

2009 MCA II Test Results: Tragic Racial Gaps Persist

Tragic racial gaps exist...

Racial gaps increase from the lower to higher grades...

No group, regardless of race, is proficient in math upon exiting high school...

Proficiency drops over time especially in math...

In Minnesota it's easy to hide gaps...

• Information on how to close gaps is needed

The 2009 state standardized test results in math and reading are in, and the same unacceptable story of race disparities in education is repeated.

What the results do not tell us is: *"What works in educating our K-12 students?"* and especially, *"What works for students of color and American Indian students?"* That the results do not tell us this should come as no surprise since the current state assessment system is not designed for that purpose. Worse, by putting all our efforts into these types of measurements we have little left over to discover and replicate the practices that do work.

What do the MCA IIs tell us?

Over 500,000 K-12 students participated in the 2009 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA II) which are administered in grades 3 through 8 for both math and reading, with reading again assessed at 10th grade and math at the 11th grade. Several stories emerge from a quick look at the data:

Story #1

Tragic racial gaps exist. When disaggregated by race, the math MCA IIs show a gap in outcomes between white students and students of color and American Indian students. The largest gaps exist between whites on one hand and African Americans, Latinos and American Indians on the other hand.

The 11th grade math MCA II results show 47 percent proficiency for white students but only 11 percent proficiency for African American, 17 percent for Latino, 18 percent for American Indian and 36 percent for Asian students.

Story #2

Racial gaps increase. When disaggregated by race for both math and reading, the gap in MCA IIs outcomes between white students and students of color and American Indian students actually increases from the lower grades to the higher grades.

The math MCA IIs outcome gap is 24 percent between American Indian and white 3rd grade students, with American Indians measuring at 63



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percent proficiency. That gap actually widens to 29 percent by 11th grade with American Indians dropping to 18 percent proficiency.

The reading MCA IIs outcome gap is 30 percent between African American and white 3rd grade students with African Americans measuring at 55 percent proficiency. That gap widens to 39 percent by 10th grade with African American students dropping to 42 percent proficiency.

Story # 3

No group is proficient. Less than half of all of our students exiting from high school, regardless of race, are proficient in math as measured by the MCA IIs.

Story # 4

Proficiency drops over time. For both the math and reading MCA II test results proficiency drops for all students as they move from the early grades to the higher grades. This is more pronounced in math than in reading. This pattern of proficiency drop has occurred every year over the history of the MCA II's use.

Overall, 3rd graders achieve a high of 82 percent proficiency in math which then steadily drops through the higher grades to a low of about 42 percent proficiency in the 11th grade. Third graders achieve a

high of 78.3 percent in reading which drops less steeply to 74.2 percent in 10th grade.

Story #5

In Minnesota it's easy to hide gaps. In the final MCA II test administered, less than half of African American (42 percent) and Latino (47 percent) students are proficient in reading even as the aggregate of all students are measured as proficient (74 percent) and driven by the 81 percent white student proficiency rate.

In other words, Minnesota is still a place where our failure to achieve racial equity can be masked by our, appropriate, competency in educating most white students.

Some forward movement – but we can't afford small increases in proficiency

Some officials claim we should be proud of Minnesota's progress toward improving student achievement as demonstrated by these tests. There certainly have been some increases in proficiency over time in both tests as reflected in the aggregate and in each student groups' performances. For instance, about 42 percent of all 11th graders tested proficient in math in 2009 as opposed to about 30 percent in 2006.

However, a closer examination

of the data would urge concern about the pace of progress. For instance, African American students moved from 4 percent to 11 percent proficiency during that same period of time.

Given that current pace of 7 percent increases every 3 years for African American proficiency in the MCA math assessment, it will take almost 18 years to get to 51 percent proficiency with this student group. This means that only by the year 2027, can Minnesota expect its African American students to have a better than half a chance to demonstrate proficiency in the state's math assessment.

