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# No Excuses: Closing the Twin Cities' Racial Gap in Learning

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## ***Twin Cities 2020: What Dreams May Come***

Minneapolis and St. Paul are growing significantly, as young families move into the city from the suburbs and around the world. Both central cities are magnets for entrepreneurs and corporations seeking the expanding pool of skilled young adults entering the workforce. Crime has fallen to record lows. Pockets of teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and chronic poverty exist but are perceptibly shrinking. Some local activists worry about the dispersal of many of the remaining poor to the inner-ring suburbs, driven by rising property values in once-distressed areas like north Minneapolis and St. Paul's east side. Less measurable but more

important is the sense of pride and purpose among the swelling numbers of well-employed, home-owning, two-parent families of color.

Assessing the roots of Minnesota's urban renaissance, most observers give its high-performing schools the primary credit. The Twin Cities has been the best place to learn of any major urban area in the country, based on academic testing and parent satisfaction data over the past decade. Fifteen years after Minnesota posted one of the nation's highest minority-white achievement gaps and black and Hispanic school dropout rates, the state's urban students of color perform close to their white peers and have the highest minority **college** graduation rate of any state. White student achievement has risen

as well, though less markedly, and Minnesota as a whole ranks first nationally on most indicators of student learning.

The Twin Cities' urban school landscape has changed dramatically in the sixteen years since the Minneapolis superintendent described his school system as "broken." Both giant school districts—in their old incarnation as direct managers of schools—are gone, and public education has never been stronger. In their place, an open sector of independent school providers has arisen to supply discriminating families with a plethora of high-quality, publicly funded school options.

The 100,000 schoolchildren of Minneapolis and St. Paul attend nearly 400 publicly financed schools and learning programs. About forty former "district" schools, with about 20 percent of the students, are the most familiar part of the system. These schools, such as Barton and Southwest in Minneapolis and Capitol Hill and Highland in St. Paul, were among the more popular neighborhood and magnet programs back in the heyday of the old district system, and they continue to do well.

The remaining 350 or so schools, with an average enrollment of 200, are "new" schools that were never in the district orbit, most of them less than fifteen years old. The new schools encompass a range of academic programs, school cultures, and managerial arrangements. Some emphasize foreign languages or the arts, some feature math, science and technology, some are Montessori programs, some are military academies, many are old-fash-

ioned neighborhood-based schools. Some are online programs, some are hybrid high schools combining classroom, online instruction and internships. Some schools are single-sex.

Nearly all of the 150-plus urban elementary schools use the long-proven reading acquisition methods that now enable 90 percent of area students to read at grade level by second grade. Most of the elementary schools serving predominantly low-income students also feature sequential math and core curricula that help ensure that the vast majority of students master basic skills and content knowledge. Many elementary schools now begin at age three, blurring the distinction between preschool and elementary school.

Most schools have been spawned by or have partnerships with neighborhood groups, churches and mosques, colleges, hospitals, businesses, and nonprofit agencies of all kinds. Many are closely affiliated with local or national school replication networks initiated by a single successful school. Some are run by nonprofit or for-profit local or national school management firms. Many of the new schools are housed in old district school buildings—some containing several small "new" schools each. For example, Humboldt in St. Paul and North in Minneapolis, once among the lowest-performing high schools in the state, now each contain ten small, distinctive high schools sharing the athletic and auditorium facilities.

Despite their differences, the 400 schools share important commonalities. All of the schools must abide by

the tough academic performance standards the state and federal governments began to adopt nearly two decades ago. Every three years, each school faces a rigorous reaccreditation and inspection process examining testing data and several other key qualitative and quantitative indicators. A declining handful of schools are denied reaccreditation and closed, setting powerful examples for the rest.

As important, all schools must continually compete for students and families, whom are well aware of their ever-widening array of good school choices. Low-income and non-English-speaking families receive significant school selection help from community groups, social service entities, religious congregations, government agencies, and local web and media outlets, which disseminate authoritative school “consumer reports” in several languages. At the push of a button, all families now have access to more useful information—and take much more time and care—to select their children’s schools than to purchase their family automobiles.

### ***Twin Cities 2004: Build a System of Successful Schools***

Building the accountable, open sector of strong new schools outlined above is the most promising strategy Minnesota can deploy to significantly improve the education of its urban—and especially its minority—children. This means going well beyond the state’s path-breaking, yet to date modest efforts to encourage various forms of school choice.

