



**Ciresi
Walburn**
Foundation for Children



The Truth About Our Failing Schools

RECLAIMING THE MINNESOTA MIRACLE



A Report From
The Ciresi Walburn Foundation For Children 20th Anniversary Roundtable

“

**All children can learn.
All children are our children.
It's time to demand
positive results!**

-Michael V. Ciresi, Roundtable Opening Comments

”

Background

The Ciresi Walburn Foundation for Children celebrated its 20th anniversary by convening a Roundtable Discussion on November 1, 2018 with other Minnesota foundations and thought leaders to discuss the urgent issue of transforming Minnesota schools to close the opportunity and achievement gaps for children of color. The premise was this: *Minnesota should lead the nation in providing equitable educational opportunities for children of color. As it stands now, however, our state has the worst graduation rates for children of color and gaping disparities in reading and math scores.* At the Roundtable, over thirty participants engaged in a robust discussion about the current situation, national and local failures and successes, and opportunities to spark action. This report is grounded in that conversation and lays out a direction that the Foundation will use to inform its future.

The loud and clear message?

There is an urgent need for massive systems change at state and local levels. It is time for another Minnesota Miracle. It is time build a new education system in this state that educates ALL of our children.

THE CIRESI WALBURN FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN*:

- Founded in 1998 with \$30 million from fees in the Minnesota Tobacco Litigation engineered by veteran litigators Michael V. Ciresi and Roberta B. Walburn.
- Supports efforts to improve the lives and educational opportunities for Minnesota children and youth.
- To date, has granted more than \$24 million to early learning, education policy and advocacy, high-performing K-12 schools, family engagement, college scholarships, and social justice and public health programs.
- Directed by a nine-member Board of Trustees comprised of attorneys and community leaders.

* Formerly the Robins Kaplan Miller & Ciresi Foundation for Children

Executive Summary

The Roundtable revealed a widespread, deep sense of outrage and frustration regarding the entrenched dysfunction and underperformance of Minnesota's K-12 education system for children of color. Many of the Roundtable participants have made significant investments of financial and human resources to improve education during the last 20 years. But our education system has deep-rooted problems, including inherent racism. It is clear investing more money in a system that is broken, without clear measures of success and accountability, is not the answer. We need to move forward with new solutions, while being cautious to not replicate disparities and inequities within the current system. Minnesota has been studying this problem long enough. It is time for comprehensive, systemic action.

It is time for Minnesota to create another miracle for the children of this state: an education system that works for ALL children, regardless of ZIP code, race, economic status, or home language. A new Minnesota Miracle will require disrupting the current system and rebuilding a structure grounded in two essential features: autonomy and accountability. Legislative and administrative changes at the state and local levels will be necessary to realize this vision.

“

This is not an unsolvable barrier. Discussions about race are real but not any worse than other communities that are having successes.

”

“

We need cataclysmic change—thinking in a disruptive way that doesn't lose kids who are caught in transition.

”

A NEW STRUCTURE GROUNDED IN:

1) autonomy for schools to create success based on local needs, and 2) state and local systems of accountability.

AUTONOMY

- Give school leaders flexibility to do what is needed to successfully serve children and families in their schools.
- Targeted solutions, differentiation and cultural competence are key components.
- A one-size-fits-all approach does not and will not work.

“To say one thing will work for all families is faulty because all families need different things.”

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Develop local and statewide systems of accountability based on quality, results, and transparency.
- Resources should follow students and be tied to results-based accountability.
- If a school doesn't meet acceptable standards, whether a public district or public charter, and fails to turn around in a specified period—shut it down!

“You don't get to have unlimited capacity to fail students.”



The Minnesota Miracle

Decades ago, school districts in Minnesota were funded in large part through local property taxes, creating significant disparities between tax rich and tax poor districts.

In 1970, Wendell (Wendy) Anderson ran for governor on a pledge to overhaul school funding. He won the election but, once in office, faced a legislative stalemate.

Meanwhile, parents and students from a relatively poor district sued to challenge the existing financing as a violation of the U.S. Constitution's equal protection clause. Federal Judge Miles Lord ruled in the fall of 1971 that the state law was unconstitutional. The current system in Minnesota, he wrote in his decision, "puts the state in the position of making the rich richer and the poor poorer."

As his decision raised weighty implications for every child and taxpayer in the state, Judge Lord deferred ordering any relief to give the Legislature one more chance to remedy the situation.

That was enough to spur politicians. Within weeks, legislators passed a sweeping bill that shifted the primary source of education funding from local to state taxes. To pay for this new state support, one of the largest tax increases in Minnesota history was enacted, increasing income, sales, cigarette, liquor and beer taxes.

The formal name of this legislation was the Omnibus Tax Bill, but it would be known as the underpinning of the "Minnesota Miracle."

