems were not new. Minnesota has experienced teacher shortages in areas like special education and English as a Second Language for years, and a complex statewide licensure system has long impacted who can be a teacher and at what cost.¹⁰¹ Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of diverse and effective teachers for student success.^{102,103} A strong teacher workforce is key if all Minnesota students are going to thrive in school and beyond.

TEACHER PREPARATION, LICENSURE, AND WORKFORCE CONDITIONS

In 2023, Minnesota schools employed nearly 67,000 teachers across all licensure levels, working in instructional and non-instructional positions; the majority of Minnesota teachers have been in the profession for 10 years or more.^{104,105} Minnesota’s teacher licensure system offers four tiers of licensure, and 84% of teachers hold a Tier 4 license, the highest level of professional licensure. The creation of the tiered licensure system in 2017 was a legislative effort to address a “broken” and “confusing” system and allow more people to become licensed educators.¹⁰⁶ Since then, additional tweaks have continued to modify the licensure system, for better and for worse—in some cases creating new pathways to fields like heritage language instruction,¹⁰⁷ and in other cases narrowing nontraditional pathways.¹⁰⁸

One area where there is ongoing debate is around which pathways to the classroom best support teacher effectiveness—particularly when it comes to nontraditional modes of licensure (for example, a traditional university-based teacher preparation program vs. an alternative or practice-based model). The research on the topic is mixed, at best. Some studies show that traditionally prepared teachers stay in the classroom longer, but the data is not strong enough to infer a causal relationship. When it comes to teacher effectiveness, there is more variation within preparation programs than across them.¹⁰⁹ What the data can tell us is that the quality of a student teaching placement, mentorship and support during early teaching years, and the school environment are predictive of who stays in the classroom.^{110,111,112}

It’s clear that Minnesota needs to invest in researched-backed strategies for teacher retention and effectiveness, including mentorship and coaching for novice teachers and high-quality student teaching placements with ample opportunities to practice teaching and receive feedback. Furthermore, investments in paid student teaching are needed to ensure all teacher candidates are paid a living wage for their work and not preemptively pushed out of the classroom.

Overall working conditions have a great impact on teachers’ willingness to stay in the field, as is true in most industries. This includes school climate and leadership, which can be supported through training and best practices, as well as the terms of teachers’ contracts. Based on salary data from the 2019-20 school year, the average teacher salary in Minnesota is \$64,655, with teachers in rural Minnesota averaging lower at \$59,391 and teachers in the Twin Cities metropolitan area averaging higher at \$69,052.¹¹³ The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the nationwide median teacher salary is \$64,390, placing Minnesota squarely in line with national trends.¹¹⁴ Most of Minnesota’s teachers are unionized, so salaries are determined largely by their licensure level and years of experience. When compared to Minnesotans with similar education levels, teachers earn significantly less than those employed in other industries. For example, teachers with a Bachelor’s degree earn an average of around \$50,000 per year, where the statewide average salary for Bachelor’s degree holders is \$68,000. Teachers with a Master’s degree earn around \$71,000 on average, where Minnesotans overall with Master’s degrees average \$87,000 in yearly earnings.¹¹⁵ Because teacher pay varies significantly from district to district, it is challenging to address through statewide levers, but points to the broader need to value and invest in education as a sector—from both a student and a workforce lens.



TEACHER SHORTAGE AREAS AND EXPERIENCE GAPS

The COVID-19 pandemic brought nationwide attention to the problem of teacher shortages. While Minnesota has not been immune to the problem of shortages, they are not uniform across the field—either regionally or by subject area. The Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB) lists special education teachers, in areas like autism spectrum disorder and emotional behavioral disorders, as in high demand. Furthermore, PELSB reports that career and technical education and languages like Hmong and American Sign Language have the highest proportion of teachers who they don't consider professionally licensed, meaning they hold a Tier 1, 2, or out-of-field permission license.¹¹⁶ Moreover, Minnesota is one of just two states that have seen a consistent decline in teacher preparation enrollment since 2019.¹¹⁷ This means that in a moment when we are already struggling to fill certain positions, fewer new candidates are pursuing the field through traditional pathways.

While we do have self-reported information on where districts are struggling to fill roles, as well as hard data on which positions have educators on lower licensure tiers, true shortages—where there are no teachers to fill a position—are hard to determine, as PELSB does not report on these numbers. However, we can draw some conclusions based on survey data of school administrators: 73% of districts reported they had positions they were unable to fill in the 2022-23 school year, and 95% reported positions that were difficult to fill. Furthermore, the vast majority of districts report the teacher shortage as significantly impacting them, and almost all districts say there are “fewer” or “significantly fewer” teachers available to them.