Minnesota can and should create a supply of quality new schools sufficient to ensure that all, and not just some, of the state’s most underserved children are able to attend schools based on proven methods and designed with the needs of these children in mind, schools of choice that are held accountable for results by parents and the public. Only a relative handful of these schools now exist locally, but their example inspires nonetheless. Minnesotans can build many more by replicating the success of similar schools from around the country, by tapping into the entrepreneurship and creativity of the state’s private and nonprofit sectors, and by giving district schools and educators the freedom to create autonomous, accountable, and genuinely new schools.

### ***Recent Developments***

Recent developments in the Minneapolis school district and statewide suggest that the Twin Cities is increasingly fertile ground for bolder, new school supply-oriented solutions to the urban education conundrum:

- The Minneapolis school district reported its enrollment dropped 4 percent from fall 2002 to fall 2003, more than 10 percent over the past five years, and projected a further loss of 25 percent, or 10,000 students, by 2008. The district cited competition from charter and suburban schools as the main reason for the exodus, which is concentrated in predominantly low-income, heavily black neighborhoods. A follow-up district

survey of Minneapolis residents revealed that perceived low academic quality and the lack of discipline are the main sources of dissatisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

- Three months after the survey was released, interim Minneapolis superintendent David Jennings labeled his system "broken." Among his recommended changes: extensive conversion of district schools to charter school status, thereby putting schools and not district headquarters in control of their own programs, budgets and personnel.<sup>2</sup> In an opinion piece defending Jennings, Minneapolis school board member Audrey Johnson targeted compensation based on seniority and the Minneapolis teachers union's control over teacher school placement decisions as key obstacles to school performance.<sup>3</sup> Along with every other Minneapolis board member, Johnson was endorsed by the teachers union and the local Democratic Party in her campaign. The board tabled Jennings' proposals.
- Attempting to respond to the financial impact of declining enrollment (including 800 empty classrooms citywide by fall 2004), the district stirred immense new parent ill will a few months later after proposing (and eventually postponing under fire), a plan to close or merge fifteen schools serving 15 percent of total district enrollment. Two of the schools to be closed, Pratt and Cooper, are among the district's handful of

high-performing or highly improved schools, and many have the small, charter-like enrollments popular with parents and staff.<sup>4</sup> The option of converting these schools to charter status was not discussed by the district.

- The Minnesota Department of Education approved a record number of charter schools in 2003, even as it tightened selection standards. Spawnd by community discontent with both urban districts, up to twelve of these schools plan to open in either St. Paul or Minneapolis this fall.<sup>5</sup> At least fifteen more are in the planning stages for 2005 openings. This is in addition to the forty charter schools serving about 8,000 students, or roughly 10 percent of the local school district enrollment in each city.<sup>6</sup>

If current trends continue, the number of charter students could triple to 25,000 in 125 to 150 schools by 2010. At that point, charters might have 30 percent or more market share of total Minneapolis and St. Paul public school enrollment. These projections may be conservative. They do not assume that new school openings will accelerate as community awareness and school supplier capacity grows, nor do they include the possibility, suggested by the interim superintendent, of district schools converting to charter status.

- The emergence of organized, respected thought-leadership has

advanced the new schools/open sector concept locally and nationally. Ted Kolderie, the central architect of the charter school idea, has teamed up with former Democratic state legislator and education official Joe Graba to create the St. Paul-based Education |Evolving, affiliated with Hamline University and the Center for Policy Studies. As the group's Jon Schroeder recently put it, a key objective is to transform chartering from "a useful, but somewhat peripheral element of efforts to change and improve existing public schools...[to a] much more strategic and proactive" strategy to create large numbers of new schools that are significantly different from the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

## **Minnesota's Achievement Gap**

The key development over the past year has been Minnesota's belated awareness of the abysmal school performance of and vast achievement gap between its urban black, Hispanic, and Asian schoolchildren and their white peers. Minnesota may be beginning to wake up to its biggest problem: the heartbreaking consequences of a large and growing percentage of its young people entering adulthood without the skills, knowledge, and values necessary for economic success and responsible citizenship. This reality poses the most serious threat to Minnesota's future civic and economic prosperity.