Despite the new taxes, this more equitable system of school financing was a major source of Minnesota pride and helped the state gain national recognition for good governance. Governor Anderson landed on the cover of Time magazine within two years in an article titled, "Minnesota: A State That Works."

The Minnesota Miracle survived, relatively unchanged, for more than 30 years until 2002 when the property tax structure was changed by the Legislature.

Snapshot of Our Failing Schools



“We need people to know the truth about how our schools are failing our children.”

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION: WORST IN THE NATION

High school graduation rates for Minnesota’s students of color are the worst in the nation:

- Hispanic/Latino – 65% graduation rate (50th out of 50 states)
- African American/Black – 65% graduation rate (48th out of 50 states)
- Native American – 53% graduation rate (49th out of 50 states)

DESPITE THE FACT THAT...

- Minnesota spends more per student than most states and the Minneapolis and St. Paul school districts spend thousands more per student per year than the average state.

F's in any gradebook!

MINNESOTA TEST SCORES

34%

Only **34%** of African American students are proficient in reading, resulting in a **35 percentage-point gap** between African American and White students.

28%

For math, only **28%** of African American students are proficient, for a **38 percentage-point gap** with White students.

38%

For Hispanics/Latinos, only **38%** are proficient in reading, and **33%** are proficient in math.

MINNEAPOLIS TEST SCORES

21%

Only **21%** of African American students are proficient in reading, resulting in a **59 percentage-point gap** between African American and White students.

17.4%

For math, only **17.4%** of African American students in Minneapolis are proficient, for a **60 percentage-point gap** with White students.

27%

For Hispanics/Latinos, only **27%** are proficient in reading, and **26%** are proficient in math.

ST. PAUL TEST SCORES

23.6%

Only **23.6%** of African American students are proficient in reading, resulting in a **50 percentage-point gap** between African American and White students.

16.5%

For math, only **16.5%** of African American students in St. Paul are proficient, for a **49 percentage-point gap** with White students.

30%

For Hispanics/Latinos, only **30%** are proficient in reading, and **21.5%** are proficient in math.

A good reason for outrage!

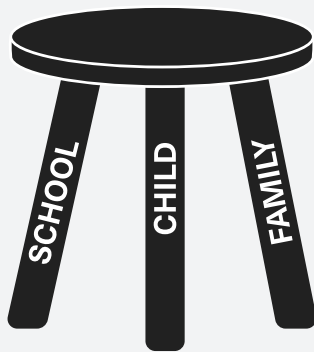
REMEDIAL COURSES IN COLLEGE

Even for students who graduate from high school, a large percentage need to take **remedial courses in college**, including more than **40%** of African American students.

A GOOD JOB!?!

To repeat: Only **21%** of African American students in Minneapolis are proficient in reading.

Yet...the Minneapolis school board recently **lauded the superintendent** in his job review for meeting expectations in top priority areas, including **literacy and accountability**.



A quality education requires a strong three-legged stool: the family, the child, and the school all must do their jobs to contribute to success.

Now is the Time!

PRESSURE POINTS FOR ACTION

“

What if each child walked into a school and knew it was an amazing school where all things are possible, whatever it required?

”

1)

Build public awareness and outrage to create a collective will for change. All Minnesotans need to care about this issue. We all benefit from educated, productive citizens, and the way to achieve this is through quality schools that work for all children. This groundswell must be built not only among the populations impacted by the failing system, but also among those with the resources, the power, and the ability to drive change. We must embrace the philosophy that “all children are our children” through public awareness campaigns, personal conversations, and more robust education reporting in the media.

“What has been normalized for many of the children across our state is not normal. If a group of us are angry and we stand together, can we have an impact?”

2)

Advocate for structural change that calls for the autonomy of all schools and accountability through state and local laws and regulations. We have learned from decades of experience that more money will not solve this pervasive problem. We need a system of accountability that includes having the courage to close failing schools.

“Minnesota needs a framework to give schools the freedom to define what they need and if that doesn’t work, we need to shut them down.”

“We must recognize that Minneapolis and St. Paul schools [and other districts across the state] are simply statutory structures.”

3)

Elevate parent and family power, provide them with information and access, listen to them, and engage in actions informed by them. Information on school performance and school choice needs to be easy to access, easy to understand, and easy to act upon. The current information made available by the state Department of Education and many school districts is woefully lacking in this regard.

“We should start giving up our seats at decision-making tables to community members to unlock the nascent power that exists in communities of color but hasn’t been listened to.”

4)

Overcome a belief gap and an expectation gap. The idea that all children can learn is not universally shared. Expectations are too low in many communities with failing schools, as well as among educators who have differing expectations for different children.

“People are not mad enough about how we are failing their students.”

