



**“Minnesota Coalition for Education Equity
Comments on Race to the Top Funds”
an initiative of the
Minnesota Minority Education Partnership, Inc. (MMEP)
January 2010**

The Minnesota Minority Education Partnership, Inc. (MMEP), the longest-standing, **multicultural education collaborative** in the state, is committed to a multi-dimensional approach to addressing racial inequities in education in Minnesota that involves researchers, educators, policymakers, community leaders, youth and families in *developing analysis, convening stakeholders to address issues and advocating for social change for improved results with students of color and American Indian students.*

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has prepared a grant application for funding from the federal government from the “Race to the Top” (RTTT) grant program. Throughout the end of 2009 – in addition to participating in MDE stakeholder sessions helping to shape the application, MMEP has gathered scores of race equity education advocates from across communities of color and throughout Minnesota to engage directly with the Department to offer advice on this historic effort. The ensuing Minnesota Coalition for Education Equity considers these funds as a vital opportunity **to address systemic issues that underlie and reinforce racial disparities in education in our state.**

We offer the following advice both as support for the MDE’s application for Race to the Top funds and as a guide for the eventual use of these funds. We also express our willingness to continue to work with the MDE throughout the grant process and beyond throughout the implementation of the grant.

Background

Racial Disparities in Education in Minnesota: What Current Outcomes Tell Us

- According to the MMEP *2009 State of Students of Color and American Indian Students Report* - White students have an 80 percent high school completion rate compared to 41 percent of Latinos, 41 percent of African-Americans, and 41 percent of American Indians
- Of Minnesotans ages 18 to 24, Latinos attend college at rates 25 percent lower than white students. African American students graduate from four-year institutions at rates 16 percent lower than whites. Minnesota has one of the largest gaps in the nation between whites and persons of color and Indians when it comes to degrees awarded per 100 college students. (*Measuring Up 2008*, Minnesota report, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008, pp. 6-9.) These disparities are striking and have serious implications as Minnesota’s college-age population becomes increasingly diverse.
- According to Education Trust’s analysis of Minnesota, only 8 states **are worse than Minnesota in the reading performance of African-American students** according to NAEP 2007 Grade 4 Reading tests. (Education Watch, State Report, April 2009).



Community, Aspirations and Finding “What Works” to close the ‘Gaps’

Convenings and initiatives by local and national community groups addressing education and survey results with youth of color **all find that overwhelmingly families of color and their students do aspire for education and, specifically, a college education.**

- The Council on Black Minnesotans, in partnership with MMEP, held key convenings to discuss strategies to support African American youth in education. The Schott Foundation for Public Education and Education Trust have also focused on promising practices supporting African American youth in education.
- Minnesota Latino community groups, grounded in education, have convened to discuss best practices in education including: the Latino Youth Collaborative, Latinos in Higher Education Network of Minnesota, and various nonprofit entities provide award-winning tutoring and support to Latino families in education. National groups such as *Excelencia en Educacion* and National Council of *La Raza* focus on solutions as well.
- The Advisory Task Force Report on Minnesota Indian Tribes and Communities, created by state statute, engaged American Indian educators and communities throughout the state about assessments, standards, teacher training and technical assistance demonstrating strong will to have high standards applied meaningfully to Native students.
- According to the 2007 Minnesota student survey, **82 percent of African American males, 75 percent of Latino males, 77 percent of American Indian females and 93 percent of Asian female** students in the 9th grade aspire for college.

Economists of the state see this as a critical economic issue as well

- The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) has identified the **shrinking of the achievement gap between minority and white youth as one of the most important challenges facing the state.** (see “Economic Impact of Immigrants in Minnesota.”)

Successful reform of K12 education depends on ownership by Communities of Color and American Indian communities

Families and students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, along with educators and economists, have solutions to addressing the achievement gap. For reform to take hold, communities of color and American Indian communities must be able to own and help sustain new practices. These various stakeholders should be viewed as **key assets** towards completing an application with the right solutions and from the key stakeholders impacted by such decisions.