Current proficiency rates are devastating for communities of color

But these are more than numbers. Eleven percent math proficiency means that 5,410 human beings, out of an 11th grade African American class of 6,079, may face limited opportunities in our society by virtue of not meeting that academic standard. Multiply that by the projected proficiency rates given our current progress and in our lifetime we can expect tens of thousands of young African Americans being left unprepared to fully benefit from, and contribute to, an emerging advanced math-based economy in our state.

Simply put, we are not closing

gaps in Minnesota by any meaningful measurement, unless incremental change is considered meaningful.

As measured by the MCA IIs, we need dramatic increases in outcomes and we need them immediately, not stretched out over a long period of time.

This begs for major changes in both educational practices and in making investments that go beyond what we are currently doing in Minnesota.

For instance, if we know that certain practices work well with African American males, than we should fully adapt our K-12 learning environments to pursue those practices (e.g. use of all male learning environments). And, if we know that will cost more than the average state per pupil allowance, then we should make that investment.

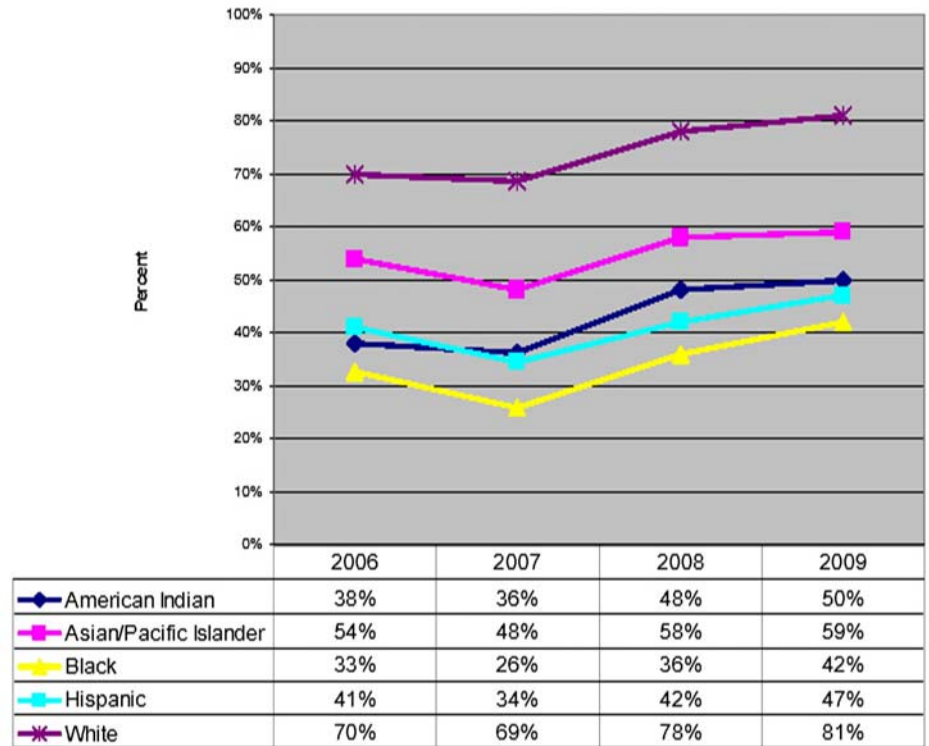
How do we find out what changes to make?

Unfortunately, the MCA II assessment system provides us with little direct information to be able to answer that question.

