

Community Voices for Equity and Excellence

Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC)
and the Center for Education Organizing



ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS



Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC) is a member-led nonprofit that builds power in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods through grassroots community organizing. Under the leadership of a diverse board of directors elected from our membership, NOC has run high profile campaigns aimed at improving public education, preventing foreclosures, and creating a more fair economy for all Minnesotans. NOC staff and volunteers have knocked on tens of thousands of doors on topics ranging from housing to tornado-recovery resources, and in the process built a reputation as a powerful base-building organization that engages and empowers Minnesotans whose voices are typically marginalized. NOC is proud to work in coalition with all organizations who share our vision of racial and economic justice, including the Communities for Excellent Public Schools coalition, Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, and the North High Community Coalition.

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The Center for Education Organizing (CEO) at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform supports and amplifies local and national demands for educational justice in underserved communities. The CEO integrates the expertise of a university-based research center, years of on-the-ground experience supporting education organizing, and our longstanding reputation as a seasoned convener of diverse education stakeholders. CEO staff provide research, policy analysis, and training to support individual groups and national networks to meaningfully engage in education reform. The CEO also facilitates alliance building among education organizing groups, and between those groups and other stakeholders such as civil rights and advocacy organizations, teachers unions, academics, and education researchers.

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The dues-paying members of NOC

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NOC wants to especially thank the more than 400 parents who took the time to fill out a long survey and share their views, and the dozens of NOC volunteers who did the hard work of contacting those parents.

We also want to thank the teachers from the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers and the St. Paul Federation of Teachers, who gave us valuable feedback on the survey, and participated alongside NOC volunteers in NOC doorknocks and community discussions.

We also want to warmly thank all of the parents and community leaders who participated in the series of neighborhood discussions we've led this Fall. We hope you keep coming and stay involved.

Finally, a huge thank you from everyone at NOC to our research partners at Annenberg for their insightful, thorough, and patient work throughout the process. We couldn't have done this without them.

INTRODUCTION

*NOC's vision:
excellent public
schools for every
child in every
neighborhood*



**Victoria Balko,
NOC Education
Committee Chair**

In April 2010, thousands of parents in low-income Twin Cities neighborhoods received letters notifying them that their schools were failing and would be “turned around” under the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program. These letters informed parents that their school leaders would be making a decision within four to six weeks about which of the four federal Department of Education turnaround strategies they would impose on the schools. These changes were all dramatic, and oriented toward changing the administrative structure at the schools. Schools could be closed, turned into a charter school, the staff could be fired. In each case, the principal would be fired, whether that made sense in the context of a particular school or not. Parents were invited to a meeting to learn about which option the school was choosing. These meetings were not opportunities for parents to have an influence on the decision – they were strictly information sessions for parents to learn what would happen to their schools.

Unfortunately, this experience for parents was consistent with their experiences of the public schools more generally. While parents are often invited to meetings and conferences to “be informed” about their children’s education, the school system often creates a feeling of powerlessness. In this case, that powerlessness reached a boiling point that prompted action. Out of that sense of frustration, the NOC education committee was born. Our first public meeting about school turnarounds attracted 70 teachers and parents – more than had attended most of the school turnaround information sessions. This meeting proved that our parents and teachers care about our schools, and are willing to show up when they think their voices will be heard.

As our local work began, NOC was invited to join the national Communities for Excellent Public Schools campaign, which included 35 similar grassroots organizing groups concerned about school turnarounds. Our initial work focused on changes to federal policy, and we met with some success: the Federal Department of Education introduced new community engagement guidelines that gave states and districts more latitude (though not a requirement) to include parents in decision-making. Quickly, though, we realized that changing federal policy was only the beginning on the path toward our vision of excellent, equitable public schools.

In Fall 2010, the Minneapolis Public Schools announced plans to close North High School – a continuation of a trend of Northside school closures and a symbolic affront to parents and community members who had been fighting for quality public education on the Northside. NOC members joined with countless other groups and individual activists and formed the North High Community Coalition to push back against this closure and save the school. Together, we packed board meetings, organized our own meetings, knocked on hundreds of doors and made thousands of phone calls to build the grassroots public support necessary to overturn the decision. Not only will North High remain open, but additional resources are being invested in the school to create new programs that will boost student achievement.

Still, with struggling feeder schools and a community struggling with the unique challenges of poverty, schools like North High and many others in Minneapolis and St. Paul face an uphill battle to produce the kind of excellence our children deserve. Having secured North High’s future, at least for the time being, NOC’s education committee determined that our work had only just begun, and began considering next steps. We identified a vision of excellent public schools for every child in every neighborhood, and committed ourselves to eliminating the racial equity gap in our school system. In light of the extensive challenges our schools face, the problem was deciding where to start: how do you choose an issue when the challenges in our classrooms are so deeply interconnected? Where can we have the greatest impact?

This survey, designed in partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, is an attempt to answer those questions, and to provide direction for the kind of sustained, grassroots community campaign we believe our schools need and deserve. We hear over and over again that parents in low-income and minority communities feel ignored by their school system. This survey is one tool for elevating our community voices to make sure our schools are inclusive of the diverse voices in our neighborhoods. We asked questions about a wide range of topics including instruction, curriculum, support services, school safety, communication, transportation, and many others. The surveys took close to twenty minutes to complete at the door or by phone, so the 400 surveys gathered represent hundreds of hours of volunteer and staff time listening and recording the answers of parents in our community.

Following the surveys, NOC hosted a series of neighborhood discussions to ask deeper questions about the responses that had emerged as priority issues. The discussions, which took place in North Minneapolis, South Minneapolis, the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul, and St. Paul's East Side were attended by over 150 parents, teachers, and concerned community members, and provided additional insight into the priorities and concerns of our community. Besides sharing their insights, the parents and teachers who attended brought real strength to NOC's work with their commitments to working together to tackle these issues. NOC is building a powerful community of grassroots leaders ready to work toward the solutions identified in this report.

The report that follows presents a way forward. Readers looking for a trendy “magic bullet” for school transformation are likely to be disappointed. In fact, many of the common “magic bullets” proposed by corporate-funded reform groups are challenged by these results. Instead, we find an interconnected set of issues that all provide opportunities for transformative, sustained action that we believe are prerequisites to the kind of public school system parents expect.