Based on MMEP’s research analysis, advocacy and convenings, we issue the following recommendations in the four quality assurances sought by the RTTT federal grant to be highlighted in Minnesota’s official proposal to the U.S. Department of Education:



1. STANDARDS

States must adopt internally benchmarked standards and aligned assessments that prepare students for success in college and in the workplace.

A1) Developing and Adopting Common Standards

A2) Developing and implementing Common, High-Quality Assessments

A3) Supporting Transition to Enhanced Standards and High-Quality Assessments

The Coalition supports **high standards** and high expectations for all youth--youth of color, new immigrant youth, and American Indian students. Standards should be relevant to pragmatic real world outcomes for students that lead to an empowered, effective citizenship inclusive of race and ethnicity. As communities of color we value the importance of educating our young so that they can **think critically**, to imaginatively frame questions and consider multiple perspectives more nimbly across multiple frameworks, cultures, and disciplines

To achieve high standards, however, research shows that educational institutions that incorporate **high supports** to youth who are struggling academically, yields the most results. (Education Trust projects were identified at MN P-16 Meeting, July 2008). The issues that contribute to low academic achievement impact youth of color disproportionately. Therefore, supports that are targeted at youth of color are vitally necessary to holding all students to the same high standards set forth by our state.

Benchmarking a student's academic progress against high global standards, and communicating those standards and benchmarking tools equitably, is key to this provision working in an equitable manner. Families of color, and immigrant families in particular, must receive culturally appropriate information with regards to how benchmarking is utilized and how their students' academic career is impacted by such methods. Furthermore, a process for incorporating communities of color in the creation of benchmarks would be imperative for this process to address racial disparities in education.

The Board on Testing and Assessment notes that measuring youth's talent cannot end with singular evaluations of student academic progress, they support "vigorous evaluations" (Education Week, Maxwell, Oct. 8). Using multiple measures will be key to the measurement of talent in the global economy. Many youth of color bring language skills, communication skills, resilience, and other key skills that **cannot be measured** by standardized tests alone. In addition, since knowledge is not always culturally neutral, assessments should be constructed in a culturally competent context to ensure that cultural biases impede ability to fairly discern student knowledge. Thus the Coalition believes that **multiple measures** are necessary to capture both the multiple talents of all youth in our community and to help the assessors overcome biases. Such assessments help the education system to "unpack" not only the appropriateness of that being measured but also the delivery of that knowledge and the governance of the assessment system.



The coalition makes the following recommendations to MDE as they apply for funds and address benchmarked standards and aligned assessments:

1. High Standards with high supports are keys to reaching equitable outcomes.
2. Benchmarking must be accompanied by additional communication strategies with families of color, and in native languages when appropriate.
3. Various assessment methods must be in place to truly measure and capture youth's talents and skills in a multicultural society and for the global economy.
4. Assessment methods must be designed and available for diverse learners, inclusive of the ELL learner and students of special education services.
5. The application for RTTT must ensure the request of additional funds for new research in developing distinct measures to capture multiple, multicultural youth talents.
6. The application for RTTT must recognize the importance of using growth models to aid our understanding of progress with students.

2. DATA SYSTEM

States must build data systems that measure student achievement and inform teachers and principals on how to improve their instructional and leadership practices.

B1) Fully Implementing a Statewide Longitudinal data system

B2) Accessing and Using State Data:

B3) Using Data to Improve Instruction:

A robust data system is a **key to reaching equitable outcomes** in education for Minnesota. Researchers have shown, however, that additional indicators captured by a data system, will make it easier for educators to identify key issues and make appropriate instructional actions to reach all students equitably for academic success. Data allows us not only to measure the **outcomes** of our work but also to connect those outcomes to **inputs** (e.g. what text book was used) and to **process** (e.g. what happens in the classroom). In order to reform our education system to arrive at racial equity we should collect data on all three dynamics. A comprehensive data system would include:

- a. Research-based, universal benchmarks of progress such as reading by 3rd grade, algebra by 8th grade, school readiness in early childhood.
- b. Quality of student engagement in the learning environment.
- c. Course taking patterns disaggregated by student race, ethnicity, gender, language.
- d. Participation in out-of-school time programming and correlation to supports for academic success with youth of color.
- e. Participation in college access programming that connects to school-day experiences.