There is now overwhelming evidence of Minnesota's achievement cri-

sis. High school graduation is one powerful indicator of school performance. While obtaining a high school diploma is by itself far from a ticket to success in the twenty-first century, failure to do so within four years of entering ninth grade statistically puts young people at great risk of permanent low-wage employment and of long-term entanglement with the social service or criminal justice systems or both.

Among forty states with significant black student enrollments, Minnesota ranked thirty-ninth in black graduation rates, according to a 2001 national study by researcher Jay Greene. Eighty-seven percent of Minnesota's white students obtained a diploma, while only 43 percent of blacks did the same.<sup>8</sup>

Sixty-nine percent of black and 69 percent of Hispanic ninth-graders in the Minneapolis Public Schools failed to graduate in four years, according to the 2001 study of the Class of 2000 by McKinsey & Company—data included in the Measuring Up report displayed on the Minneapolis Public Schools' website.<sup>9</sup> Minnesota's statewide four-year graduation rate for black students was slightly better, 51 percent, although 30 percent behind the white rate, according to a 2004 study by the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute using somewhat different indicators.<sup>10</sup>

## **Below-Basic Skills**

The academic performance of minority students entering high school is scarcely more promising. While required for a high school diploma,

passing Minnesota's state-administered eighth-grade basic skills tests in reading and math is not considered especially challenging by many observers. In the Minneapolis school district in 2003, only 42 percent of black and 46 percent of Hispanic eighth-graders passed in reading, compared with 87 percent of whites. In math, 30 percent of blacks and 39 percent of Hispanics passed, while 75 percent of whites did so. In the St. Paul district, 41 percent of black and 51 percent of Hispanic students passed the reading test, along with 80 percent of whites. In math, a startlingly low 24 percent of black and 34 percent of Hispanic eighth-graders passed, compared with 66 percent of whites.<sup>11</sup>

The two districts' Asian student population, predominantly Hmong, did not do much better. Forty-nine percent of Asian eighth-graders passed the reading test in each city, while 57 percent (in Minneapolis) and 47 percent (in St. Paul) passed in math.<sup>12</sup>

The 2004 statewide results for all three ethnic groups showed a slight decline in math and a slight decline or no improvement in reading.

These dismal results are consistent with the eighth-grade reading scores of the latest National Assessments of Educational Progress (NAEP), an authoritative national exam administered in every state. The 2003 NAEP results indicate that by eighth grade, Minnesota's black and Hispanic children are three entire grade levels behind white children in reading ability. Half of black and Hispanic students scored "below basic," unable to demon-

strate even "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work" at grade level, compared with 17 percent of white students.<sup>13</sup>

The results were worse in math. By eighth grade, Minnesota's black children are four and a half grade levels behind white children, while Hispanic children are more than three grade levels behind. Over half of black and Hispanic students scored "below basic." In both math and reading, the black and Hispanic eighth-grade state basic skills scores have been essentially flat for at least five years.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Minnesota's Early Reading Gap***

Perhaps the most ominous numbers are the third- and fourth-grade reading results. There is now a solid national consensus that the inability to read well by third grade places children at a severe risk of later school failure. Gov. Tim Pawlenty's recent call for all Minnesota children to read by the end of first grade is only one reason to pay attention to these results. In 2003, only 41 percent of Minneapolis school district black, 33 percent of Hispanic, and 44 percent of Asian third-graders were clearly at or above grade level in reading according to the state-administered Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment exam, compared with 81 percent of whites. In the St. Paul district, only 46 percent of black, 43 percent of Hispanic, and 46 percent of Asian third-graders were at or above grade level, while 81 percent of white children were.<sup>15</sup>

These results are consistent with Minnesota's performance on the fourth-grade NAEP reading assessment. The 2003 NAEP results show 62 percent of Minnesota black and 64 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders scoring "below basic" compared with 24 percent of whites. The average black and Hispanic fourth-grader is reading below the level of the average white first-grader, which suggests that most black and Hispanic children are, at best, barely able to read at all as late as fourth-grade.<sup>16</sup>

The NAEP results at both fourth and eighth grades measure student achievement statewide, rather than by district. Because black and Hispanic students in Minneapolis and St. Paul tested significantly worse on the state basic skills and third-grade reading exams than their peers statewide, there is every reason to believe that NAEP results for black and Hispanic students in the two cities would have been even worse if this data were available.

