



Rochester Post Bulletin: Rashad Turner: Post-COVID education cannot return to 'normal'

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When the United States comes out of the COVID-19 pandemic, most people hope that our lives will return to normal. For the sake of Minnesota children, I don't hope that our lives return to normal. In "normal" Minnesota, seven-in-ten Black fourth-grade students cannot read at a fourth-grade reading level. One-in-four American Indian eighth-graders cannot do math at an eighth-grade level.

Minnesota has some of the worst education gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the nation. The gaps persist across all 87 Minnesota counties. The issues are systemic. The gaps have become part of the status quo.

Even worse, these gaps were measured pre-pandemic.

Pandemic schooling has wreaked havoc on Minnesota's public education system. Hybrid and distanced learning are contributing to unprecedented learning loss among our most vulnerable students. A December report from McKinsey & Co. shows that school shutdowns are compounding racial disparities in learning and achievement. The report estimates that students of color could be more than 12 months behind by the 2021-2022 school year compared with four to eight months for white students in key subjects like reading and math. In Minnesota, Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) reported in November that nearly 40% of their high school students had failing grades. Over 75% of SPPS students are students of color.

Our normal lives, involving this normal public school system, need to change. Minnesotans cannot continue to send their children to compulsory, failing institutions.

The Page Amendment, a proposed amendment to the Minnesota state constitution, would provide all Minnesota children with a civil right to quality public education. The amendment targets the system, which is breeding a status quo where children, especially students of color and low-income white children, are not properly educated to live up to their fullest potentials.

The amendment is specifically targeted at the current education provision, which was written in 1857. The current language states that our public schools are to be "uniform" and provide an "adequate" education. Adequate. That's it.

Would you hire an adequate doctor? An adequate accountant? Electrician? Absolutely not. So, why is it that Minnesotans pay billions of dollars per year to a system that is delivering an adequate or worse education to their children? The system is not churning out a return on our investment. And the biggest loss isn't even the money. It's the children.



The amendment both establishes a civil right and injects “quality” into the constitution. Education becomes a paramount duty of the state; a state that has been aware of the education gaps for years, though has never made a decisive action to make a change. The responsibility will then fall on legislators to work with families, children, and communities to find meaningful solutions to addressing our education gaps.

People like to say that education is the great equalizer. This is only true if that education is accessible and more than adequate. A quality education leads to a quality life. The Page Amendment can put the power in the hands of families and students, the power to set the education standard in our state so that ten-in-ten Black fourth-graders can read at a fourth-grade reading level. Heck, maybe even a sixth-, eighth-, or tenth-grade reading level. The amendment can make this possible.

Rashad Turner is the president & executive director of the Minnesota Parent Union, which leads grassroots coalition building for Our Children MN, an organization working to inform Minnesotans of our state’s education gaps and to build support to pass the Page Amendment.