5)

Redesign teacher preparation programs to prepare new teachers with the skills necessary for success in today’s classrooms. Academic preparation is critical, and teachers also must be prepared to build and sustain relationships with children and parents from different cultures, backgrounds, and life experiences. Teacher preparation programs must center on cultural intelligence and differentiation; a “one-size-fits-all” approach to a classroom is not adequate.

“I’m a teacher—you’re a kid. We come from different backgrounds and it has impacted us both. Education is the place where that dynamic most shows up, and we are not preparing teachers for that.”

“I believe all teachers have heart. They are talented, go into their own pockets for supplies, and are good people. And many of them feel as if the world is trying to disrespect them for what they do. They are underperforming not because of skin color or bad intentions, but because of the system they are sitting in and because they are not prepared for the job in front of them.”

6)

Learn from the early childhood movement and the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. Valuable lessons exist from early childhood efforts in our state, and we should more deeply understand the parallels and the differences. Early childhood practices include an easy-to-understand quality scale; a decentralized system; autonomy that allows providers to develop what works for their setting; parents who exercise choice; and scholarships for children most in need.



A Minnesota Model for Success

MINNESOTA EARLY LEARNING FOUNDATION (MELF)



In 2005, Minnesota business and nonprofit leaders formed the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation and raised \$20 million in private funding to determine cost-effective ways to improve early education quality, so more children would be ready for kindergarten.

The leaders of MELF were not players in the child care sector, so they had no biases or vested interests to protect. They turned down government funding to remain independent of political influences.

MELF piloted several approaches for improving early education quality in multiple Minnesota communities: St. Paul, Minneapolis, Wayzata, and Nicollet and Blue Earth counties.

Based on robust research findings, MELF worked with a bipartisan group of legislators and a broad section of community representatives.

MELF OUTCOME

The results have included widespread, bipartisan recognition of the importance of quality pre-K education; the implementation of a Parent Aware four-star quality rating program that has served as a national model; and millions of dollars invested in the system, including scholarships for low-income children.

What works in other states?

The New Orleans and Denver public school districts have among the fastest academic growth in the country in recent years for low-income children and children of color.



New Orleans, Louisiana

In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005 and wiped out virtually the entire public school system, which was one of the lowest-performing districts in the nation.

With innovative state legislation and a new system of public charter schools with school-level autonomy, New Orleans rebuilt its school district and saw dramatic improvements in student achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment. In 2005, there was a 25-point gap between city and state students; that narrowed to 14 points in 2010 and six points in 2016.



Denver, Colorado

Denver public schools had the lowest rate of academic growth among Colorado's ten largest districts in 2005. But a coalition of foundation executives and civic leaders—called A+ Denver (now A+ Colorado)—sparked dramatic change. Between 2005 and 2015, the district closed or replaced dozens of schools.

The school board embraced charter schools; created “innovation schools” with some of the autonomy of charters; and instituted a common enrollment system encompassing both district and charter schools. From 2007 to 2017, Denver's four-year graduation rate rose dramatically, test scores increased, and both district and charter schools were held to a common School Performance Framework.



Success Strategies

SHARED BY NEW ORLEANS AND DENVER

1)

Autonomy and accountability

Within a school district, individual schools were given the autonomy to determine their own success strategies. There is no one best way to run a school, and district-wide bureaucracies with centralized control impede necessary innovation and flexibility. In return for autonomy, each school was held accountable if it failed.

2)

Close failing schools

This proved to be far more effective than trying to turn around failing schools, which in most cases leads to more failure.

3)

Families choose

Each family had the ability and necessary information to make an informed decision about the schools their children attended, with an easy-to-use universal enrollment system for all schools in a district, including public charter schools.

“

Denver didn't have Katrina. They had civic engagement—a small group of committed people who wouldn't take it anymore and demanded action.

-Roundtable participant

”

“

People can do this without a hurricane.

-New Orleans educator
and school founder

”

“

*I challenge us to
put community at the center,
elevate voices,
be courageous,
stop examining the problem,
and start acting now.*

-Roundtable Participant

”

Thank you to the participants of the Ciresi Walburn Foundation for Children's 20th Anniversary Roundtable and the moderator Chanda Smith Baker of The Minneapolis Foundation. The Ciresi Walburn Foundation for Children Board of Trustees values all the contributions and commitments to continue to move forward to improve our schools for all children in Minnesota. Our discussion was respectful but not safe, and we appreciate that participants were forthcoming with each other.

We hope this document and the spirit of the Roundtable ignite a similar sense of urgency among the public, parents, educators, and elected officials in our state. We have the resources and brainpower to create a system of high-performing schools that meet the needs of all our children. Let's work together to reclaim the Minnesota Miracle for the 21st century.

Acknowledgments

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