How does the education of Minnesota's black and Hispanic children compare with other states? According to the Greene study, Minnesota's black graduation rates were the second lowest of any state (after Wisconsin), and markedly lower than places such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Its eighth-grade Hispanic-white reading gap is the highest of any state surveyed, and Minnesota's eighth-grade black-white math gap is the second highest. Its black and Hispanic fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores were lower than places such as Texas, Florida, New Mexico, and Colorado, whose

urban school districts spend half to two-thirds of the per-pupil expenditures of the Minneapolis and St. Paul districts.<sup>17</sup>

### **What These Numbers Mean**

All of these results are remarkably similar, across a variety of indicators, assessment years and grade levels. Taken together, they demonstrate conclusively that well over half and as many as two-thirds of Minnesota's urban black and Hispanic children and perhaps half of its urban Asian children are not learning essential skills, and **they do worse compared with their white peers the longer they stay in school.** Most will not receive a high school diploma, the minimum credential for basic participation in the economy. Many will remain functionally illiterate, condemned to low-wage or no work. The small number fortunate enough to graduate and then attend college will be disproportionately represented in remedial classes—in effect, repeating their high school courses—and are statistically likely never to graduate.

Year after year, the Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools that predominantly house the state's black and Hispanic youngsters are consistently failing to educate them. And because the majority of white children are doing well by these very indicators, Minnesota's racial learning gap is unquestionably among the highest in the country.

This extraordinary waste of human potential, this permanent stunting of young lives and future prospects would

be morally unacceptable even if blacks and Hispanics were only a small share of Minnesota's population. This is no longer the case. In fourteen short years, the percentage of non-white students in the two urban districts has grown from 45 percent to 71 percent.<sup>18</sup> With higher minority birth rates and continued in-migration, we can expect more rapid growth in the years ahead. This means that Minnesota's present mal-education of mostly urban minority children has increasingly grave consequences for the economy, criminal justice and social service systems, and civic well being, of the state as a whole.

### **Schools with Results**

All too often, the response to the facts above is pessimism and sometimes fatalism about the possibility of more than marginal improvement, emphasizing the students' family structure, language, and economic, educational and ethnic backgrounds. These variables are unquestionably important determinants of student performance in the American school system as **currently configured**. The mounting evidence of the lifelong impact of parenting quality and a child's first few years should not be dismissed. Nor should efforts to promote two-parent families and better nutrition, health care, housing, and economic opportunities. In fact, some of the strongest new charter elementary schools are planning to offer pre-school and work closely with families with young children.<sup>19</sup>

That said, the State of Minnesota chooses to invest over one-third of its

total spending (and thirteen years of its children's lives) on K-12 education. It's time to respond to the achievement crisis by pursuing the potential for substantially improved student performance through **different** schools than the ones most minority children attend today—schools that would enable children to surmount negative circumstances that they bring to the schoolhouse door.

There are many schools today that are achieving very different results with minority children. Examples include:

- **The KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Academies.** Starting with two phenomenally high-performing schools in inner city Houston and the South Bronx, this network of middle schools has grown to over 31 schools with overwhelmingly low-income, black and Hispanic enrollments around the country.<sup>20</sup>
- **North Star Academy.** An entirely black middle/high school in Newark, N.J., that achieves academic results on par with affluent suburban districts.<sup>21</sup>
- **Amistad Academy.** A New Haven, Conn., middle school where black students score roughly double the average of their peers citywide.<sup>22</sup>
- **Marva Collins Preparatory School of Wisconsin.** A 99 percent black K-8 in Milwaukee's most violent neighborhood with very impressive test scores.<sup>23</sup>
- **Noble Street Charter School.** With an overwhelmingly poor,

Hispanic enrollment, this Chicago high school launched by Northwestern University Settlement House graduated and sent 90 percent of its first senior class to college last year and was ranked number one among Chicago's more than fifty non-selective public high schools.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly top performing urban Minnesota schools include:

- **Community of Peace Academy**, a predominantly Hmong St. Paul K-12 with very strong results on eighth-grade basic skills exams. The school was one of only two urban Minnesota public schools to make the state's list of top twenty value-added schools in math.<sup>25</sup>
- **Twin Cities Academy**, a majority white St. Paul middle school with a significant black, Hmong, and low-income enrollment, was the only urban Minnesota public school, district or charter, to make the state's list of top twenty value-added schools in both reading and math.<sup>26</sup>

The national list of predominantly low-income, minority schools achieving academic success is too long to mention here, although of course not nearly long enough. Very few urban Minnesota schools as yet have the track record of the schools mentioned above.