In addition to position shortages, teachers are not distributed evenly across the state when it comes to region, field, or experience. In 2023, over one-third of Minnesota teachers in the highest poverty districts were considered “inexperienced,” compared to just one-fifth in the lowest-poverty districts.¹¹⁸ That trend holds true both within and across districts, meaning that even within the same district, inexperienced teachers are more likely to work at schools with higher levels of poverty. While new teachers can and do have a positive impact in the classroom—and in some cases novice teachers are just as impactful as their veteran peers—teacher effectiveness is shown to grow with experience in the first five years.¹¹⁹ At a systems level, this can drive inequities for students in high poverty schools since we know that effective teachers can make a great deal of difference in students' lives in both test scores and long-term outcomes, academic or otherwise.^{120,121}

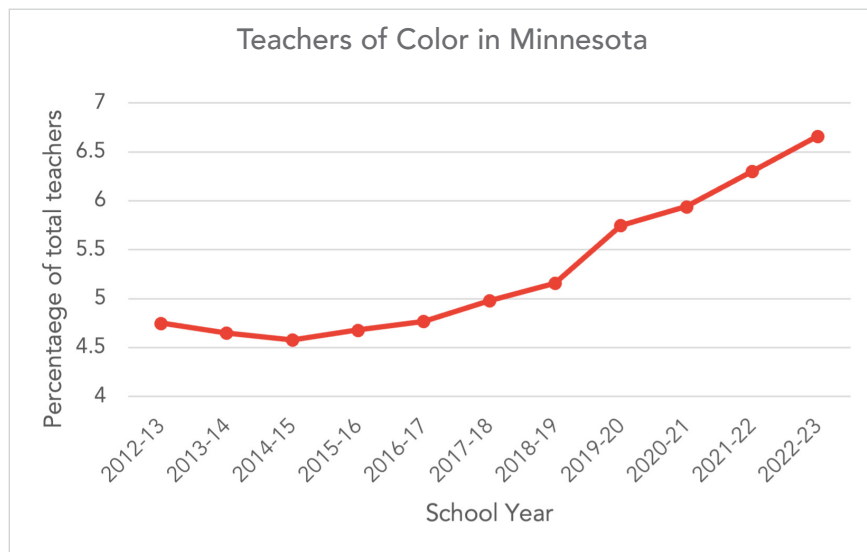
Minnesota should address these issues by investing in policies and programs that help educators earn licenses in shortage areas, in addition to supporting recruitment and retention strategies for hard-to-staff schools. Furthermore, continuing to streamline the tiered licensure process, especially for candidates outside of the traditional teacher preparation system, could help fill gaps in the

teacher workforce. As a state, we should work to support the growth and development of educators, while also ensuring that access to experienced and talented teachers is not determined by a child’s zip code or family income level.

TEACHER DIVERSITY

Minnesota’s teacher workforce does not reflect the diversity of our student population. In terms of gender, Minnesota is slightly ahead of the national average, with 70% of its workforce identifying as female, compared to 77% of the American teaching workforce overall.^{122,123} When it comes to racial diversity, however, Minnesota lags behind—just 6% of Minnesota teachers identify as people of color, compared to 20% nationally.^{124,125} Research suggests when students are taught by teachers of color, it links to better attendance, classroom engagement, and test scores for students of all races, with increased benefits for students of color.¹²⁶ Furthermore, data suggests that having a same-race teacher can reduce disciplinary actions and special education referrals for Black students, who are disproportionately suspended, expelled, and placed in special education.¹²⁷

There have been a number of legislative efforts to increase teacher diversity in Minnesota, from scholarships for teacher candidates of color to increased pathways within our licensure system. While this has led to a 50% increase in teachers of color since 2017, this represents an increase of just 2 percentage points—leaving a lot of work ahead.¹²⁸



SOURCE: PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR LICENSING AND STANDARDS BOARD DATA REQUEST, MAY 2023



The true impact of these policies will take time, since teacher preparation and licensure is a lengthy process, but the statistic is noteworthy nonetheless. While policy changes and investments are likely helping drive this change, there is much more to do, and we must track the impact of the wide range of strategies policymakers have advanced. For example, the legislature allowed alternative teacher preparation programs outside of institutions of higher education to launch for the first time in 2017.¹²⁹ These are PELSB-approved programs that provide more avenues into the classroom; some have a focus on shortage areas like CTE and heritage languages, others on supporting candidates of color, but all allow for aspiring teachers to prepare for their career outside of the expensive and time-consuming higher education system. Similarly, investments in Grow Your Own programming and more recently apprenticeships have helped open new doors for paraprofessionals and others to earn a license through new pathways.

