

≡ IN SEARCH
OF ROI



Allergic to Accountability

BY CATRIN WIGFALL

Despite no proven correlation between spending and student achievement, Big Education relentlessly demands—and gets—more and more money.

Imagine this scene: On a cold January morning, a mom listens to the local radio station to hear the latest weather report, then bundles up her son in a coat, hat and mittens before sending him off to school. And as she does this, she has a sense of pride. Why? Because even on the coldest winter mornings this mother, like many Minnesotans, is certain of one thing: the school

she sends her son to is a good one. And she knows, even if not everyone agrees, that Minnesotans pay a lot to have one of the finest education systems in the country. National rankings, after all, don't lie. Nor do test scores.

Or do they?

What if I told you everything in the conventional narrative about Minnesota's

education system is believed by facts that point to a different conclusion from what we've been told?

Hailed as having one of the best public education systems in the nation, the reality of Minnesota's public schools is that behind those high rankings are educational disparities and shortcomings that have not disappeared despite decades of increased spending.

Spending is not down

Liberal politicians and school-spending advocates portray “insufficient” spending as the main problem with Minnesota’s public education. According to Education Minnesota President Denise Specht, Minnesota needs to spend about \$4 billion more every two years to “fully fund” public schools. But if there was a magic number for making schools better, wouldn’t we already be spending

enue per pupil has consistently increased since 2003—both adjusted for inflation and not adjusted for inflation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Minnesota spends on average \$12,647 per student each year.

But misleading rhetoric leaves the general public believing Minnesota spends far less on education than we actually do. According to the most recent *Thinking Minnesota Poll*, the median

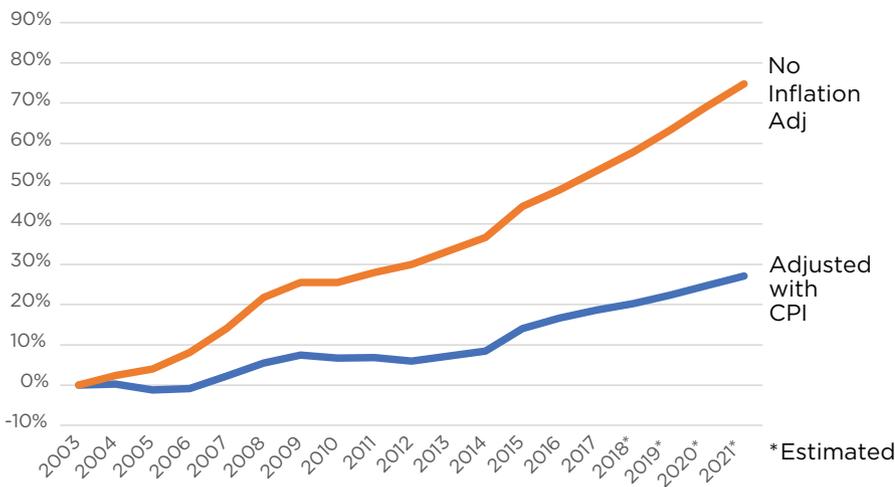
single spending increase in that budget. By 2022-23, the SCRFA has estimated education spending will increase to nearly \$21 billion or 4.4 percent above fiscal year 2020-21.

The money is spent on classroom instruction (teachers’ salaries and benefits), support services for students and teachers, school administration, transportation, food services and facility operations, early education, capital costs (building and maintaining facilities), and state agencies, to name a few. Nearly \$600 million a year (\$551 million in fiscal year 2018) is sent directly to school districts across the state to pay for the educational needs of students who do not meet performance standards appropriate for their age. In addition, federal Title I funds for low-income students and other state funding (“achievement and integration” aid, early education money, rural school money, etc.) are also designated to move the achievement gap needle.

Minnesota has multiple streams of funding going into education, and yet disparities continue to plague our state.



Percent Change in Total Revenue per Average Daily Attendance Since FY2003



Source: Minnesota Department of Education

that amount? Data show that there is no apparent correlation between increased spending and improved academic outcomes. The false narrative that inadequate funding is the root of our education problems paints Minnesota as a state allergic to accountability. Minnesotans spend more money for education year after year, yet they fail to get the most bang for their buck. And our students are paying the cost: too many are being left behind in the shadow of success.

The chart above shows that total rev-

dollar amount Minnesotans guessed the state spends per pupil was \$3,000.

There is clearly a disconnect between rhetoric and fiscal reality.

Minnesota has also continued to appropriate more money for education spending, with current education expenditures for fiscal year 2020-21 at \$20.1 billion, according to the Senate Counsel, Research and Fiscal Analysis Office (SCRFA). Last year’s two-year budget deal gave a \$540 million boost to the education fund—the biggest

Lackluster academic outcomes

Minnesota test results over the last decade reveal a familiar tale of woe for the state’s public schools: academic outcomes stagnant or in decline, and an achievement gap that won’t budge.

