



## Summary

# Minnesota Department of Education's Role in Addressing the Achievement Gap

**The Legislature should better define the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE's) role in addressing the achievement gap and clarify certain provisions in statute. MDE should improve its administration of various initiatives related to the achievement gap.**

### Key Findings

- Minnesota law does not clearly define “achievement gap,” how it should be measured, or MDE’s role in addressing it. (pp. 15, 16)
- Some statutory requirements related to achievement gap initiatives are unclear or impractical. (pp. 29, 38, 40)
- Contrary to statutory requirements, MDE has not annually monitored school district and charter school progress toward their World’s Best Workforce goals, including reducing the achievement gap. (p. 28)
- MDE has not developed—nor does it typically help districts develop—improvement plans when districts fail to reach their Achievement and Integration goals, such as reducing the achievement gap. (p. 39)
- MDE does not have a strategic plan specific to American Indian education that addresses the achievement gap. (p. 46)
- The Regional Centers of Excellence have had a positive impact on the schools with which they partner, many of which have reduced their achievement gaps. (p. 53)

### Key Recommendations

- The Legislature should consider amending Minnesota statutes to more explicitly define the term “achievement gap” and MDE’s responsibilities related to the achievement gap. (pp. 20, 21)
- The Legislature should revise certain statutes to establish more practical timelines and clearer expectations for MDE. (pp. 31, 39, 41)
- MDE should annually monitor—and report to the Legislature—districts’ and charter schools’ progress toward closing the achievement gap and other World’s Best Workforce goals. (p. 31)
- MDE should take a more active role in developing improvement plans when districts do not meet their Achievement and Integration goals, including reducing their achievement gaps. (p. 41)
- MDE should develop a strategic plan for American Indian education that includes approaches to reduce the achievement gap. (p. 49)
- The Legislature should consider making the services of the Regional Centers of Excellence more widely available as a way to help address the achievement gap. (p. 56)

### Background

The “achievement gap” is the difference in academic achievement or educational outcomes among different groups of students. Such disparities may exist between students of different races, ethnicities, or socioeconomic statuses, among others. Minnesota’s achievement gaps are some of the largest in the nation.

Although school districts and charter schools are responsible for educating Minnesota students, MDE oversees education in the state. This includes the administration of statewide initiatives intended to address the achievement gap.

We evaluated MDE’s oversight and administration of four initiatives that include addressing the achievement gap among their statutory goals:

- (1) World’s Best Workforce
- (2) Achievement and Integration for Minnesota
- (3) American Indian Education
- (4) Regional Centers of Excellence

## Report Summary

### **State law does not define “achievement gap” or MDE’s role in addressing it.**

Minnesota statutes do not contain a single, clear definition of “achievement gap.” For some initiatives, statutes specify groups of students among whom performance should be compared, but none explain how disparities between the student groups should be measured. Further, while the statutes authorizing each of the four initiatives we examined mention closing the achievement gap as a goal, only the American Indian education statutes assign MDE specific responsibilities with respect to the achievement gap. We recommend that the Legislature consider amending statutes to clearly define “achievement gap” and MDE’s role in addressing it.

Because MDE’s responsibilities to address the achievement gap are not clearly defined in state law, we evaluated MDE’s administration of four education initiatives more broadly: (1) World’s Best Workforce, (2) Achievement and Integration for Minnesota, (3) American Indian education, and (4) Regional Centers of Excellence.

### **The Legislature should revise problematic statutory provisions.**

A number of statutory provisions related to the World’s Best Workforce and Achievement and Integration initiatives are unclear or establish impractical requirements. For example, World’s Best Workforce statutes require MDE to determine whether school districts and charter schools are making “sufficient progress” in improving teaching, student learning, and creating the world’s best workforce. The statutes do not, however, define “sufficient progress” or explain how MDE should measure it. We recommend that the Legislature clarify the meaning of this phrase in statute.

Achievement and Integration statutes require that MDE determine whether school districts have met the goals in their three-year Achievement and Integration plans by August 1 after the final school year of the plan. This deadline is impractical as it allows very little time (typically less than two months) for school districts to report their results to MDE and for the department to review them. Also,

many school districts base some of their achievement goals on the results of Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, which typically are not released to districts until August. We recommend that the Legislature amend statutes to establish an evaluation timeline that is more feasible for both school districts and MDE.