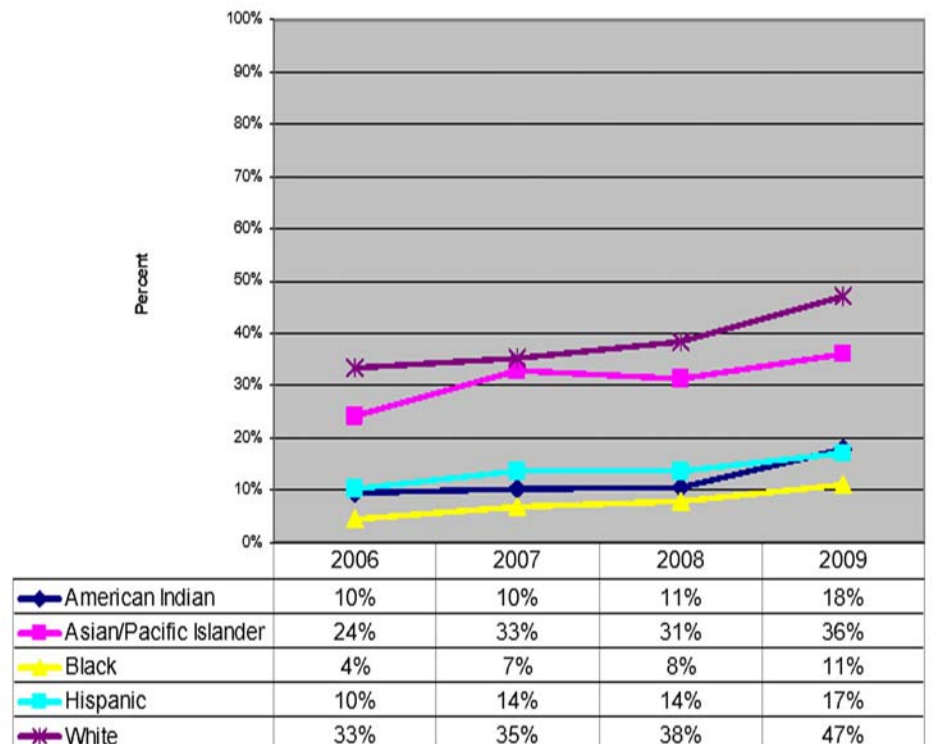
One would think given the large investment of time, energy and dollars we direct to a statewide accountability system, involving setting academic standards and implementing standardized tests to measure our progress, that it would not only tell us whether our K-12 system is meeting the standards, but also inform us how to best do that.

While the MCAs serve an

Grade 10 Reading MCA II



Grade 11 Mathematics MCA II



important purpose - as one way to gauge the status of student proficiency – we simply need better measurements that quickly “zeroes in” on classroom practices that work best with a racially, culturally, and economically diverse student population, and how those practices are supported by the school and the district. Other tools are needed in order to do this. For example, a school with excellent MCA II results may only be reflecting the benefits of community wealth and minimal social stress than the application of pedagogies that work with Mexican and Somali immigrant students just learning to speak English.

The Minnesota Department of Education does use the MCAs to identify “Beating the Odds” schools but it is still too rough an instrument to tell us more important things like: differentiation of instruction, intensity of assistance to kids, whether actual growth in learning is happening regardless of whether students hit a proficiency level, etc.

Essentially, what Minnesota needs is a more mature accountability system, one that equally uses several tools to reveal how schools and students are doing. Such a system would still use a summative testing instrument

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like the MCA IIs which allow you to take a “snapshot” at a fixed point in time to know the state of student achievement and to differentiate that among different student groups. But that would be complemented with other “snapshots” to begin to put together a fuller picture of reality.

The state’s “School Report Card” can provide us many of those additional views; growth measures, student engagement indicators, etc. These tell us important things about a school that gets us closer to better assessing the different practices that can drive student achievement.

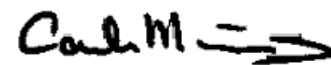
And, we can benefit from greater use of formative assessments – a test given in “real time” that directly informs teachers and students and allows for immediate adjustment of practices.

Our policy efforts should be on how to “marry” those different

tools into one practice so that we don’t get distracted by partial information that leads us away from actually meeting – ***not just wishing to meet*** - high standards.

Perhaps our focus should be less on merely labeling schools and students in the hope that they will somehow “get it right” and more on learning what works, sharing it immediately and powerfully, and making sure students, teachers and schools have the resources needed to use that evolving knowledge in a multi-racial, multi-cultural world committed to equity with excellence.

As demonstrated by the recent MCA II results, we really have no time to lose. ■



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