- f. Disparate treatment of student consequences such as suspension rates disaggregated by gender and race.
- g. Language skills outside of English and multi-lingual capacity of students.

Such a collection of data should both look for indicators of success and for sources of failure.

We appreciate the value of both summative and formative assessment and want the Race to the Top funds help us to develop assessment systems that can do both.

We also want systems and practices that link student data to their teachers so that teachers can be best informed for how to effectively work with their students.

The coalition makes the following recommendations to MDE as they apply for funds and address data systems that measure student achievement and inform teachers and principals for effective action:

1. Developing a strong data system in Minnesota will allow for more real-time use of data to improve instruction. Leaders of color, however, want to be sure that educators understand how to identify racial disparities in that data, and direct their practices to close gaps effectively.
2. Leaders from the Coalition urge that training funded by Race to the Top Funds is made available for teachers, principals and parents on the use of this data to close gaps in education.
3. Likewise, communication with communities of color about the growth and achievement of students in schools is critical. Leaders strongly recommend streamlining the ability of MDE to quickly disseminate relevant reports to the community about the real achievement of its schools and make that information highly accessible and usable.

3. TEACHER REFORMS

States must demonstrate policies that effectively recruit, develop, retain and reward teachers and principals for performance.

C1) Providing Alternative Pathways for Aspiring Teachers and Principals

C2) Differentiating Teacher and Principal Effectiveness Based on Performance:

C3) Ensuring Equitable Distribution of Effective Teachers and Principals

C4) Reporting the Effectiveness of Teacher and Principal Preparation Programs:

C5) Providing Effective Support to Teachers and Principals: *The extent to which the State, in collaboration with its participating LEAs, has a high-quality plan to use rapid-time student data to inform and guide the support provided to teachers and principals.*

While 23.6 percent of Minnesota’s K-12 enrollments are students of color and American Indian students, teachers of color comprise only 3.3 percent of our state’s total teacher workforce (MMEP, 2009). Attracting both more diverse and effective teachers to the teaching profession in Minnesota is a key to the academic success of all youth. If learning is



an identity development process (Wijeyesinghe, Jackson, *New Perspectives on Racial Identity Development*, NYU Press 2001; Ross, Ooka Pang, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, Praeger Pub 2006) and cultural competency is key to a diverse workplace, more diverse and culturally competent teachers must be developed for Minnesota's future teacher workforce. Attracting more diverse employees to this profession will mean utilizing traditional teacher preparation institutions and alternative teacher preparation programs to reach this goal - ***no singular entity*** can provide all the diverse pool that Minnesota will need in a demographically shifting environment.

Guiding current teachers, to improve in their craft while teaching, is also key to achieving equitable outcomes in the classroom. As demographic shifts occur in our schools, including the presence of more immigrant youth, many educators may not have the experience in working with different families and will need up-to-date information on key issues that arise in a multicultural, educational setting. Evidence has shown that educators do seek on-going training to better serve students of color, American Indian students, and low-income youth.

Strong school leadership, with effective principals as a core, is a strong recommendation given by communities of color for this application. Denying the cultural competencies of this group, however, is not acceptable in a demographically shifting educational environment. The Coalition strongly encourages the use of principal training academies that weave cultural proficiency training into their leadership training curricula.

In developing a state rubric to measure teacher effectiveness, leaders from communities of color call for identifying strong and effective teaching practices by including youth and parents of color in the set of stakeholders that develop this rubric and assessment process. The Coalition firmly believes that without their perspectives we will not be able to identify ***true, effective teaching practices*** in Minnesota.

