



**2011 ANNUAL MEETING WELCOME**  
**Executive Director, Carlos Mariani Rosa**

**Welcome**

Good morning.

As we come together today as allies in building an education system that produces success for students of color, we reinforce the importance of pausing to reflect and re-commit ourselves to our work.

**We Face a Dynamic Age**

As we do this, it is important to place our work in the context of our times. This past year makes it clear that we face a dynamic age:

On the national scene we see:

- national economic uncertainty spelling an austerity mindset that could lead to less federal education funding (this has led some candidates for national office to call for the abolishment of the U.S. Department of Education);
- an awareness that we Americans are vulnerable in the intense competition for global talent as other nations produce larger numbers of well-educated students (this has led the President to call for a major new national goal of increasing post-secondary success); and
- ESEA re-authorization, NCLB Waivers, Race to the Top, and Common Core Standards reform. Some would say these are pushing the limit of the power of centralized government to shape our schools and raises a question of how much of this reform is supported by research and how much by politics.

At the state level we see:

- state economic uncertainty producing austere appropriations that leaves our K12 schools looking to local levies to fund basic operations and has colleges at the tipping point of not being affordable for average Minnesotans;
- major leadership changes of Minnesota's educational institutions: U of M, MNSCU, MDE, MOHE, SPPS, MPS, and many other school districts and colleges;
- major changes in Minnesota's elected leadership, with a new Governor and a new Legislature;
- a strong attempt by the state to obtain a waiver from certain NCLB requirements;
- a broad array of legislative efforts - aimed at changing our education system - that range from Alternative Teacher Licensure to new Teacher Evaluation approaches, from limiting college tuition rate increases to creating K12 vouchers;
- policies responding to the growth of students of color in our schools, including a Legislative and Gubernatorial withdrawal from the use of Integration Funds to promote racial segregation in our public K12 schools; and, of course,
- the continued rapid growth of students of color in MN; now one in four of all K12 enrollments are students of color and American Indian students.

All of this must not distract us from an agenda of Race Equity and Educational Excellence, and of working collaboratively. We must continue to insist that students of color and American Indian students are important and are necessary for the wellbeing of Minnesota.

## What Are We Reflecting On Today?

We are united in the idea that how we educate our people in Minnesota, our young especially, should - must - never produce different student academic outcomes **BASED** on race nor ethnicity

Sadly, such outcomes happen today in Minnesota and throughout our nation.

But **Race Equity** – the call to adapt our resources and talents in the most appropriate way to meet the particular needs at hand so that all groups of people can arrive at equal opportunity – isn't the only thing that unites us.

We also want learning in Minnesota to be of the highest and most relevant rigor, one that meets the needs of a technologically and socially advanced society, and one that serves our democracy.

And so, our desire for **Education Excellence** also unites us.

We believe that these two goals – **Race Equity** and **Education Excellence** – are one and the same. We know that it makes little difference to arrive at equitable outcomes if the quality of our education is not rigorous. And we also know it is impossible to have an excellent education system without racially equitable outcomes.

We do the work we do because we know that we are responsible for shaping an education system that produces success with students of color and that drives the highest quality of knowledge acquisition in human history for all students regardless of race. And this means that **we are responsible for designing and implementing a school system that combats racism.**

To achieve this, our schools need to be places where important skills like reading, writing and computing are taught as part of a process of **empowering young people.**

We see schools as either being transformative organizations or places that confirm racial inequalities; places that either tear down or promote students; that either deaden or inspire each student on their path of affirming their identity, their humanness, their sense of worth as members of the community.

Tearing down a student's racial identity perpetuates the "achievement gap" and promotes the racial divides of our nation. Inspiring students leads them to challenge those divisions, to overcome the very forces of low expectations that seek to take away their power to define themselves.

And this isn't just theoretical philosophy. Our understanding of these choices on how to structure our schools leads to a very practical agenda, because there is nothing more practical than doing what works. In the end, if it takes racial competency – and it does – to produce a literate, socially engaged, productive student, then we should be racially competent.

And we shouldn't fool ourselves into believing that having low expectations for one student doesn't translate into having low expectations for all students. It may seem that way in Minnesota, where over 80% of middle income white students graduate from high school on time, whereas less than 50% of students of color do.

But the recent NAEP test scores, showing that our white students are losing ground to their peers in other states, and the recent ACT results, where our white students are not measuring college ready, warns us that our inability to drive students of color success not only impacts those students, but has a deleterious impact on white students as well.

It is in our schools where we come to see how much we are all connected – and how we should be connected.

It is in our schools where we build our society – and if our schools are unequal our society will reflect that, as it does in Minnesota which has some of the largest racial disparities in our nation ranging from unemployment to incarceration to home ownership.

Everyone here this morning understands this why you do what you do and why are here in solidarity with one another.

As we re-commit ourselves this morning then to Race Equity and Education Excellence we at MMEP want to encourage us all to remember three things:

## **1. Human Face**

Learning, and the policies we pursue to enhance learning, isn't about "pouring knowledge into students" so that all we have to do is manage our schools better, train our instructors better, use standardized tests, structure campuses and classrooms a certain way.

Of course we should do these very things, they are vitally important as the STRIVE initiative led by Robert Jones and facilitated by Kent Pekel, and the Center for School Change led by Joe Nathan, and Growth and Justice led by Dane Smith and MinnCan led by Vallay Varro all know very well.

But because our schools and colleges reflect the cultural and psychological behaviors of society as a whole, these structural changes will always run the risk of being overwhelmed by the insidious power of racism in our society.