The state measures student academic achievement primarily through the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) that are given once a year. The reading MCA is administered in grades 3-8 and grade 10, and the mathematics MCA is administered in grades 3-8 and grade 11. Science knowledge is assessed in grades 5, 8, and once in high school. As reading and mathematics are the primary assessments Minnesota uses to meet state and federal accountability requirements, these are the test results that will be discussed below.

Minnesota student achievement is also measured by NAEP scores. The NAEP test results that will be referenced below are mathematics and reading scores from grades 4 and 8. Participation in NAEP is required by federal law, and it is admin-



Catrin Wigfall is a Policy Fellow at Center of the American Experiment. She is the director of EducatedTeachersMN and EmployeeFreedomMN. Catrin spent two years teaching 5th grade general education and 6th grade Latin in Arizona as a Teach for America corps member before using her classroom experience to transition back into education policy work.



There is clearly a disconnect between rhetoric and fiscal reality.

istered to a sample of students who represent the student population of the states and nation. It is the only objective student learning outcome measure available to compare states' academic performance.

Test scores

Test scores are not the only indicator of success, but they play a key role in evaluating learning because they are objective, standardized measures of student achievement on academic or proficiency standards. Tests can also place healthy pressure on schools, helping identify which schools are struggling to meet the minimum academic expectations.

The MCA assigns four levels of achievement: Exceeds the Standards (proficient), Meets the Standards (proficient), Partially Meets the Standards (not proficient), and Does Not Meet the Standards (not proficient). Students receive an achievement level based on their scale score.

According to the 2019 MCA math test results, 44.6 percent of students assessed statewide—in grades 3-8 and grade 11—are not performing at grade level. In reading, 40.4 percent of students assessed statewide—in grades 3-8 and grade 10—are not performing at grade level. And the results are even more discouraging when broken down by race/ethnicity. Around 45 percent of Asian students, nearly 68 percent of Hispanic students, 72 percent of

American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 72.2 percent of black students are not proficient in math. And even among white students, over 100,000 are not performing at grade level, equating to nearly 53 percent of the total student body that is not proficient in math. But our educational disparities are not confined to race. Low-income white students significantly trail higher-income white students across Minnesota.

The passage of time has not been kind to our hope for improved academic progress. Math scores have declined since 2016 and reading proficiency has been stagnant.

But what about students who opt out of standardized testing? Doesn't that skew the data?

The percentage of students who opt out of the MCAs is not significant enough to affect overall proficiency scores. On the 2019 MCAs, 2.5 percent of students opted out of the math assessment, and less than 2 percent opted out of the reading assessment.

Minnesota students have also declined in both reading and mathematics on NAEP tests. The average math NAEP score for fourth-grade public school students in the state declined from 249 in 2017 to 248 in 2019. In reading, the average fourth-grade score was 222 in 2019, down from 225 in 2017. For

eighth-grade students, the average math NAEP score declined from 294 in 2017 to 291 in 2019. Eighth-grade reading scores dropped to 264 in 2019, compared to 269 in 2017.

And while these drops in scores may not seem significant, digging into the numbers reveals more of the story, and reveals Minnesota students' performance relative to students in other states. Recall that these test scores are averages, and they do not take into account the impact of student heterogeneity. Disaggregating groups of students gives a better picture of a state's academic performance and helps put to rest the claim that more spending necessarily improves student performance.

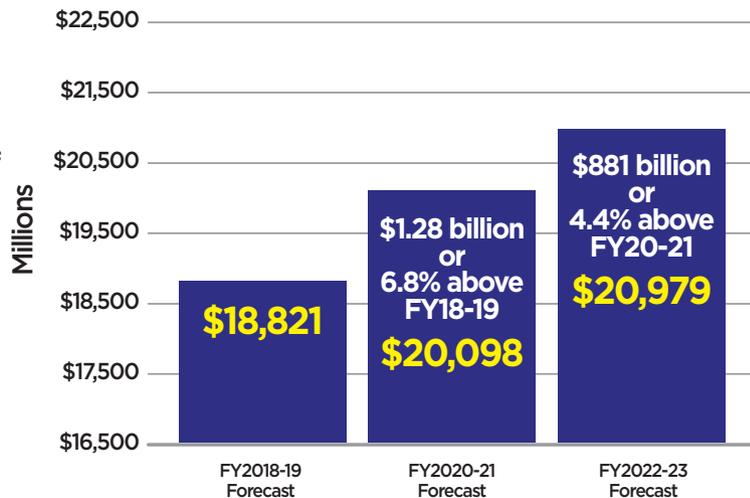
For example, Texas spends \$9,375 per pupil compared to Minnesota's \$12,647 per pupil. Yet Texas black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students outperformed Minnesota black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander students *on each 2019 NAEP subject test for each grade level*. Thus, assuming that Minnesota must do a better job educating its students because it spends more money is not accurate.