### ***Autonomous, New, and Small***

A long-overdue national consensus may be emerging on many of the

shared characteristics that help these extraordinary schools to produce the results that others don't. All of the schools listed above happen to be public schools, but all of them are also ***charter schools, new schools, and small schools***.

As charter schools, each of the seven schools above is autonomous, determining its own mission, governance, program, staffing, and budget. With real control over the latter two, its school leader is actually able to lead. As important, each school is under great pressure to perform in two ways. First, they must attract and keep students, which drives school revenues. The school can never take its customers for granted. Second, they must deliver improved student performance—as measured by test scores—and live up to the terms of its original charter, on which rests the school's survival as a publicly funded entity. Each school is a school of choice, staffed and enrolled by teachers and families who have made a considered decision to accept and support the mission, program, and policies of the school. As a result, each school creates and sustains an intentional, coherent organizational culture with common values and expectations.

The new and small aspects of great schools reinforce the charter-related characteristics. As a new school, the school is likely led or governed, at least in part, by the same individuals who created it, chose the original staff, and continue to convey and uphold its founding mission. A related advantage is that a new school does not have to

carry the baggage of staff members, staffing patterns, programs, processes, and habits that predate the era of performance-based accountability.

The evidence for the educational benefits of small schools is mounting, especially for low-income and minority children. With an average size in these exemplary schools of 200 to 400 students and fifteen to twenty-five adults, collegiality is fostered, staff, students, and parents know each other by name, and struggling students (and teachers) are rarely ignored. In their study of 400 Chicago elementary schools, scholars Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider identified the central role of what they call relational trust in building effective schools.<sup>27</sup> The cultivation of trust, morale, and the strong teacher-student relationships essential to sustaining a high-performance school culture are all much easier in a small setting.

### ***Attributes of Outstanding Schools***

The nation now has 3,000 relatively new, mostly small charter schools. And yet only a few have demonstrated the spectacular results of a KIPP-Houston or a North Star, although many more charters have done very well and most are still too new to have established a track record. Autonomy, newness, and smallness are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for excellence. In their recent book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom note other characteristics shared by schools that succeed with minority children:<sup>28</sup>

- Great teaching and leadership are expected and nurtured. Teachers are carefully selected and led by a first-rate educator, work as a team rather than in isolation, and engage in a “continuous process of school-based professional development.” In order to be hired, applicants must evidence the belief that all children can learn at high levels, and that it is the fault of the individual teacher—and not the child, family or society—if an individual student is not doing so. The ability to fully engage every student in learning is also central.
- Strict discipline is enforced at all times to ensure the order that is a pre-requisite of learning. As important, these schools inculcate sound work habits and the belief that effort is more essential to success than innate ability. They foster manners, ethics, and responsibility and build a tight-knit school community, which counteracts the often contrary messages of the street and popular culture. They infuse students with a rich sense of purpose and possibility, able to imagine themselves as future citizen leaders expected to contribute mightily to society.
- A lengthened and academic-focused school day, with extra time for reading and math.
- Very high academic expectations, with all students given intellectually challenging, rigorous, above grade-level work (two years of algebra in middle school, for

example). Great schools also convey to *all* of their students that they are expected to attend college.

- An emphasis on gaining mastery of core knowledge and academic skills, including the use of phonics in reading acquisition, grammar, spelling, history, math equation tables, and algorithms, as pre-conditions for higher levels of learning. Many top schools implement or adapt E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s, K-8 Core Knowledge curriculum, which specifies academic content to be mastered by each grade level.

Contrary to what is taught in most graduate schools of education, these schools find that old-fashioned methods complement, rather than contradict, the prudent use of strategies such as student-led debates, performances, exhibitions, science projects, and Socratic dialogues. And great schools find no inconsistency between teaching the foundations of American and world civilization while respecting and embracing the families, neighborhoods, and ethnic cultures of their students and regarding them as assets to build upon.

An emerging characteristic of many high-performing schools is their sophisticated use of individual student, classroom, and school-wide performance data to make decisions about how best to improve student learning. In the era of *No Child Left Behind*, all public schools will face escalating pressure to improve.

