“Initiatives for Assuring Successful Educational Experiences for All Minnesota Children”
A Brief Note
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Introduction

Cascades of initiatives are now engaged in a broad array of interventions to assure a successful educational experience for all Minnesota children. Their effect on Minnesota’s 338 school districts is yet to be determined.

Funding streams for these initiatives are derived from several sources. Here is a partial list of recent awards:

• Race to the Top (RTTT) Early Learning Challenge grant to Minnesota and eight other states—$45 million over five years to improve outcomes for Minnesota’s preschool children.
• Promise Neighborhoods grant to NAZ, a collaborative that includes CEED, Minneapolis Public Schools, and 50-plus community organizations . . . $28 million over five years; focuses on families to boost children’s success.
• Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to CEED, on behalf of the Human Capital Research Collaborative (HCRC); six school districts in three state; other partners—$15 million over five years; expands the Child-Parent Center (CPC) Education Program, a proven preschool-to-third grade intervention.

It is important to note the context for these varied responses:
“The cost burden to Minnesota K-12, when children are unprepared for kindergarten”** [is estimated to be] “$113 million annually.”

• Policy is concerned with the sources of disparities;
• Research, having done extensive work with what the data reveals, now concentrates on qualitative investigations, in order to have perspectives on the meaning of the data; and
• Practice is absorbed in the tasks of engagement and assessment.

Among these initiatives, “Strive” has emerged as a notable effort. It is intended to engage Minnesota’s “movers and shakers” into a coherent force to assure school success for every child.

The development of Strive was led by Dr. Robert Jones of the University of Minnesota and the African American Leadership forum, and the overall process was coordinated by Kent Pekel and Julie Sweitzer of the University’s College Readiness Consortium, which is located in Morrill Hall.

Selected Notes from the Strive Working Group Study*:

- “. . . The initial survey of the educational landscape identified more than five hundred such initiatives.” [p. 4]

- “. . . while there is undoubtedly a great deal going on in the Twin Cities, Strive working group also noted that there is currently no organization or entity in the region that brings together the key organizations and individuals that influence students’ lives for strategic discussion of where the community stands today and where it should go tomorrow . . .” [p. 18]

- “Every Thursday, we’re all linked up on the Internet, and in 2 ½ hours, we go through about 320 charts.” . . . [p. 1, Ford CEO Alan Mulally (2011)]

- “. . . two Strategic Goals in the Twin Cities: (1) ensuring that all students read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade and (2) ensuring that all students complete a credential or degree after high school.” [p. 7]

- “For the purposes of this report . . . the Strive model has been distilled into five key components: (1) a Strategic Leadership Group . . . (2) a set of Strategic Goals . . . (3) a Data System . . . (4) Improvement Networks . . . (5) a Partnership Staff . . .” [p. 19]

- “. . . The Strive working group . . . agreed that the members of the Strategic Leadership Group should share a commitment to the metropolitan area as a whole, and to making decisions based upon data, evidence and sound analysis.” [p. 22]

- “Another important component of the Data system in the Strive approach are the Improvement Benchmarks that identify the incremental gains . . . “ [p. 24]

- “While the success of the Strive model depends greatly upon the commitment and capacity of the people who serve on the Strategic Leadership Team and the Improvement Networks, it is the Partnership Staff that connects the dots between the organization and individuals that make up the collaborative. . . .” [p. 26]

- “. . . Strive indicates that it is critical that the anchor organization have the clout and credibility to bring leaders to the Strive table despite other priorities . . .
While members of the Strive working group offered many ideas for an organization that could anchor a Strive partnership in the Twin Cities, no single organization emerged as the obvious choice. [p. 27]

A Few Issues Worth Noting in the Pursuit of Equity and Excellence

An effort to focus on the school system as the location of responses to children with behavioral disorders (locating mental health and family services within the school) creates serious problems.

The concept of the “Compassionate School” (favored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation) creates problems for managing the time of a student’s school day, e.g., meeting with the psychotherapist to deal with disruptive behavior or attending a reading improvement group?

Should the educational system concentrate on the student’s learning achievement, with community agencies assigned the tasks of responding with mental health services to the student’s behavioral and emotional issues?

Attention to therapeutic child care for infants and toddlers is strikingly absent from the array of proposed interventions. This is especially puzzling, since the University of Minnesota made the major contribution to the concept of “attachment” in the infant and toddler stage—a loving and nurturing beginning in the unfolding relationship between infant and caregiver—as the foundation for competency in learning. The work of Alan Sroufe, Byron Egeland, Marti Erickson, and Dante Cicchetti is widely recognized in this field, nationally and internationally.

Missing from the cascade of responses is a fundamental question, “Who first sees the child with a problematic future?”

This question would raise “prevention,” as a primary community focus.