Since tiered licensure was established, high proportions of educators of color have entered at the Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels. Teachers of color make up 27% of Tier 1 and 25% of Tier 2 licenses, but only 9% and 4% of licenses at Tiers 3 and 4, respectively.¹³⁰ Initially, Tier 1 and 2 teachers had clear pathways to advance to a permanent licensure; however, as previously discussed, changes to the tiered licensure policy have reintroduced some barriers. For example, the original policy allowed someone with a Bachelor's degree to apply for a Tier 2 license as long as they met certain other requirements, and upon three years of successful classroom teaching, they could apply for a Tier 3 license, which can offer higher pay and does not require an annual renewal or re-application to keep their spot in the classroom. The legislature removed that pathway in 2023, and now candidates who don't have a Master's degree or a license from another state must be enrolled in a traditional teacher preparation program at a college or university to earn the same Tier 2 license. It will be critical to monitor this change and its impact on teacher diversity.

This includes looking at the implications for educators who are asked to enroll in traditional teacher preparation programs, where teachers of color have long been underrepresented.¹³¹ Traditional teacher preparation in Minnesota requires completion of student teaching, which is 12 weeks of unpaid work. This leaves candidates without significant financial safety nets often unable to complete their program.¹³² As previously mentioned, paid student teaching is an important strategy in ensuring candidates from all backgrounds can access the teaching profession. In an ideal world, all teacher candidates would be paid for their student teaching work. However, if resources become limited in leaner budget years, funds should be targeted to underrepresented groups in the profession.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Minnesota has a long way to go to realize the promise of educational excellence for all students. From academic achievement to discipline rates to teacher diversity, there are many challenges facing public education in Minnesota. Luckily, none of these problems lack solutions, but addressing them effectively requires innovation, courage, political will, effective partnership, and proper support. The policy recommendations below are not exhaustive, but they capture some of the major areas for growth in education in Minnesota today.



ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

A strong academic foundation is critical for student success, both in school and beyond. This includes best practices in foundational areas like literacy and math, and a robust pipeline that supports students from early learning all the way through to college and career. Moreover, we must address Minnesota's long-standing achievement and opportunity gaps to ensure each student reaches their full potential. Here we highlight some of the most timely and actionable priorities.

- 1. Ensure effective implementation of the Read Act.** Minnesota should prioritize continued statewide investment in educator training—both for current and aspiring teachers—as well as the adoption of evidence-based curriculum in all school districts across the state. While we are well on our way to ensuring all current educators receive targeted training, we must ensure a strong pipeline at the front end with all teacher preparation programs investing in evidence-based training and curriculum. Aspiring teachers need to learn effective strategies to teach literacy that align with the practices used in the schools they will eventually work in. Going forward, Minnesota should prioritize strong reporting and monitoring by MDE to ensure the law is implemented with fidelity.
- 2. Invest in high-dosage tutoring for students not performing at grade level.** Evidence shows that tutoring, when aligned to best practices, is one of the most effective strategies for addressing learning loss and closing achievement gaps. Generally speaking, effective tutoring means student-to-teacher ratios at 3-4:1, credentialed educators or well-trained volunteers with

appropriate curriculum, and in-person tutoring embedded in the school day. Based on what we know about pivotal points in a student's education, high-dosage tutoring should focus on foundational literacy skills and math skills up to and including algebra.

- 3. Reduce disparities in who has access to and succeeds in rigorous coursework.** Whether through AP courses, PSEO, or college in the schools, rigorous coursework can help students succeed in college and career, but there are significant disparities in who is enrolling in these programs. We know based on evidence in other states that reducing bias in the enrollment process can increase both access and success. Strategies to reduce racial bias in recommendation for rigorous coursework should be embedded in statute, such as requiring districts to automatically enroll all qualified students, rather than requiring teacher recommendation or student opt-in. The state could also support districts in implementing multiple measures for admission into rigorous coursework, such as test scores, grades in prior years' coursework, and teacher recommendation.



4. Better support for the transition from high school to post-secondary education.

The transition from high school to college can be daunting, especially for first-generation students. Removing financial barriers and reducing information gaps can have a significant impact. First, Minnesota should invest state resources into increasing FAFSA completion, given the state’s historically low FAFSA completion rate and the importance of FAFSA completion in accessing higher education. Second, Minnesota should expand the promising Direct Admissions program so it’s universal rather than requiring high schools to opt in, and pollinate best practices for implementation across the state.