Last but not least, an effective, talented governing board is an essential attribute of strong charter schools, one

shared with independent schools. The best boards are composed of experienced community leaders and businesspeople as well as parents. By contrast, good school boards are rarely found at district school “sites” because they have no real governing authority.

### ***Why Schools Can't Change by Themselves***

Many advocates for the current school districts no doubt support (at least quietly) the great school attributes listed here. But they face powerful political, institutional, and cultural constraints, as leaders in Minneapolis are now beginning to admit.

The political constraints are perhaps most obvious. All long-term decisions governing the operations of individual district schools are in the hands of elected school boards. In still mainly homogenous small town and suburban Minnesota, this cherished system ensures—most of the time—that schools are guided by well-known, respected parents and civic leaders acting in the best interest of these communities.

This is simply not the reality in Minneapolis and St. Paul. As capable and well-intentioned as they may be, thirteen of the fourteen school board members of these districts were plucked from relative obscurity, anointed by activists of a single political party with the support of the teachers union, and chosen in largely uncompetitive, poorly reported, and confusing multi-candidate elections. Compared with, say, candidates for the state legislature, school board candidates are rarely

called upon to address the fundamental choices facing these districts.

Once in office, school board members find it easier to lobby for more funding or meddle in matters best left to local schools rather than confront labor and bureaucratic rules and cultures that get in the way of school excellence. While the boards deliberate, and superintendents come and go, the central office bureaucracy sputters on. Minneapolis and St. Paul aren't unique. A 1999 report by the respected, nonpartisan Education Commission of the States identified school district governance as a key problem and proposed that the day-to-day oversight of elected big city school boards be curtailed, with power shifting to individual schools.<sup>29</sup>

The work of scholars such as Harvard's Richard Elmore and Lisbeth Schorr, and Frederick Hess of the University of Virginia illustrates the complexity and frustrations of replicating successful programs and making true change within American school systems. Elmore contends that the institutional culture of district schools is better designed to resist learning and improvement than to enable it and cannot "be fixed with simple policy shifts or exhortations from people with money." The "issue of getting to scale with successful educational practice requires nothing less than deliberately creating and reproducing alternatives to the existing flawed institutional arrangements and incentives structures."<sup>30</sup>

In *Common Purpose*, her study of why successful programs failed to replicate or even sustain themselves, Schorr

describes the opposition the very success of these programs inspires from the bureaucracies whose control over staffing and priorities is threatened. As a result, most of the exemplary programs she cited folded after the leader who kept the lions at bay stepped down.<sup>31</sup> Hess's study of school reform in fifty-seven big city districts, *Spinning Wheels*, documents that most superintendents and board members engage in an endless cycle of largely symbolic "reforms" that almost always stop short of changing the existing power and staffing relationships between schools and the district bureaucracy.<sup>32</sup>

There are as yet no significant, long-term examples of a major American school district voluntarily relinquishing real control over personnel, budget and program—the essential prerequisite for creating great schools. (Milwaukee appears to be an emerging model of a big district promoting quality and responsiveness in the face of real competition, from both charter public schools and publicly funded private schools.)

### ***Meaningful Improvement Requires New Organizations***

Recently, the aforementioned Joe Graba has been making the point that the problem is even more fundamental than the nature of unionized public bureaucracies. Graba was deputy education commissioner under Minnesota Gov. Rudy Perpich (who pioneered public school choice), Democratic chair of the Minnesota House of Representatives K-12 Committee, and state teachers union official. Graba

spotlights the work of Harvard Business School's Clayton Christensen, the author of *The Innovator's Dilemma*, a landmark study of innovation and improvement in twentieth-century American business.<sup>33</sup>

Christensen observes that real innovation almost never comes out of an established organization. With rare exception, only new organizations have produced the "disruptive innovation" that forces dramatic improvement in the core business plans, the core products, the core services of companies in a sector. Graba notes that there never was a railroad that was a major investor in an airline, and only one department store chain successfully made the transition to discount retailing: Target Corporation.

Christensen and others maintain that within every organization a culture is created, composed of processes, assumptions, habits and values. Once established, this culture becomes impossible to change in fundamental ways. As a result, large established entities don't have the capacity to produce more than small improvements to their existing products and services.