The coalition makes the following recommendations to MDE as they apply for funds and address pathways to teaching and the preparation of teachers:

1. Federal funds should be used to produce more teachers of color in Minnesota, including the development of a "Grow your Own" effort that reaches into secondary education – and also into non-traditional sources of adult candidates - to motivate and prepare people of color and American Indians to pursue teaching careers.
2. Traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs must all reach into communities of color to highlight the opportunities for diverse applicants in the teaching profession.
3. In order to encourage bright and diverse applicants, financial incentives in the form of grants or scholarships should be created in all teacher preparation institutions and targeted at candidates of color and American Indian candidates.
4. The current teacher workforce must be engaged in ongoing professional development that promotes inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership practices so that they may continue to develop their cultural



competency skills for working with Minnesota’s rapidly evolving student diversity.

5. Principal academies and other school leadership training entities must include cultural proficiency training, especially in the use of data to improve schools, for preparation to lead a multicultural school environment in Minnesota.

4. TURN-AROUND STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

States and school districts must work to effectively turn around low-performing schools.

D1) Intervening in the lowest performing schools and LEAS

D2) Increasing the supply of high-quality charter schools

Minnesota’s Race to the Top proposal will emphasize the need to develop an “Office of Turn-Around Schools” (OTAS) that is independently run, but housed within the Minnesota Department of Education. Given the large racial disparity in academic outcomes that exists in Minnesota, the OTAS must, by necessity be focused in closing these gaps and must therefore be an entity that possesses a high degree of research based competency in cross-racial, cross-cultural dynamics.

The OTAS should possess in-house expertise that reflects competence in the social and pedagogical realities of communities of color and American Indian communities and not be an entity that obtains that competence solely by associating with those communities. The OTAS should itself be a multi-cultural entity that families of color and American Indian families can lay ownership to and feel confident in its ability to reflect the diversity of perspectives present in those communities. The OTAS concept has an incredible opportunity to serve as a formative laboratory for the further development of educational leadership from within these communities. Its creation is set to occur at a time when a cadre of students of color and American Indian students is beginning to emerge in greater numbers from postsecondary institutions. These young future leaders are anxious to contribute to the attainment of knowledge by their communities in ways consistent with the unique multicultural experiences therein.

Leaders in communities of color and American Indian communities understand that a variety of debilitating social conditions exist disproportionately in their communities: poverty, limited access to health services, social isolation, limited postsecondary experiences, etc. Struggling schools often face high concentrations of these barriers to success which also need to be addressed in order to maximize the effects of new instructional and leadership practices. Faced with these realities, the OTAS should not just focus on assisting schools with academic instruction and ignore the negative impacts of certain social dynamics, but also provide competent assistance in creating collaborations among social and health services as part of “turning around” schools.

Communities of color recognize the importance of addressing both the **process** for turning around schools and the **identification of new practices** to be used that are effective and culturally appropriate. These can include the use of school audits currently done by



organizations led by educators of color such as the National Center on Urban School Transformation.

Leaders in communities of color think it imperative to have an independent entity directing resources and strategies for turning around low performing schools that:

1. Is reflective of and involves families of color and American Indian families in turn-around school decision-making processes.
2. Provides a transparent and accountable process on the “closing of school process” and communicate those areas appropriately to all communities through culturally, linguistically appropriate media methods.
3. Provide greater multi-lingual information on the opportunities for developing charter schools and hold on-going information sessions on the processes and accountability standards for such models.
4. Re-trains and develops K-12 staff in turnaround schools on holding high expectations of students of color and American Indian students for college access.
5. Incorporates social interventions into the redesign of schools that creates a learning environment where the full social and health needs of the student are coordinated in order to address the various barriers to learning that may exist for students.
6. Maintains strong relationships with local and national centers of education research and advocacy that are competent in high performing schools with students of color and American Indian students [e.g. National Center on Urban School Transformation, Harvard Achievement Gap Institute].

Respectfully submitted:

MMEP Minnesota Coalition for Education Equity, a broad collaborative of people of color and allies from the MMEP Board of Directors, MMEP Research Collaborative Table and from communities of color in Minnesota.