Here's what we learned:

- Parents have significant concerns about school discipline and school safety. More than one third of parents report their child has been the victim of bullying, and many parents – particularly parents of color – believe that schools discipline children unfairly.
- Parents lack a voice in their schools. While parents feel invited to meetings where they can “be informed”, most parents do not feel their input can actually impact decision-making in their schools and districts.
- Parents rate their teachers very highly, but want more time and attention from their teachers and from their schools. Parents feel large class sizes and inflexible schedules often leave students in the classroom with inadequate individualized attention, and limit the quantity and quality of teacher/parent communication.



These aren't quick fix solutions, but they do point the way to sustained investments and improvements we could make in our schools to foster quality communication, real community engagement, and safe schools for everyone. While there's no magic bullet for closing the achievement gap, addressing these issues would be an incredible start.

We look forward to working together to take these tough issues head on, and build toward a bold, positive vision of equity and achievement.

NOC, December 2011

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE TWIN CITIES

ENROLLMENT TRENDS IN THE TWIN CITIES

ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE TWIN CITIES

MINNESOTA NAEP ACHIEVEMENT—2009

837,640 students were enrolled in Minnesota's K-12 public schools during the 2010-11 school year (including 72,195 students enrolled in public schools in Twin Cities). More than a quarter of Minnesota's Students of Color attended school in the Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools. Specifically, in 2010-11, approximately 26% of the state's Asian students, 29% of the state's African American students, and 20% of the state's Hispanic students attended school in the Twin Cities (Minnesota Dept of Education). Although Minnesota students traditionally perform well on standardized tests in comparison to the rest of the nation, there is a large and persistent achievement gap between Students of Color and White students.

Because Minneapolis Public School District and the St. Paul Public School District are the two largest districts serving NOC parents, we focus our analysis of student achievement and attainment on them. The following sections give some basic information about these two large urban school districts including enrollment trends, test scores and graduation rates.

Both Minneapolis (MPS) and St. Paul Public Schools (SPPS) are racially mixed, with no single race representing the majority of children. Low-income students make up more than half of the children in each public school district (measured by whether the students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program in school). 36% of St. Paul students and 22% of Minneapolis students are of limited English proficiency.

In both MPS and SPPS, student enrollment has decreased over the last ten years. Student enrollment in all grades (P-12) in MPS declined by 29% in 10 years, from 48,156 students in the fall of 2001 to 34,336 students in the fall of 2010. Proportionally, the largest decreases were in the enrollment of Asian students (declining by 60%) and African American students (declining by 40%). Hispanic student enrollment increased by 17% during the last 10 years. In SPPS, enrollment declined by 14% in 10 years, from 44,201 students in the fall of 2001 to 37,859 students in the fall of 2010. Proportionally, the largest decrease was White student enrollment, which declined by nearly 35%. Hispanic student enrollment in SPPS increased by 13% during the last 10 years. These declining enrollments are part of the justification for school closures in the Twin Cities. But enrollment alone is not the full picture – there is a significant achievement gap in the Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools.

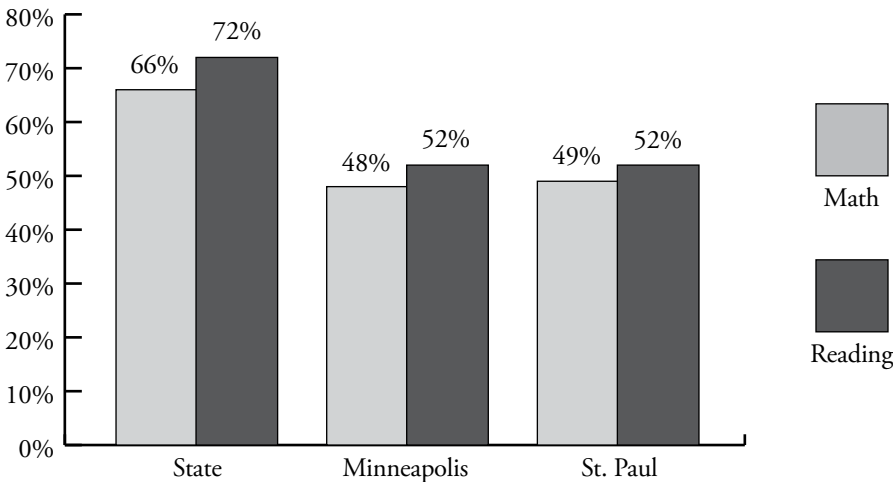
There are multiple measures of academic attainment and achievement, but all point to the same conclusions – while as a whole Minnesota does reasonably well compared to other states in the nation, Minnesota has one of the worst achievement gaps between Students of Color and White students in the nation and academic achievement in the Twin Cities is lower than the rest of Minnesota. Here we share current student attainment and achievement patterns in Minneapolis and St. Paul as measured by graduation rates, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA-II).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a test that is given to a sample of students across the country. It is used as a common yardstick across states. The state of Minnesota has historically scored well above the national average on the NAEP. For example, in 2011 Minnesota ranked 6th compared to other states on eighth grade NAEP reading scores, and 2nd on eighth grade NAEP math scores. Minnesota ranks 16th in the nation on the fourth grade NAEP reading scores, and 3rd in the nation on the fourth grade NAEP math scores.

Despite these impressive scores, there is a large achievement gap between African American and White students on the NAEP, and this difference is more pronounced in Minnesota than at the national level. For example, on the eighth grade NAEP reading test, the Minnesota average for African American students was 28 points lower than the average for White students (compared to a nation-wide gap of 25 points). On the eighth grade NAEP math test, the Minnesota average for African American students was 35 points lower than the average for White students (compared to a nation-wide gap of 31 points).

Public school students in Minnesota take the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment—Series II (MCA-II), a standardized test that measures academic achievement. On average, 72% of Minnesota students are proficient in reading and 66% are proficient in math. Both Minneapolis Public Schools and St. Paul Public Schools have lower percentages of “proficient” students in reading and math than the statewide average.

Minnesota also measures, the percentage of students who are both low-scoring on the MCA-II and whose trajectory predicts that they are unlikely to achieve proficiency on the MCA-II. The percentage of African American and Hispanic students in this category is higher in both MPS and SPSS than the statewide average.



In Minnesota, the 4-year graduation rate is measured by the percentage of ninth grade students who graduate after four years of school (accounting for students who transfer in and out of the class). In 2010 the 4-year graduation rates for students from both MPS and SPPS were substantially lower (49% and 63% respectively) than the statewide average of 76%.

