



Unmasking Inequities

An Equity-Centered Policy Approach to Education in Response to the Pandemic



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The Issue: The Pandemic has Revealed and Exacerbated Inequities

Minnesota cities are often highly ranked nationally for their education outcomes, but this is only true for white Minnesota residents.¹ Our state has long been home to the worst racial disparities in education, health, housing and economic outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified and intensified many of these disparities. Schools that primarily serve students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are still struggling to make sure all students have access to the technology, learning space and support they need for remote learning. In contrast, many middle class and affluent white families are hiring tutors or teachers and leveraging their more flexible work from home schedules to oversee their children's distance learning. As teachers, the compounding impact of differing learning opportunities on individual students is something we confront every day. Confirming what we already knew, the shift to remote school is estimated to have set White students back by one to three months in math, while students of color have lost three to five months.²

Our Values

Given the unprecedented level of uncertainty and urgency needed to respond to this widening opportunity gap, we narrowed our ideas and anchored our recommendations in several shared values. At the forefront is **equity** which calls for making difficult decisions in order to relentlessly prioritize students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English language learners. It is also essential that our recommendations **have a positive impact on students, are actionable, and excite a wide base of teachers.**

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The pandemic has shined a spotlight and illuminated the pieces that were always missing for many students in our education system, now I hope we will have a greater sense of urgency to fix what's broken.”

Dawna Diamon
Special Education Teacher, MPS Metro
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Allocating funding for meaningful learning interventions such as learning pods and extended learning time requires decision-makers to reform the state's largest funding stream to be more transparent and equitable.

Minnesota's largest funding stream, "compensatory revenue," goes to districts serving students who receive free or reduced price lunch (FRL). Unfortunately, there is no oversight mechanism and the extent to which it is received by the new students who need it most is unknown. The Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) conducted an evaluation and came out with recommended reforms to ensure that this funding benefits students who have FRL status. E4E-Minnesota educators have pushed for these changes in the past and will continue to advocate for them during the 2021 legislative session.

The Solutions: District and State Policy Recommendations

As teachers who are constantly innovating in ways we didn't know were possible, we call on decision makers to also take creative and bold action in all policy decisions moving forward. The conditions of the pandemic call for a new, radically equity-focused approach to learning environments, whether they are online or in-person. We call on school districts, state legislators, and teachers' unions to:

1. Relentlessly prioritize school resources for those who need it most
2. Provide anti-racist social emotional learning and mental health support to students most impacted
3. Prioritize teacher diversity during budget cuts by protecting teachers of color from layoffs and investing in critical teacher preparation programs that lead to an increase in teacher diversity

Note to readers: This is a time of extreme hardship for students and families, especially those who are already being short-changed by our education system. This is not an exhaustive list of solutions, but recommendations that educators prioritized because they address both urgent and longer-term needs and are equity focused and impactful. A diverse team of ten Teacher Leaders created the following recommendations by drawing from research, their own professional expertise and experiences, colleague surveys, and informal discussions with students and families.

1. Relentlessly prioritize school resources for those who need it most

The state legislature should fund family-school connection initiatives by providing grants targeted to low-income parents and caretakers who are providing learning support communities or "learning pods."

Rationale: Early in the pandemic, there were many accounts of affluent parents leveraging their remote work status to oversee their child's education or to hire teachers to guide their child's distance learning, which created equity concerns. Conversely, low-income parents face the impossible choice to reduce or give up in-person employment in order to support and supervise their children. There are examples of microgrants that have provided families from low-income backgrounds opportunities to create learning-pods that have produced promising results.³ Pods that have a positive impact should continue to serve students by providing extended day or year services. If coupled with mentorship or pathway programs, pods could also serve as a way to bring parents of color into the teaching profession.

Districts should extend the school day and year for students who are most impacted with high-quality enrichment opportunities.