Graba contends that American K-12 education must now deliver far more than incremental improvement if millions of mostly low-income, mostly minority children aren't to be left permanently behind in the twenty-first century. Graba, the Thernstroms, and many other observers are rightly skeptical about the capacity of the new federal mandates and state-level standards and testing, *by themselves*, to yield the dramatic academic improvement the

country needs. In the twenty years since *A Nation at Risk*, untold billions—Title I nationally, regular state funding, state compensatory funding in Minnesota—have been almost exclusively devoted to "inside" strategies to improve the existing system such as class-size reduction, teacher training, teacher pay, and standards. The results of these well-intentioned efforts have not been forthcoming.

A strong case can be made for a hidden crisis of complacency and mediocrity in the suburban and rural Minnesota schools that serve the predominantly white middle class. As the earlier numbers indicate, there are also plenty of white students not doing well in urban public schools. There is no question, however, that most minority children and families in St. Paul and Minneapolis deserve dramatically better schools. They need new schools built around their needs, adopting the attributes mentioned above, and truly accountable to their families and communities.

Critics of more options for families often raise the issue of what will happen to the children "left behind" in failing district schools as others escape. The objection itself concedes that too many district schools are less than desirable learning environments in the first place. Fears about "creaming" are off the mark: students in Minnesota charter schools are much more likely to be poor, of color, and learning English than students statewide, and a higher percentage of current Minneapolis-St. Paul charter enrollment are students of color than school district enrollment.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, Minnesota's generous compensatory funding provides new schools with powerful incentives to maximize their low-income enrollment.

The concern about creaming can best be addressed by ensuring that no child is left behind in failing schools. Low-performing district **and** charter schools should be closed—as most bad charter schools have been—and their facilities handed over to autonomous new schools modeled after the proven schools listed above. Even a few closures for academic failure will have a salutary effect on school leaders citywide.

### ***No District Left Behind***

How will school districts respond to the growth of the new school sector and their own contraction? Continued calls for more funding to replace money following students out the door are unlikely to be well received at the Capitol. Key legislators in both parties increasingly understand that the state's proper role should be to support student learning, not to fund bureaucracies. Even after a year of cuts in state funding, the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts are now spending a total of nearly \$16,000 and \$13,000 annually per child, respectively (about 15 to 20 percent of which is facilities-related). With the cost of living factored in, these are two of the highest spending big city districts in the country, and well above the funding levels of Minnesota charter schools and other districts in the state.<sup>35</sup> Instead of more funding, both districts face every prospect of accelerating revenue loss as

dissatisfied parents and communities seek and create better options.

Working with the teachers' union, districts can also pursue the "East Berlin" solution of walling themselves in by trying to roll back school choice and prevent families from leaving. Last year, the Minnesota Senate majority leadership was very briefly convinced to place a moratorium on new charter schools—until they heard from their many charter school constituents. Yet the Minnesota Legislature as a whole will be reluctant to reverse its bipartisan, first-in-the-nation, two decade legacy of expanding choices and opportunities for Minnesota students and families.

Rather than stand against the tide, the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts can and should embrace a radical redefinition of their role. Central office administrators and school boards can get out of the school management business and into the performance contracting business. They can issue a national request for proposals, encouraging their own best educators and the most proven school providers and models to offer exciting new school options for urban families. Districts can limit their own role to selecting, monitoring, and evaluating performance contracts with schools. Meanwhile, they can give their own schools the freedom—and accountability—they need to achieve their full potential, and hand over control of staffing, budgets, and programs. The two districts contain hundreds of creative, capable educators and administrators whose

potential talents and energies are waiting to be fully tapped.

### ***A Call for Civic Leadership***

It may take a few years for our school districts to do the right thing. On the other hand, losing significant market share concentrates minds wonderfully, as the American auto industry discovered two decades ago. Quality did not become “Job One” until 30 percent of the cars Americans purchased were Japanese.

Meanwhile, there are many ways citizens and communities can ensure that Minnesota’s urban children—our children—flourish by building the open sector of successful schools described at the beginning of this essay. Neighborhood, community, and faith-based organizations can organize new charter schools in partnership with parents, educators and businesspeople. Citizens with diverse talents can join parents on the founding boards of these schools. Private investors and philanthropists can provide seed capital to new school entrepreneurs. Legislators can help by ensuring that charter schools receive the same per student funding as local districts and are able to locate in empty district facilities, by expanding the inadequate supply of great urban teachers through lowering the barriers to enter the profession, and by not stifling schools with regulatory burdens.