Disparities in academic outcomes are even more evident when the 4-year graduation rate is disaggregated by race/ethnicity. Figures 2 and 3 show that the 4-year graduation rates for American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students in MPS and SPPS are all lower than statewide averages, (except Black students in SPPS, who graduate at a higher rate than the rest of the state).

**MCA-II,
THE MINNESOTA STATE
ACCOUNTABILITY
ASSESSMENT**

**FIGURE 1. STUDENTS
PROFICIENT ON MCA-II.**

*(Source: Minnesota Department
of Education)*

**FOUR YEAR
GRADUATION RATE**

FIGURE 2. FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, FOR THE MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT AND THE STATE OF MINNESOTA IN 2010

(Source: Minnesota Department of Education)

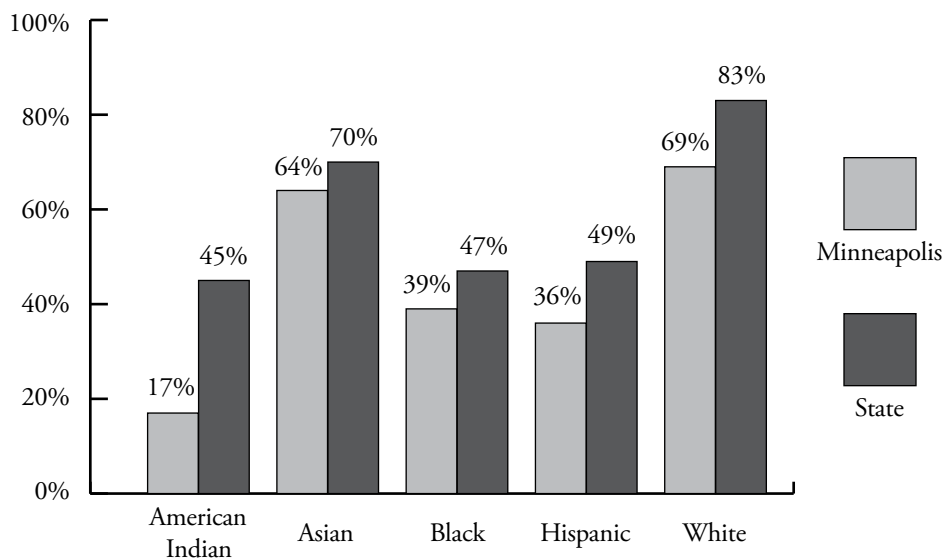
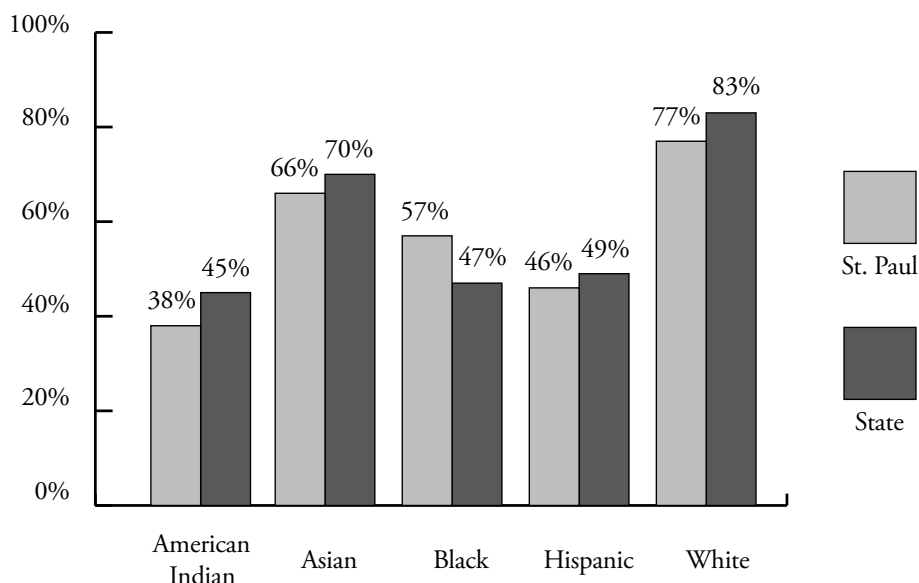


FIGURE 3 FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, FOR THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT AND THE STATE OF MINNESOTA IN 2010

(Source: Minnesota Department of Education)



When viewed all together- the four-year graduation rates, NAEP and MCA-II scores document an achievement gap between White students and Students of Color in Minnesota. There is ample research that demonstrates that achievement gaps are often linked to gaps in educational opportunities.¹ Put simply, the achievement gap should be understood not as evidence that individual students are failing but rather as evidence that entire groups of students are systemically under-served by the existing public education system.

Minnesota Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC) surveyed parents in Minneapolis and St. Paul to collect their knowledge and opinions about their local schools in June and July of 2011. The main goal of this survey was to synthesize the ideas of parents who are often excluded from the school reform process- low-income parents and Parents of Color.

NOC staff worked with researchers from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) to develop the parent survey, and analyze the data. The process for developing the survey was iterative and collaborative. NOC members decided on the topics to be covered and provided feedback on protocol drafts and refined question wording. The final protocol included 21 questions that asked about parents' communication and relationships with schools, the quality of their children's educational experience, school safety and bullying, and services and resources that would improve educational quality.

NOC members and staff collected surveys by door-knocking in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding schools with a high density of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, phone-calling community residents who had previously identified education as a key issue during door-to-door canvassing (especially as tornado recovery efforts made door-knocking impossible), sending the survey online to listservs and posting it on social media sites, and administering surveys at community festivals and events (which had Hmong, Spanish and Somali interpreters present to assist with completion).

These efforts were successful – altogether NOC members and staff collected 403 surveys. After cleaning the data, the final analysis is based on a sample of 355 completed surveys. 68% of the final survey respondents are Parents of Color and 27% are White Parents (with 5% unknown). For the purpose of demographic analysis we created two groups of parents: Parents of Color (parents of African American, African, Latino, Asian American and Mixed Race children)² and White Parents. The final sample reflects the enrollment of local school districts: in Minneapolis Public Schools 68% of enrolled students are Students of Color and 32% of enrolled students are White Students, and in St. Paul Public Schools 76% of enrolled students are Students of Color and 24% of enrolled students are White Students.