So new efforts to re-design schools need to be informed by what we know about the systemic workings of racism and what we know about students forming identity in a multi-racial world as they undertake the process of acquiring academic knowledge.

## **2. Backlash**

There is no nice way to say this – we are in a battle against forces that perpetuate systemic racism. Groups like the Organizing Apprenticeship Project led by Sal Miranda and Beth Newkirk, the Integration Districts with leaders like Dan Jett, Anthony Galloway, and Scott Thomas know this. Local groups like Navigate and the Immigration Freedom Network that drive the Dream Act Movement for undocumented students know this. The African American Leadership Forum knows about this very real battle.

And in facing it, it's not so important to distinguish whether we face intentional racism or the unintended consequences of those who lack knowledge of the reality of racism.

Policy makers who are uninformed about systemic racism but make policy nonetheless, run the grave risk of continuing behavior in our education systems that creates inequalities – like the Minnesota school district that recently voted against their superintendent's recommendation to acquire ELL text books for their students even though a large number come from homes where English is not the dominant language.

Such is also the case with the Legislature's and the Governor's jeopardizing the state's commitment to funding school desegregation efforts.

These decisions must be challenged, and not for the purpose of engaging in "culture wars" but for the sake of delivering a practical agenda for Minnesota.

Not addressing Race Equity has real consequences related to our desired education outcomes. It will decide for instance, whether Ecolab or 3M have a local pool of trained chemists to sustain their business or import talent from elsewhere while our local African American communities slide into deeper poverty. Not addressing this "Opportunity Gap" makes it easy for these employers to look elsewhere for what they need.

Placing our education reform work within an anti-racist framework is practical business. We are called to address racism for moral purposes but we also grapple with it to deliver a practical agenda that contributes to our economic and civic prosperity. Every private business and every

social institution should embrace this and should be part of beating back the resistance that comes from those opposed to race equity.

We need to be about systemic change, and that change requires addressing both the structural and belief dynamics of our schools and colleges. And we have to do this in a context where powerful forces conspire to perpetuate the current system of race inequality.

Easy, right? Not easy.

### **3. Collaboration**

And so, this morning we call you together to focus on, and commit yourselves to the power of Collaboration – across sectors, across public and private, across racial and economic communities, across institutions – as the best hope for ending race disparities in our education systems and for producing education excellence in Minnesota.

It is the best hope not only because of the ability to bring lots of talent, energy and perspectives to the table but also because of the way racial inequities work – the way systemic racism works.

It works at all levels of society, at all the ways in which we interact and reinforce social norms. And that means that each of us who occupies space in those different points of society need to work from the same page and understand how we are connected to one another.

The current conventional wisdom holds that early childhood education is the key to ending the “achievement gap.” At a time not too long ago the “key” was thought to be high school reform. At yet another time it was “structuring small schools” and “teacher performance pay.” A new candidate competing with early childhood is “third grade literacy.”

I am not saying these are bad ideas. Giving a child an early opportunity for academic success based on the incredible cognitive processes that unfold in the pre-school years is a powerful idea.

Limiting our strategy to only this however ignores the other ways in which racial inequities will continue to undermine the education of students, like the MN high school teacher we met who believes it is his duty to report undocumented students to immigration services and who believes they should not have access to quality education.

In other words, the issue has less to do with “fixing students” and more to do with fixing our entire education system.

And so, the deeper strength of any of these strategies is how they inform one another. If racism pops up all along the educational pathway of a student, Pre-K through elementary, through middle, through secondary, through higher education, then we can best defeat it by joining hands across that continuum and coordinating our strategies. And we can do the same across all our social sectors outside of our schools and colleges.

We acknowledge that many communities have embraced this approach: the North Side Achievement Zone led by Sondra Samuels, and the St. Paul Promise Neighborhood led by Angelique Kedem are two such emerging collaborations.

Collaboration involves managing processes where multiple stakeholders are brought together consistently to plan, to implement, to evaluate, to hold each other accountable to clear measurable goals tied to a common end result and doing all this with a commitment to drive systems level change where everyone puts their money on the table and aligns what they do with one another.

This morning we will share with you some of our experiences at MMEP in the power of Collaboration:

- Nurturing a statewide college access network to supporting regional community building efforts focused on restructuring local schools and colleges, from supporting broader collaboration within

specific racial communities to shaping new knowledge by bringing education researchers from diverse sectors into a multi-racial research collaborative table.

- We do this not just to tell you what we are up to, but to encourage reflection and commitment to working collaboratively as a key to your success.
- We will also honor two individuals who capture the spirit of MMEP in their work to help students of color be academically successful while promoting high expectations and rigor.

## **In Closing**

It has been my privilege to be associated with the MMEP community for many years.

It has been a period of time where MMEP put the issue of race disparities on the table in Minnesota. We did this before the term “achievement gap” became used, before NCLB. We compiled data from across the education pipeline and provided the first narrative in Minnesota of systemic inequalities and its implications for schools, for our economic and civic institutions. We did this before other very important groups – like the Itasca Project – issued similarly powerful work.

And as then, MMEP is committed to being a place where race equity innovators and emerging leaders will find encouragement and solidarity – for supporting one another is important in order for a movement to flourish.

MMEP is not just an organization that delivers some good programming and opportunities for others to learn and connect.

It is part of a movement for education Race Equity and Education Excellence which believes that “We all do better when we ALL do better.” We consider ourselves blessed to be in that movement with you. I look forward to your thoughts today during our Community Conversation.