Mississippi, who spends \$8,771 per student and whose student body is made up of nearly 49 percent black students compared to Minnesota's 10.7 percent, has better performance than our state

among students of color. Mississippi black and Hispanic students in both fourth and eighth grade math and reading outperformed Minnesota black and Hispanic students. Equally important, Mississippi's NAEP test scores for fourth and eighth grade black students have been scaling up over the years, compared to Minnesota's declining scores among fourth and eighth grade black students. And among low-income students—of which Mississippi has 75 percent compared to Minnesota's 37 percent—Mississippi fourth graders ranked 3rd in the nation in reading. Minnesota's low-income students ranked 40th.



E-12 Education Forecasted General Fund Spending



Source: Senate Counsel, Research, and Fiscal Analysis

Achievement gaps

Minnesota's achievement gap is the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. It is most often used to describe the troubling performance gaps between students of color, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their white peers, as well as the similar academic disparity between students from low-income families and those who are better off. The state of Minnesota has not made meaningful progress in closing its achievement gap—which is one of the worst in the country—despite continued increases in spending and direct allocations of hundreds of millions of dollars each year to specifically target low-performing students.

The achievement gap between white and black students varies only slightly when comparing proficiency on the MCA and the NAEP. In fourth grade reading, the 2019 MCA results show a 35 percentage-point achievement gap in proficiency between white and black Minnesota students. Black and white fourth graders both scored lower on the 2019 NAEP reading test, compared with the MCA results, with an achievement gap of 26 percentage points. The achievement gaps for grade 8 reading proficiency and grades 4 and 8 math between the MCA and the NAEP range from 30 percentage points to 40 percentage points. Over the last five years, the achievement gap on the math MCA has widened by 2.1 percentage points in grade 4 and 1.4 percentage points in grade 8. This widening gap is also paired with declining test scores for both white and black students in Minnesota. On the reading MCA, the achievement gap has widened by 0.5 percentage point in grade 4 and narrowed by 0.9 percentage point in grade 8 over the last five years.

While the third-grade reading achievement gap on the MCA has narrowed between white and black students in Minnesota by 5.7 percentage points since 2015, the gap closure is not positive because it is a result of white students' proficiency declining.

The achievement gap is also not limited to race. Only 37 percent of low-income Minnesota students of all races/ethnicities are proficient in math

and reading compared with 68 percent of their higher-income peers. According to the most recent *Thinking Minnesota Poll*, 79 percent of Minnesotans say the achievement gap in the state is a significant problem.

Graduation rates and college readiness

Reductions in graduation gaps do not automatically equate to success. According to Minnesota Department of Education data, the number of African American students who graduated high school increased from 36 percent to 67 percent from 2003 to 2018 (compared to



Student demographics can disguise educational outcomes; a state like Minnesota might do well on aggregated scores due to its socioeconomic composition rather than any great achievement by its education system.

white graduation rates of 79 percent and 88 percent), but an analysis of college readiness tests by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows zero progress in closing the gaps in terms of actual learning. And because the Legislature removed required minimum test scores for a high school diploma, Minnesota high school graduation requirements have become diluted.

According to ACT Research data, only 25 percent of black students are college ready compared to 69 percent of their

white peers. Governor Walz has recently emphasized the climb in graduation rates as a positive development, despite the fact these rates are happening while test scores keep falling. We may be graduating more students, but an increasing proportion of those students are unprepared for college and other post-secondary options.

Educational ROI

Spending more on schools may be popular, but the state's education shortcomings and disparities require policy solutions, not further cash infusions.

This analysis of Minnesota's education system is not to dismiss external factors that can affect a child's academic performance. Nor is it necessarily indicative of outcomes in specific schools and districts—as there are learning environments generating higher-than-average achievement per dollar spent. But it is meant to assess the state's education system as a whole and get us thinking about how good are Minnesota's public schools, *really*?

Minnesota's massive investment in K-12 education has not promoted strong student achievement, as additional dollars have not resulted in improved academic outcomes or meaningful progress to close the achievement gap. We are a generous state with regard to funding for districts with high populations of low-income students and students of color. But these investments are not paying off, and until we pursue solutions outside of the education "reforms" that have been tried ad nauseam, our education system will not get the lasting change it needs and all our students will not get the education they deserve.

It is challenging to move a test score average over time, but the state's multi-year academic track record has very little to show for the influx of cash the education fund has received. This new decade of education will require different ingredients if we hope to make meaningful progress in boosting academic outcomes and setting students up for success.

When will it be time to hold the state accountable and ask, "Where are the results of all our spending?" ★