NOC members were responsible for inputting all of the survey data into the Survey Monkey website. Annenberg Institute staff then downloaded and cleaned the survey data. Some basic facts about the survey sample include:

- Survey respondents represent a total of 355 parents, with approximately 720 school-aged children, who attend about 100 different Minnesota schools.
- 73% of parents surveyed had at least one child in elementary school; 24% had at least one child in middle school; and 31% had at least one child in high school.
- 38% of the parents in the sample have children in Minneapolis Public Schools, 23% in St. Paul Public Schools, 21% in other Minnesota public school districts, 10% in charter schools and 8% in private schools.³

THE NOC RESEARCH PROCESS



FINDING 1

MINNESOTA PARENTS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT BULLYING, DISCRIMINATION, AND STUDENTS FEELING SAFE AT SCHOOL.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

*Quotes from NOC
Survey Respondents:*

*“...discrimination is real inside
the school building... Students
are treated differently, are
disciplined differently.”*

WHAT PARENTS SAY

*“[The] school responds to
bullying but not in a way I
find adequate.”*

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS REPORTING THAT THEIR CHILD HAS BEEN BULLIED IN SCHOOL

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011)

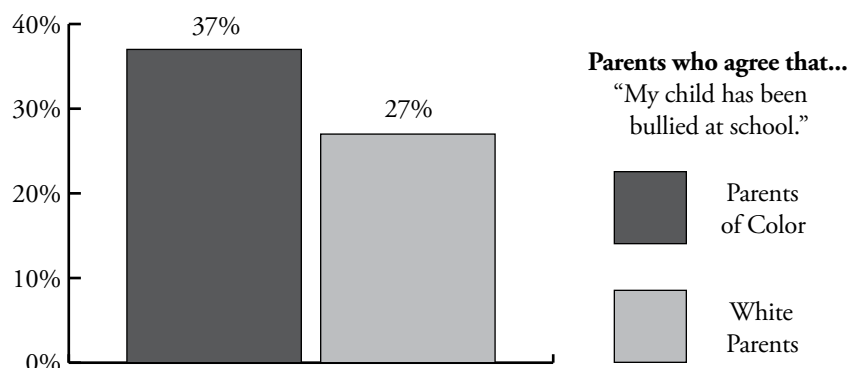
Safety and discipline are both important aspects of school climate that affect a student's ability to succeed in school. The way that schools handle bullying and other discipline problems can impact school climate and student academic success—particularly disciplinary measures that involve suspension or expulsion. Suspension is one predictor of whether a student will drop out of school. Suspension disrupts learning time by taking the students out of the classroom, so they often fall behind and risk failing. Research shows that students of color are disproportionately suspended, which heightens their risk for the negative consequences of suspension.⁴

According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 13% of students were teased, harassed, or excluded by peers weekly or more frequently.⁵ They also report that students who were involved in bullying (either as a bully, a victim, or both) were more likely to dislike school, have less trust in their teachers and peers, and skip school. The MN DOE bullying report suggests formative disciplinary measures for bullies, like mediation and other relationship building interventions, rather than punitive measures, like suspension. But, Minnesota state policy relating to bullying is very general and leaves each district and school with significant control over bullying policies.⁶ As a result MPS and SPPS each have different discipline policies. Minneapolis has a wide-ranging policy that includes provisions for many different types of bullying, including bullying that happens out of school hours and off school grounds, like cyber bullying. St. Paul, on the other hand, does not have a policy specifically relating to bullying. Bullying is included in the harassment section of the St. Paul Public School District school board policy, though not by name.

NOC members wanted to know what Minnesota parents thought about school safety and discipline – both their children's experiences and the preventative policies at school. Overall, 82% of parents surveyed agreed that their child feels safe at school, while 10% of parents disagreed. Similarly, 83% of parents report that their child feels safe traveling to and from school.

The data are a bit different when parents are asked specifically about bullying.

- Overall, 34% of parents report that their child has been bullied at school. A higher percentage of Parents of Color (37%) reported bullying than White Parents (27%) as seen in Figure 5. All of these percentages are much higher than the results of the MN DOE survey cited earlier.
- 52% of the parents surveyed agreed that their child's school has fair and effective policies to prevent bullying while 22% disagreed and 26% had no opinion.



A series of questions focused on how equitably students are treated at school. We found that:

- 23% of Parents of Color report that not all students at their child's school are treated fairly, regardless of race or nationality, compared to 10% of White Parents.
- 26% of Parents of Color report that their child's school does not discipline students fairly, compared to 15% of White Parents.
- 35% of Parents of Color report that their child has experienced discrimination in school, compared to 12% of White Parents.

The high number of parents reporting bullying issues should be a wake up call for all of us. Children deserve to feel safe, and are unlikely to achieve their full potential in the classroom when they're distracted by fear. The findings on discrimination and fairness in school discipline are deeply interconnected with bullying. Students and parents need to trust school authority in order to report bullying and seek help in moments of real need. Widespread bullying and mistrust of authority merge to create a sense of hopelessness that works against our goals of student achievement. Our schools need to do better for our kids.

On a positive note, some parents in our discussion groups reported that their schools have excellent practices that could be adopted more widely. Parents particularly singled out Loring Elementary in Minneapolis as a school that proactively creates an explicit anti-bullying culture and includes social and emotional training curriculum as part of the everyday conduct of the school. We hope to see these efforts spread, and we hope to see more positive changes that create a more equal and safe playing field for our kids.

- Create a school culture that explicitly rejects bullying. Train kids early and often to understand and reject harassing behaviors.
- Incorporate the diverse cultures of our community into the curriculum. We applaud the Hmong Organizing Project's progress getting Hmong culture incorporated into St. Paul's curriculum, and hope to see this strategy expanded more broadly to include all of our students. Cultural understanding reduces bullying and discrimination.
- Include parents, teachers, and community leaders in shaping and implementing discipline policy. Create structures for school administrators, teachers, and parents to collaborate in assessing school discipline efforts and outcomes.
- Invest in counseling services to get at the root causes of behavioral issues and provide resources for bullies and bullying victims.
- Align discipline policy with academic achievement goals and require support and intervention – rather than punishment – for schools with disproportionately high suspension rates.⁷
- Reduce class sizes, to enhance teachers' capacity to address children's individual challenges.
- Partner with community cultural organizations to create additional learning opportunities for students that expand on the districts' offerings.