5. Increase access to CTE and career pathway programs.

Access to career-oriented programming in high school can make high school more relevant and engaging, and expose students to a wider range of postsecondary options. Minnesota should support the growth of these programs, making investments and removing barriers. Statewide articulation agreements with public two-year colleges for high school students successfully completing CTE coursework can ensure these programs provide a long-term benefit for students. Furthermore, supporting clear pathways into CTE teacher licensure can help expand statewide access to multiple career pathways for high school students.

6. Increase investment in early learning scholarships.

High-quality programming for kids ages 0-5 creates an essential foundation that we should prioritize as a state. With such a clear return on investment, Minnesota should continue to expand early learning access with a baseline of ensuring the highest-need families can enroll in high-quality programming, and a goal to expand to universal access.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & WELLBEING

Students can't thrive academically if they don't feel safe, welcome, and supported in school. Moreover, they need well-rounded systems that support a variety of needs in order to thrive after graduation. This means exploring how best to support students within school walls—from culturally relevant curriculum to effective behavioral and mental health support—and how best to coordinate with community partners and services that support the whole child. Here we highlight some key next steps that can build strong, well-rounded schools where students from all backgrounds can thrive.

1. Improve statewide systems from tracking and improving consistent attendance.

After the pandemic, school attendance dropped steeply and has still not recovered. This is a complex issue with many root causes, but as a state, we must prioritize taking steps to untangle and address the variety of student and family needs that are driving the problem. This includes:

a. Providing more detailed statewide attendance data, disaggregated by both age and frequency of absences.

To provide effective interventions and investments, policymakers need to know which students are missing school and how often. Policy solutions to chronic absenteeism aren't one-size-fits-all; a student who is absent for 50% of the school year requires different interventions than a student missing 11% of the school year. Under current data practices, however, they are lumped into the same group. The same is true for a first-grader vs. a tenth-grader; their reasons for missing school are likely different, and therefore require different solutions.

b. Eliminating the lag on statewide attendance data and release annual summaries at the same time as MCA scores are released.

Currently, attendance rates in Minnesota are published on an 18-month lag. Without timely and accurate data, policymakers can't measure what's working or respond to real-time needs.

c. Making investments to expand promising practices.

In addition to better data, school staff need tangible strategies, resources, and cross-sector support for increasing attendance and supporting student needs. Looking to schools that are

part of the Attendance Pilot Program is a good place to start, making sure we scale the most effective practices across the state, as well as continuing to identify and address direct needs expressed by students and families.

2. Invest in culturally competent in-school mental health support.

Mental health is a growing need for Minnesota students, but our systems are not set up to ensure students get the support they need. We know that many students are missing school and struggling academically due to unmet needs, and families are often left on their own to find solutions. Addressing this issue within school walls—from in-school mental health services, to better investment in school support staff like social workers and counselors—is an important step to help students thrive.

3. Improve student discipline practices to keep all students engaged and in school.

Minnesota is home to significant disparities in exclusionary discipline. By replacing outdated practices with more effective interventions, we can improve outcomes for our highest-need students. As a state, Minnesota should work to support adoption of nonexclusionary best practices, ensure guardrails to prevent ineffective interventions, and track data to monitor progress. Some specific next steps include:

a. Improving transparency and accountability in discipline reporting by releasing timely data.

Despite discipline being a major topic in education policy and practice, public data reporting has been sporadic at best, with the most recent statewide data sometimes several years out of date. Without this information, there is no way for lawmakers or the general public to hold schools



accountable for their discipline practices, particularly schools who entered into the agreement with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights based on their history of discrimination in discipline. The state should identify and address barriers to timely reporting and ensure both policymakers and the public have access to the most recent school year's data.

b. Monitoring the impacts of recent restrictions on exclusionary discipline and expanding on areas of success. In response to documented discrimination in discipline practices, the legislature banned exclusionary discipline in kindergarten through third grade—but this change is still being implemented and remains a point of debate. Rather than making premature changes, lawmakers should monitor the impact and engage stakeholders on ways to improve policy and practice to ensure schools have what they need to effectively implement nonexclusionary discipline tools. Given Minnesota's significant disparities around discipline, this is essential to ensuring that Black students, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities aren't pushed out of school.

4. Improve the school funding formula to ensure ample resources for low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners. How to make sure school funding is ample and equitable is a perennial debate in Minnesota—and one that policy-

makers need to take seriously. The way we have historically funded schools isn't working—as evidenced by large cross-subsidies for students with specific learning needs—and outdated and ineffective tools for measuring poverty. Next steps should include:

a. Creating a long-term fix for measuring the concentration of poverty in schools.