Rationale: Students who have been most deprived of learning opportunities during the pandemic because of lack of access to technology, quiet space with adult support, poor instruction, and other obstacles deserve additional high-quality learning opportunities designed to help them catch up. These high-quality opportunities should be targeted toward students who are the farthest behind and traditionally marginalized student populations, including students of color, English language learners, students with special needs, and those from low-income backgrounds to name a few.

2. Provide anti-racist social emotional learning (SEL) and mental health support to students most impacted by the pandemic and distance learning.

The state legislature should adopt anti-racist SEL standards for districts across Minnesota.

Rationale: As teachers, we know that social emotional well-being goes hand-in-hand with academic achievement. As SEL becomes a more frequently used term and practice in our schools, we are excited to see the possibility of statewide SEL standards. We also acknowledge that some SEL and character development curriculum have rightfully been criticized as being rooted in white supremacy culture. Any state adopted standards should include an anti-racist framework, something critically important in Minnesota given the overwhelmingly white teaching workforce. Efforts to increase SEL without a serious commitment to increasing teacher diversity (see below/next page-HOLD FOR LAYOUT) are disingenuous at best.

The state legislature should offer anti-racist SEL grants for schools who have students who are most impacted by the pandemic.

Rationale: Some schools serve populations who have experienced the negative impacts of the pandemic more severely than others because of existing inequities. Among the most impacted schools, the state should award those with teams of teachers and school leaders who show a strong interest, funding to implement anti-racist SEL opportunities. This would help ensure their vision becomes a high-quality and consistent part of the school's practice and culture.

3. Prioritize teacher diversity during budget cuts by protecting teachers of color from layoffs and investing in critical preparation programming

The state should invest in the expansion of alternative preparation programs.

Rationale: Grow-your-own programs and residencies are typically much more diverse, but are more expensive on average to administer.⁴ Given the current economic climate, existing alternative preparation programs could be on the chopping block. Any conversation about remediating learning loss or providing social emotional support to students who are most impacted must include discussion about WHO is delivering instruction and support. We need to fully invest in teacher diversity efforts to ensure students see teachers who look like them as a part of any education policy response to the pandemic.

The state should require districts and unions to address teacher diversity, native non-English speakers and other shortage areas in their layoff provisions.

Rationale: Minnesota celebrated the first Somali Teacher of the Year in 2020 and promptly allowed her to lose her job because of seniority-based layoff policies.⁵ We need to ensure that during a time of economic downturn, teachers of color, who are oftentimes newer to the teacher workforce, are not disproportionately impacted by layoffs.

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The lack of consistency and stability in staffing has a profound impact on our students. Students at my school recognize and really appreciate the teachers that stay, and have shared with me that it tells them it makes them feel cared for and valued.”

Justin Goldstein
Math Teacher, North Community High School



Next Steps

We are at an historic crossroads. We can choose to go back to business as usual, or we can boldly target resources toward innovative academic interventions and more just social-emotional supports where they are most needed, while increasing the odds that they are delivered by educators who reflect and understand our students. We call on legislators as well as district, union and school board leaders to choose the latter.

We also call on our fellow educators, families and community members to hold these leaders accountable for a radically equitable response to educating all students as the pandemic continues to reveal and exacerbate racial and economic injustices.

Endnotes

- 1 Executive Brief - Statewide Crisis: Minnesota's Education Achievement Gaps. *Minneapolis Federal Reserve* (2019).
- 2 'A lost generation': Surge of research reveals students sliding backward, most vulnerable worst affected. *Washington Post* (2020).
- 3 When the Point of the Pod is Equity: How Small Grants are Empowering Parents of Underserved Students to Form Pandemic Microschools . Beth Hawkins, *The 74 Million* (2020).
- 4 Teacher Residencies: The Future of Teacher Prep? *Education Writers Association* (2018).
- 5 Award-winning teachers of color lost to budget cuts in Burnsville call for introspection, policy change. Christine Schuster, *SW Newsmedia* (2020).

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