*"I transferred my children ...
because of problems
with bullying."*

NOC'S VISION

NEXT STEPS

FINDING 2

WHILE MANY MINNESOTA PARENTS FEEL ENCOURAGED TO PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL FUNCTIONS AND SUPPORT THEIR CHILD'S LEARNING, THEY DON'T FEEL THAT THEIR PARTICIPATION INFLUENCES SCHOOL DECISIONS OR DISTRICT POLICIES.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

"Parent engagement is the key to bridging the achievement gap."

As an organization committed to building the power of parents to get involved in the education of their own children and the quality of educational opportunities in Minnesota, NOC members wanted to get a better sense of the relationship between parents, schools and policy in their community.

Researchers describe a continuum of involving parents in schools- parent involvement means working with teachers and administrators to support your individual child's growth; parent engagement means getting involved in school wide efforts to improve school resources and learning opportunities; and parent organizing means joining together with other parents to collectively build the knowledge and power needed to shape school policies.⁸ The idea that parent involvement- attending parent-teacher conferences, or helping your child with homework- leads to increased student achievement, and better schools overall is well established.⁹ Similarly, more and more evidence shows that creating school-wide opportunities for parents to regularly engage in shaping learning opportunities, or increasing school capacity can lead to programs that result in higher student achievement and attainment.¹⁰ Parent organizing is also a powerful strategy for improving student achievement and schools. By increasing the power and knowledge of parents to get involved in developing and implementing education policies, parent organizing campaigns have led to increases in school funding, building new schools, greater access to college preparatory curriculum, innovate teacher retention strategies and more equitable education policies.¹¹

WHAT PARENTS SAY

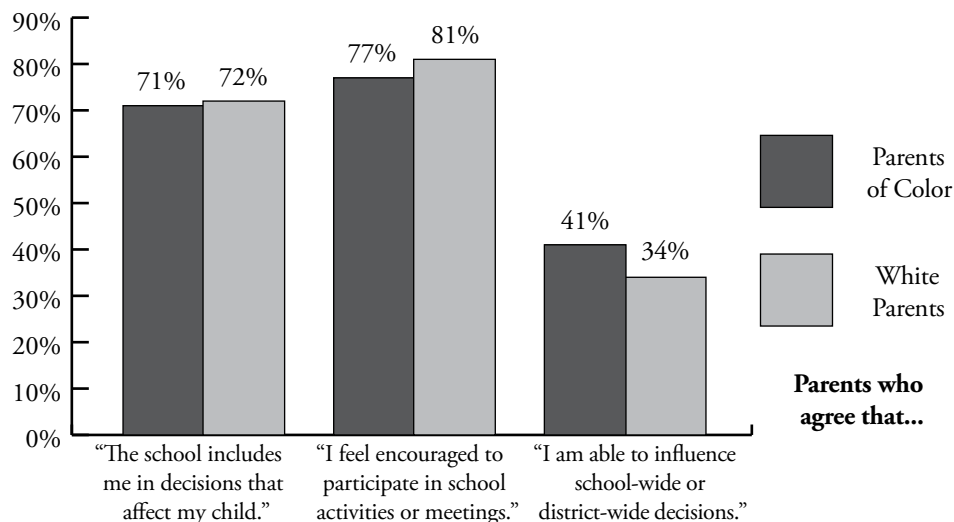
Surveyed Minnesota parents rate their schools highly in terms of parent involvement.

- 71% of parents agree that the school includes them in decisions about their children) and parent engagement
- 77% of parents feel encouraged to participate in school activities and meetings.

While parents feel included and encouraged to participate, they feel less positive about their ability to impact education policies. 39% of surveyed parents report being able to influence school-wide or district-wide decisions. Figure 5 breaks out these overall averages by demographic groups.

FIGURE 5. PARENT OPINIONS ABOUT THEIR ABILITY TO MAKE CHANGES IN THEIR CHILD'S SCHOOL

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011)



Parents were also asked about the frequency of communication with staff at their child's school and what types of communication they most prefer. White Parents have more communication with their children's school than Parents of Color. 86% of White Parents have had communication with someone from their child's school 4 or more times in the last year, compared to 66% of Parents of Color. The table below shows the breakdown of the frequency of parent contact.

Parents' Reports of Contact by School	Never	1-3 Times	4-6 Times	7-9 Times	10 or More Times
Parents of Color	7%	28%	17%	12%	37%
White Parents	3%	11%	27%	15%	44%

Surveyed parents report that the best ways to reach them are phone calls, email, sending a flyer home or arranging a parent-teacher conference. In general, Parents of Color were more likely to prefer more personal methods of communication (phone call, text message, home visits) than White Parents. When asked about what sorts of accommodations they would prefer to help increase their participation in school events, the options that were most appealing to parents were providing child care and holding the meeting at a convenient time. Parents also expressed that meetings and events should have better advertizing to increase their participation.

NOC is committed to improving parent engagement in and organizing around the school transformation process. Our education committee was formed in response to school closures- and it is an issue we are committed to working on in the future. We believe that parents should be involved not just in the education of their individual child but also in federal, state, local and school-level decision-making. We have already seen the impact of parent organizing on our local schools- North High is open and operating with additional resources. But we want more: we envision an education system in which parents are informed, involved and valued. We envision an education system in which parents work alongside students, teachers, administrators, school staff, and elected officials to create equitable high-quality education opportunities for all of Minnesota's children.

We also believe that parent involvement, parent engagement and parent organizing are not just transformation strategies for schools that are struggling; they are vital, ongoing components of any successful school. Today's reality, by contrast, is a school system that is alienating and difficult to navigate. Too often, we hear administrators shrug and bemoan the fact that "parents just don't care." As community organizers, we know how hard it can be to turn people out to a meeting, but we also take it as OUR failure when we don't hit our goals. We want to challenge the district to adopt that same point of view. If the district's communication strategies are missing large segments of parents, it's a failure of the district, and the district needs to adapt, and find strategies that will work. We've seen literally hundreds of bold new initiatives announced and scrapped as leaders come and go from our community schools. Without buy-in from community, no change will really take root and have the chance to succeed. The school needs the community at the table, and parents and teachers want to participate. NOC is committed to doing our part to make this happen, and we call on our school administrators to do the same.

FIGURE 6. FREQUENCY OF PARENT/SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011)

NOC'S VISION

"I do not attend most parents' activities because my input and interests are not solicited. When I have made suggestions before, I was treated like the 'angry, black mother.'"