Minnesota was the first state to give students, families, and educators the freedom to pursue public schooling in multiple and innovative ways. In order to secure the full blessings of liberty for

future generations of urban Minnesota families, we must act on this freedom by creating the great new schools of Minneapolis and St. Paul. To paraphrase Lincoln, prosperous and decent cities cannot long endure half educated, half not.

### ***Notes***

1 “Public schools lose 5,500 students in Minneapolis,” *Star Tribune*, November 6, 2003; *Upfront Hotline*, Minneapolis Public Schools weekly newsletter, November 3-9, 2003.

2 “The Case for Change,” David Jennings, Minneapolis Public Schools website, January 16, 2004.

3 “Jennings is right: school system is broken,” *Star Tribune*, February 20, 2004.

4 “Superintendent’s Recommendations for School Closings and Reorganizations,” Minneapolis Public Schools website, February 2004; school performance data from the Minnesota Department of Education website.

5 “Charter schools mark a record,” Pioneer Press, December 29, 2003.

6 2004 data from the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools and the Minnesota Department of Education.

7 “Ripples of Innovation: The Next Generation of Charter Schooling in the Nation’s First Charter School State,” Jon Schroeder, Progressive Policy Institute, April 2004. See also [www.educationevolving.org](http://www.educationevolving.org)

8 “High School Graduation Rates in the United States,” Manhattan Institute, November 2001.

9 McKinsey & Company research published in “Measuring Up: A report on the Minneapolis Public Schools,” by the Minneapolis Foundation, the Minneapolis

Public Schools, and the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, 2002.

10 "Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis," February 2004, as displayed at [www.resultsforamerica.org](http://www.resultsforamerica.org)

11 Minnesota Department of Education data as compiled in the "2004 State of Students of Color" report, published by the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership. The full report is found at [www.mmep.net](http://www.mmep.net)

12 Ibid

13 National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education, [www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

14 Ibid

15 Minnesota Department of Education data as compiled in the "2004 State of Students of Color" report, published by the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership. In March 2004, it was revealed that the Department had inadvertently inflated the 2003 student test score results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (including the third-grade data). This means the 2003 student performance data is worse than reported here, although corrected results are not available.

16 National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education, [www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard](http://www.nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard)

17 Education Finance Statistics Center, National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education; also report on school system spending for 2000-01, published by the Education Intelligence Agency.

18 Minnesota Department of Education district enrollment data.

19 The leading example of this emerging trend may be the Early Literacy Academy, an age three to grade three planned

Minneapolis charter organized by former state education commissioner Bob Wedl.

20 "Closing the gap," *Time*, March 22, 2004.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 "The best return he's ever had," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 20, 2003.

24 Illinois State School Report Cards, 2003, Chicago Public Schools.

25 "A new gauge is added to state test analysis," *Star Tribune*, April 17, 2003.

26 Ibid.

27 "Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School Reform," *Educational Leadership*, March 2003.

28 *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Simon & Schuster, 2003; some of the attributes listed are mentioned by this author and not the Thernstroms.

29 "ECS Report Tackles K-12 Governance," *Education Week*, November 10, 1999.

30 "Getting to Scale with Successful Educational Practices," in *Rewards and Reform*, Susan H. Fuhrman and Jennifer A. O'Day, Jossey-Bass, 1996.

31 *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America*, Anchor, 1998.

32 *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform*, Brookings Institution Press, 1999.

33 "We cannot get the schools we need by changing the schools we have," transcript of remarks by Joe Graba, found at [www.educationevolving.org/pdf/Grabas\\_talks.pdf](http://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/Grabas_talks.pdf); *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Harper-Business, 2000.

34 Minnesota Department of Education data, as compiled by the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools.

Per student spending calculated by dividing the entire district budget by the total number of students. Sources include: Budget Update and 2002-03 audit, Minneapolis Public Schools website; St. Paul Public Schools website, projected 2002-03 budget; Education Finance Statistics Center, National Center for Education Statistics, United States Department of Education; report on school system spending for 2000-01, published by the Education Intelligence Agency; charter school finance data from the Minnesota Department of Education. ■