Requiring families to complete annual free and reduced priced meal forms is an outdated practice and a poor measure due to inconsistent response rates. Better approaches could include using student characteristics through direct certification programs and census data to identify students in poverty. This would be more accurate than cumbersome forms and allow for the flow of revenue to go towards schools and students who need additional services most.

b. Making real, long-term fixes to ensure the funding formula is aligned to student needs. Too often as a state, we use the biennial budget process to tinker around the edges of our school funding problems, while never getting to the root of the problem or making the longer-term fixes necessary to properly fund schools based on student need. State leaders should find the political will to make this a priority.

TEACHER WORKFORCE

A strong teacher workforce is essential to student success. Students cannot thrive without well-trained, well-supported educators to make each school around the state rigorous, engaging, and relevant to an increasingly diverse student population. Unfortunately, Minnesota continues to struggle with teacher shortages, and we have a lot of work to do when it comes to both recruitment and retention. Here are a few key action steps Minnesota can take to grow and strengthen the teacher workforce:

- 1. Invest in researched-backed, practice-based learning experiences.** From teacher preparation to professional development, having hands-on experience supported by feedback loops to develop and grow are important opportunities for educators to build and implement classroom skills. On the front end, this should include expanding support for apprenticeship-type teacher preparation models, and ensuring that candidates in more traditional programs have access to high-quality student teaching placements with ample opportunities to practice teaching and receive feedback. Once in the classroom, research shows that high-quality mentorship and coaching for novice teachers is one of the strongest predictors of teacher retention. Minnesota should work to identify and expand best practices across the state.
- 2. Invest in paid student teaching.** For most teachers entering the field, student teaching is a required part of training, but moving from a flexible course schedule to 12 weeks of unpaid, full-time work can be prohibitive for students with existing work and personal commitments. Paying teacher candidates for their work can get them across the finish line and ensure compensation for their contributions during this time. Minnesota should move from piloting this concept to making it universal, prioritizing high-need and underrepresented teachers when there are limited funds to further shore up Minnesota's efforts at diversifying its teacher workforce.
- 3. Build clear pathways to the classroom for teachers from diverse backgrounds.** Despite recent changes to Minnesota's teacher preparation and licensure systems, it can still be challenging to find a clear pathway into the field, especially for career-changers or candidates seeking a nontraditional path. This means we lose out on many passionate and highly-qualified candidates who could be a real asset to our classrooms.
- a. Investing in non-traditional pathways.** Minnesota should continue to invest in nontraditional pathways, from Grow Your Own to apprenticeship to other alternative models to meet candidates where they are at and reduce barriers to training.
- b. Ensuring clear pathways to licensure.** Minnesota should ensure that the tiered licensure system is straightforward and supports multiple avenues into the classroom. This should include pathways that honor experience in the classroom, and allow educators with a track record of experience to advance through the tiers to permanent licensure.
- 4. Measure and address teacher shortages.** From broad post-COVID shortages, to field-specific shortages, to an ongoing lack of teachers of color, to an inequitable distribution of teachers across buildings, Minnesota has work to do to ensure a strong pipeline of new educators into the highest-need areas. Minnesota should start by improving state data systems to accurately measure which fields, which regions, and which types of schools have the greatest shortages by looking at actual unfilled positions. We must then address these shortages through targeted programming and support—from field-specific teacher preparation efforts to incentives for educators to fill high-need roles.
- 5. Stay the course on teacher diversity.** The research is abundant and clear: having a diverse teacher workforce where teachers of color are fully represented is good for students from all backgrounds. Through investments in programming to changes to teacher licensure, Minnesota has begun to diversify its teacher workforce, but we have a long way to go. As a state, we must build on current investments, while exploring next steps to remove barriers and retain teachers of color.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR MINNESOTA STUDENTS

Education in Minnesota, as in much of the nation, is at a crossroads. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the long-standing fissures in our education system and created new urgency to address them. Now, five years later, that urgency is dwindling but the facts remain largely the same:

- Every year, large numbers of Minnesota students are not reading or doing math at grade level.
- In Minnesota, achievement and opportunity gaps for students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners are some of the highest in the country.
- Barriers to entry, relatively low pay, and increasing burdens are pushing teachers out of the classroom or preventing them from ever getting there in the first place.

The facts in this report are sobering, but rather than give into helplessness or despair, they should be used as fuel for demanding change. Minnesota students are depending on us to act. The good news is that in many cases, we know what works—we just need the courage to implement it. That is far easier said than done and it will require additional investment, political will, collective action, and confronting hard truths head-on. It is difficult work, but it cannot wait. Our children’s future, and our own, depends on it.

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