NEXT STEPS

The path forward on parent engagement and school transformation:

NOC is part of the national Communities for Excellent Public Schools coalition. Together we are advocating for changes to the regulatory language of the federal School Improvement Grants Program. These changes include the following:

- Timely and meaningful notification of parents that their school has been designated or identified for transformation, and a school site meeting to inform parents of options;
- Local “School Transformation Teams” made up of parents, students, community members and school staff with the power to design and implement a reform plan with the support of state and district resources;
- A comprehensive, full-year process of assessment and planning so that reforms are tailored to the specific needs of the school;
- A requirement that ongoing parent and community engagement be part of the reform plan.

The path forward overall:

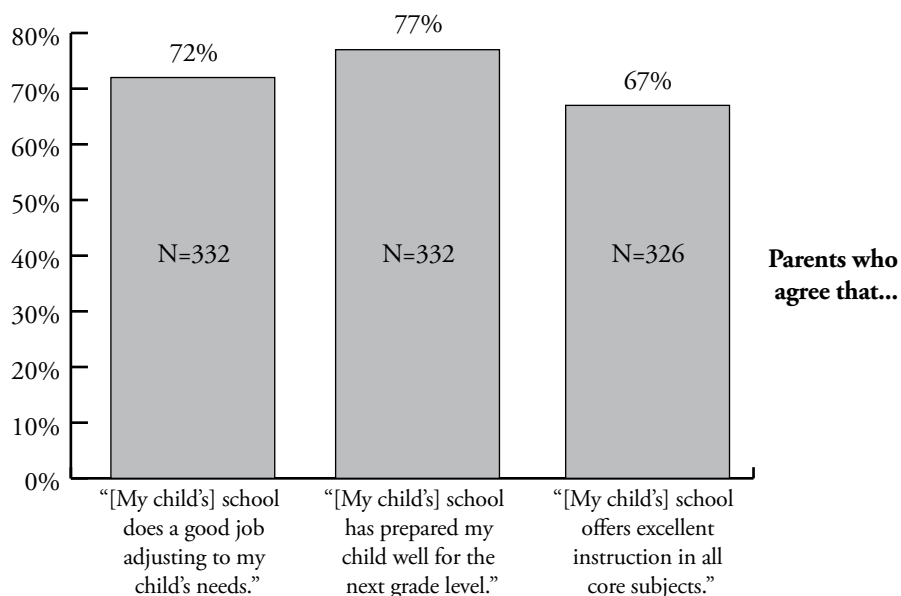
- Give parents, teachers, and community a meaningful seat at the table BEFORE decisions are made. Few people show up to meetings where the outcome is a foregone conclusion whether they attend or not.
- Invest in outreach. Increase the resources the district dedicates to parent contact, including time for teachers to contact their students’ families as part of their work days.
- Recruit and train culturally competent staff who can communicate effectively with the full diversity of students and parents in our community.
- Create multiple pathways for parent engagement. In diverse communities, there’s probably not one meeting or strategy that will be effective for everyone.
- Partner with community groups like NOC to create opportunities for parent and community engagement.
- Invest in innovative ideas like the St. Paul teacher home visit program, which meets people in their homes or in neutral locations for non-disciplinary conversations about student success.



THE MAJORITY OF MINNESOTA PARENTS SURVEYED BELIEVE THAT THEIR CHILDREN’S TEACHERS ARE PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY INSTRUCTION, BUT THAT THE EDUCATION SYSTEM STILL NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED. PARENTS BELIEVE THEIR CHILDREN WOULD BENEFIT FROM MORE TIME AND ATTENTION FROM THOSE TEACHERS.

Learning and instruction are the heart of the school system. Parents rely on skilled and engaged teachers to offer quality instruction to their children every day. While many factors impact a student’s ability to learn having a highly trained teacher in the classroom makes a big difference.¹² But being highly trained isn’t enough to ensure high quality instruction. Teaching is a complex profession, and teachers need a range of conditions in their classrooms and schools in order to offer their best to their students every day. Small class sizes are necessary, particularly in schools where significant numbers of students may need individualized attention or approaches to learning. Teachers need time to work with other teachers, to coordinate their lessons and share strategies for reaching students.¹³ Schools need embedded professional learning opportunities, so that all teachers—no matter how experienced or skilled—can continue to hone their practice over time. And districts must offer enough resources to schools that teachers have the tools they need to be effective in the classroom.¹⁴ Parents widely support their children’s schools and teachers—but schools and districts need to create the teaching—and learning—environments that bring out the best in both teachers and students. In addition, teachers need training, and support in reaching out to parents and learning from them, about what their children need and/or confront in their daily lives. That’s why many school districts offer to train and compensate teachers to conduct home visits.

Overall, surveyed parents feel positively about the education their children are receiving. 72% of surveyed parents feel that their child’s school does a good job adjusting to their children’s needs. 77% feel that their child’s school has prepared their child well for the next grade level and 67% report that their child’s school offers excellent instruction in all core subjects.



FINDING 3

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

WHAT PARENTS SAY

FIGURE 7. PARENT OPINIONS ABOUT EDUCATION QUALITY AT CHILD’S SCHOOL

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011)

As mentioned above, teachers are critically important to students. 94% of the parents surveyed expect their child’s teacher to be properly licensed. The majority of all surveyed parents (76%) prefer having an experienced to an inexperienced teacher for their child. When asked about the distribution of experienced teachers, Parents of Color (78%) are more likely than White Parents (68%) to think that the children who struggle the most deserve the most experienced teachers.

The NOC survey asked parents to give a letter grade on how well different groups of people at various levels of government (the parent, teacher, school, district, state, and federal government) were doing in their role. The chart below shows the average grade that parents gave to each of these groups. The grade most frequently given to parents, teachers, and schools was an A, while the most frequent grade given to the district, the state, and the federal government was a C. When all of the grades were averaged, there was a bit more variation – parents and teachers received a B+, schools received a B, districts received a B-, the state received a C+, and the federal government received a C.

FIGURE 8. AVERAGE PARENT EVALUATION OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011)

PARENT EVALUATION OF...	
PARENTS	B+
STUDENT'S TEACHERS	B+
STUDENT'S SCHOOL	B
SCHOOL DISTRICT	B-
STATE OF MINNESOTA	C+
FEDERAL GOVERNMENT	C

“Communication between parents and teachers needs to improve greatly especially at the high school level. Students are preparing for their future... and that commitment to children getting the best possible education should be of the utmost importance as we send them out into the world... Parents and teachers can work together to help in this process.”