### **MDE has not annually monitored school district and charter school progress as required under World’s Best Workforce.**

World’s Best Workforce is a broad initiative with five statutory goals. These goals—which include closing the achievement gap and increasing graduation rates, among others—encompass much of what MDE, school districts, and charter schools do to educate students.

While statutes do not define “sufficient progress,” MDE has not satisfied a statutory requirement to *annually* determine whether school districts and charter schools are making progress in creating the world’s best workforce. Nor has the department listed the districts and charter schools that failed to meet their goals in its annual World’s Best Workforce report to the Legislature, despite requirements in law to do so. We recommend that MDE annually monitor school districts’ and charter schools’ progress toward their World’s Best Workforce goals—including closing the achievement gap—and report the results to the Legislature, as required by statutes.

### **MDE has not taken a sufficiently active role in improvement planning when school districts do not meet their Achievement and Integration goals.**

The Achievement and Integration program provides state funding to participating school districts, which must develop a three-year plan to increase integration and close their achievement gaps. School districts are required to participate if (1) their districtwide proportions of “protected students” (students who do not identify as non-Hispanic white) greatly exceed the proportions of protected students in a neighboring district, or (2) particular schools within the district have significantly more protected students than other district schools. Other districts may participate on a voluntary basis.

At the conclusion of a three-year plan cycle, MDE determines whether school districts have met the goals in their Achievement and Integration plans. Contrary to what statutes require, MDE does not develop “improvement plans” for districts that have not met their goals. We recommend that the Legislature shift the primary responsibility for improvement planning to the districts. However, we also think that MDE should take a more active role in helping school districts develop their Achievement and Integration improvement plans.

**MDE lacks a strategic plan specific to American Indian education.**

Minnesota statutes require MDE to develop a strategic plan for American Indian education. This plan must include five goals, one of which is to close the achievement gap between American Indian students and “their more advantaged peers.” MDE has engaged in some strategic planning activities and has included broad goals for American Indian education in its department-wide strategic plan. However, MDE has not developed a strategic plan that addresses the unique circumstances surrounding American Indian education. We recommend that MDE develop a strategic plan with goals specific to American Indian education.

**The Regional Centers of Excellence provide useful support for schools.**

The Regional Centers of Excellence have successfully helped some schools address their achievement gaps. Minnesota’s six regional centers are operated by regional service organizations and are staffed by nonstate employees who provide ongoing support tailored to individual schools. To be eligible to work with the regional centers, a school must be identified by MDE as being among the lowest-performing schools with respect to factors such as graduation rates and student performance on standardized math and reading tests.

While the regional centers are not part of MDE, the department supports them in various ways, as required by statutes. The school district superintendents and charter school directors we surveyed shared many positive comments about the regional centers and the support they provide. We recommend that the Legislature consider expanding school district access to the regional centers.

**Summary of Agency Response**

*In a letter dated March 2, 2022, Minnesota Department of Education Commissioner Heather Mueller wrote that she “appreciates the time and effort that was put into the review” of the World’s Best Workforce, Achievement and Integration for Minnesota, American Indian education, and Regional Centers of Excellence programs. She noted that the department “has a responsibility to address the systemic structures, processes, and barriers that have resulted in persistent achievement gaps” and commented that the report does not encompass the full extent of MDE’s work supporting public schools in addressing their achievement gaps. The commissioner said she believes “the report is missing key context” about program funding and the constraints on the department’s ability to reallocate funding to specific programs. She noted that the department disagrees with OLA’s interpretation of state law regarding the requirements of (1) MDE’s World’s Best Workforce review of school districts and (2) the strategic plan for American Indian education. The commissioner thanked OLA for its acknowledgement of the department’s “leadership of the Regional Centers of Excellence (RCE) in partnership with the Minnesota Service Cooperatives.” She stated that the report shows that MDE is most helpful to school districts and charter schools when the department is “able to live in the areas of leadership, partnership, and support, and not solely in the areas of accountability and compliance,” and that the department hopes the review of these programs “will help MDE better serve Minnesota’s public schools, our students and their families.”*



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