Despite the fact that parents think that teachers are offering excellent instruction and preparation, there is still work to be done. The achievement data at the beginning of the report offers evidence that something needs to change and so do survey questions about college preparation. 98% of parents surveyed hope that their child goes on to college. However, only 50% of parents surveyed feel like the school is preparing this child well for college. Notably a higher percentage of White Parents (53%) than Parents of Color (43%) feel that the school is preparing their child well for college.

Some Minnesota parents are also concerned about class size. When parents were asked whether their children’s classes were too large, 43% of parents agreed, as seen on Figure 9 below.

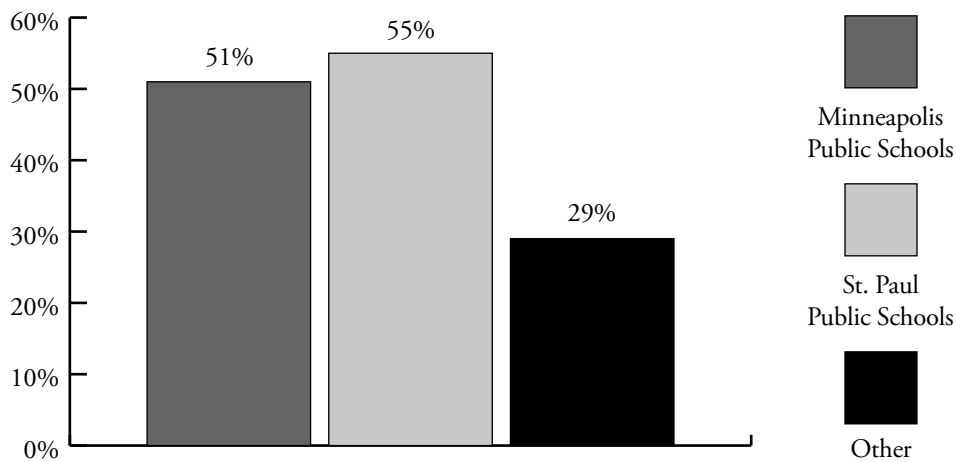


FIGURE 9: CLASS SIZE

PARENTS WHO AGREE THAT "CLASSES AT MY CHILD'S SCHOOL ARE TOO LARGE."

(Source: NOC Survey, 2011. N=326)

Let's state this as clearly as we can: most parents believe their children's teachers are excellent. These results run strongly contrary to the teacher-bashing we've seen in a lot of school reform rhetoric lately. The fact is, in a broad sample of mostly low-income parents in Minneapolis and St. Paul, teachers earn excellent grades. What emerges from the survey, then, is a picture of excellent teachers overwhelmed by large class sizes and too little time to plan, collaborate, and communicate. Parents want class sizes to be small enough for these excellent teachers to really work with their students and give them the attention they deserve. Parents want to be able to communicate with teachers about their student, which means that teachers must have both time to talk with parents, and a small enough class that they really get to know their students well enough to make those conversations meaningful.

NOC'S VISION

"Please...help [our teachers] become educators, not disciplinarians, by lowering classroom size."

The path forward:

- Reduce class size across the board, focusing particular investment on the schools with the most pressing achievement concerns.
- Use the occasion of hiring additional teachers for these smaller class sizes to recruit diverse, culturally competent staff.
- Create opportunities for collaboration and mentorship between teachers, so that newer teachers can learn from experienced teachers.
- Invest in wraparound services and staff to support childrens' nutritional, physical, social, and emotional needs so that teachers can focus on teaching.
- Build time into the day for teachers to contact parents as part of their work.
- Collaborate with community organizations like NOC to advocate more aggressively for stronger funding for our schools.
- Leave flexible instructional time in the school day for teachers to meet the needs of their particular classroom.

NEXT STEPS

CONCLUSION

We see a deep disconnect between the aspirations parents have for their kids and the outcomes. We are appalled by the gap in outcomes between white students and students of color. We do not want to let another class of kindergarteners hurtle towards the uncertain future offered by schools' current performance. Urgent action is needed. We have identified specific problems, and outlined tangible steps schools and districts can take with us that would transform our public schools.

We are not, however, making an appeal for more top-down change. Rather, we are inviting school administrators to participate with us in transforming our public school system. Parents, teachers, and community leaders – the public – must lead the way if we are going to transform these public institutions. We will be there, invited or not, to do the work of sustainable school reform.

Many of the paths forward we've described could be done tomorrow, at the level of individual schools, and we want to help make them happen. NOC members have already been doing the work of knocking on doors, making phone calls, and turning parents out to meetings. NOC members volunteer to tutor and mentor kids at schools in our neighborhoods. NOC members are already building parent organizations at individual schools. NOC members are working to train other parents to get more involved. NOC members serve on school committees and advisory groups in their neighborhoods. We've shown our ability, when we disagree with a decision, to turn people out in protest and build public pressure. We've also shown we can support schools where they're taking initiatives that show promise, and align with our vision for equity and excellence.

We're painfully aware that many of the paths forward we've described cost money. We are calling on districts to get creative about putting as much money as possible actually into the classroom, to reduce class sizes and make the best use possible of the excellent teachers already in our schools. We are also committing NOC to leading the fight for full funding for Minnesota schools, and creating a political climate in which cuts and "shifts" in school funding become political non-starters in our state. Already, we have earned local and national press in our campaign to challenge anti-revenue organizations and the corporations that sponsor them, and we have presented our demands for revenue directly to the banks at the center of political and economic power in our state. We are calling on all of our allies: school officials, elected leaders, community groups, churches, unions, and individuals to join the fight for full funding for our schools, including funding specifically designated to invest in ending the equity gap.

Our vision is clear: excellent public schools for every child in every neighborhood. We will settle for nothing less.



APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What is your zip code?
2. How many school aged children are in your family?
3. What are the names of the schools that your children currently attend? Please be sure and write in if the school is a preschool, elementary school, middle school, high school or college.
4. What grade is each child in?

For questions 5-40, the respondent was asked to respond about their OLDEST child.

5. What is your child's race/ethnicity?
 - African American
 - African
 - Asian American
 - Latino
 - Native American
 - White
 - Other (please specify)

For questions 6-12 Parents were asked to respond with one of the following:

1 – Disagree 2 – No Opinion 3 – Agree

How much do you agree with the following statements about the quality of instruction at your child's school?

6. The school does a good job adjusting to my child's needs.
7. The school has prepared my child well for the next grade level.
8. The school is preparing my child well for college.
9. The school offers excellent instruction in all core subjects.
10. My child is given the chance to take subjects other than reading, writing, math, science and social studies.
11. Classes at my child's school are too large.
12. Which of the following services would improve student achievement at your child's school? (Parents could select as many choices as applied)
 - A free health clinic at the school
 - Expanded family and student counseling at school
 - After-school enrichment classes like art, science or sports
 - Free academic tutoring for students

13. Do you hope your child goes on to college?

1 – Yes 2 – No 3 – Don't Know

14. Which of the following three sentences BEST describes your opinion. Please choose only one.

- It is important that my child attend a good school

located in my neighborhood

- It does not matter where my child's school is located as long as it is a good school
- It is important that my child attend a school that is BOTH good AND diverse even if he or she has to travel outside our neighborhood.

15. How does your child travel to school most of the time?

- Walking
- Biking
- School Bus
- Public Bus
- My Car
- Carpool

For questions 16-20 Parents were asked to respond with one of the following:

1 – Disagree 2 – No Opinion 3 – Agree

16. The school helps me understand what I can do at home to support my child's learning.
17. The school includes me in decisions that affect my child.
18. I feel encouraged to participate in school activities or meetings.
19. The school provides accommodations (child care, flexible schedules) so that I can participate in school activities or meetings.
20. I am able to influence school-wide or district-wide decisions.
21. Which of the following would help increase your participation in events or meetings at your child's school? Check all that apply.
 - Focus on interesting topics
 - Hold them at convenient location
 - Hold them at a convenient time
 - Advertise them better
 - Provide childcare
 - Provide translation
 - Other (please specify)

22. What are the languages you speak fluently?

23. Is there someone at your child's school that can speak to you in one of the languages you are fluent in?

1 – Yes 2 – No

24. In the last year, how many times have you communicated with someone from your child's school about your child specifically? (Note: This does not include recorded messages from the school)

- Never
- 1 to 3 times
- 4 to 6 times
- 7 to 9 times
- 10 or more times

For Questions 25-31, Parents were asked to respond with one of the following:

1 – Yes 2 – No

We are trying to understand the best ways for schools to communicate with parents. Would you like a teacher or staff person from your child's school to...

- 25. Send a flyer home in your child's backpack
- 26. Call you on the phone
- 27. Send you a text message
- 28. E-mail you
- 29. Invite you to a Parent-teacher conference
- 30. Visit you at home
- 31. Other (please specify)

For questions 32-43, Parents were asked to respond with one of the following:

1 – Disagree 2 – No Opinion 3 – Agree

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- 32. My child has experienced discrimination at school.
- 33. My child gets to learn about other cultures at school.
- 34. All students at my child's school are treated fairly, regardless of race or nationality.
- 35. My child's school disciplines students fairly.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about safety at your child's school?

- 36. My child feels safe at school.
- 37. My child feels safe traveling to and from school.
- 38. My child has been bullied at school.
- 39. My child's school has fair and effective policies to prevent bullying.
- 40. My child's school responds to my concerns about bullying and safety.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about teachers?

- 41. I expect my child's teacher to be properly licensed.
- 42. I prefer experienced to inexperienced teachers for my child.
- 43. I believe the most struggling students deserve the most experienced teachers.

44. What is the highest level of education you completed?

- No formal schooling
- Elementary or Middle School
- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College/Technical School
- 2-year College/Technical degree
- 4-year College degree
- Graduate Degree

For questions 32-43, Parents were asked to respond with one of the following:

A B C D F

How well do you think each of the following is doing in educating our students? Please give each of the following a letter grade:

- 45. You
- 46. Your child's teachers
- 47. Your child's school
- 48. Your child's school district
- 49. The State of Minnesota
- 50. The Federal Government
- 51. Is there anything else you would like us to know about?

52. Can you please give us your contact information. (This is voluntary, please feel free to skip if you would rather it be confidential)

- Name
- Address
- City/Town
- State
- Zip
- Email Address
- Phone Number

53. What kind of phone number did you provide?

- Cell
- Home
- Work

54. Is it ok to send texts to this number?

Yes No

APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND DATA

Child's Race		
African American/African	183	54%
Latino	19	6%
White	95	28%
Other	39	12%

Child's School		
Minneapolis Public Schools	135	38%
St. Paul Public Schools	82	23%
Other Public School District	73	21%
Charter School	37	10%
Private School	28	8%

Child's Grade Level		
Pre-K/ Kindergarten	30	9%
Grades 1-5	152	44%
Grades 6-8	68	19.6%
Grades 9-12	83	24%

Parent's Education Level		
Less than High School	23	7%
High School Graduate	40	12%
Some 2- or 4- year College/Technical School	79	24%
2-year College/Technical Degree	58	18%
4-year College Degree	67	20%
Graduate Degree	64	19%

END NOTES

1. Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
2. In the survey we asked parents to identify the race/ethnicity of their children, not their own race. So, the term Parents of Color means parents of Children of Color we do not know the race/ethnicity of the parent specifically. Note: parents of African American children make up the majority of this category. The exact breakdown by each racial/ethnic group in this category is: 51% African American/African, 5% Latino, 4% Asian American, 4% Native American, and 4% Mixed Race.
3. Our analyses include parents in all of these categories, while the majority of parents are from MPS and SPPS we want to be clear that these findings come from parents across the Twin Cities, and have relevance beyond the two school districts.
4. Losen, D.J. (2011). *Discipline policies, successful schools, and racial justice*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.
5. Minnesota Department of Education, (2010). *Bullying in Minnesota schools: An analysis of the Minnesota student survey, 2010 brief: School factors*
6. Minnesota General Laws, Statute 121A.0695: School Board Policy; Prohibiting Intimidation and Bullying.
7. NOC supports the recommendations presented in the National Education Policy Center report “Discipline Policies, Successful Schools, and Racial Justice” by Daniel J. Losen, some of which are presented or paraphrased here.
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9. Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
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14. Futernick, K. (2010). *Incompetent Teachers or Dysfunctional Systems? Reframing the Debate on Teacher Quality and Accountability*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd, Teachers Network.



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