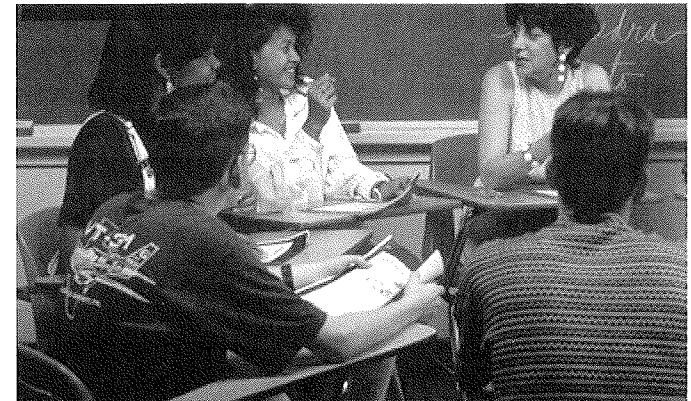


CITIZENS LEAGUE

RESEARCH REPORT

A Failing Grade for School Completion: Increasing School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul

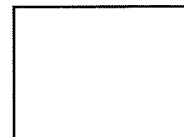


An overview of a report prepared by the Citizens League

August 2001

CITIZENS LEAGUE
708 S 3rd Street, Suite 500
Minneapolis, MN 55415
www.citizensleague.net

A Failing Grade for School Completion



708 South 3rd Street, Suite 500
Minneapolis, MN 55415
612-338-0791 Fax 612-337-5919
www.citizensleague.net

A Failing Grade for School Completion

The number of students who drop out of school in Minneapolis and Saint Paul is unacceptably high. Minnesota's relatively strong statewide graduation rate obscures the crisis occurring in the state's urban schools. Less than half the students who enter the ninth grade in the Minneapolis public schools graduate within four years. In St. Paul, only slightly more than 50 percent of all students who enter ninth grade graduate.

In today's world, failing to graduate from high school portends a lifetime of low-level jobs, depressed earnings and a lowered standard of living. A well-educated work force is vital for the metropolitan area to remain competitive in an economy that demands ever-greater skill levels. The metropolitan region simply cannot afford to abandon so many of its young people to low skill jobs. On moral grounds alone we cannot stand by while as many as 3,000 young people are set on a track to economic hardship each year in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

The current dismal outcomes on school completion are unacceptable and continuing the status quo threatens the vitality and livability of our community. The public, the Legislature, executive agencies, parents, teachers and administrators all hold part of the solution for achieving greater school success for students in our core cities. We must do better for our students and our state. Yet schools have a major responsibility in meeting this challenge.

There are many reasons why students drop out of high school. In addition to academic problems, the League Committee found a range of social forces that impact student achievement, including family background, pregnancy and mental health. But the charge to the committee was to "examine what our schools can do to improve the alarmingly low completion rates."

Our belief is that, despite external factors, schools must do better at engaging students and become more responsive to their needs in order to keep them in school.

The Committee found examples of many promising practices to boost graduation rates. These practices range from better early childhood education, to smaller schools to more individualized learning. In short, early intervention and a shift toward an educational system that is more responsive to its students needs.

We are encouraged by the recent efforts of the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts to address this issue. Their willingness to acknowledge the problem is a step in the right direction. But ultimately, despite the promising practices and best intentions, there simply is not sufficient pressure on the system to make the necessary improvements. Good intentions and promises of improved performance are not enough.

To genuinely succeed in engaging all students, the Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts need to set measurable school completion goals, establish clear rewards and consequences for success or failure, restructure the notion of high school, and improve schools capacity for taking the steps they need to engage more students in learning.

A summary of Citizens League recommendations

Set a goal of a four-year high school completion rate of 80 percent within the next five years.

- Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts should quickly set a goal of 80 percent school completion within the next five years as a measurable goal for improving district-wide graduation rates.
- Every high school needs clear high school completion goals to be set and clear plans to reach them.
- School completion outcomes should be regularly reported to the community.
- The Minneapolis and Saint Paul school districts should adopt a district, data-driven system of accountability for graduation rates.
- The State and the Minneapolis and Saint Paul districts need to agree on clear, consistent measurement according to clear consistent definitions and uniform indicators.

Set clear rewards and consequences for school completion outcomes.

- Establish school-based financial rewards for schools that exceed their goals.

- Develop consequences for not meeting school improvement goals.

Restructure high school for greater flexibility.

- Redefine “high school completion” away from the traditional fixed, four-year framework.
- Support innovation through expanded student choice for charter schools and other alternatives.
- Expand Post-Secondary Educational Options (PSEO) to connect at-risk students with the “real world” of work through career exposure and technical education options.

Build capacity for high school success.

- The Legislature should invest stable and adequate resources in early childhood education and in reform strategies that will guarantee every student the opportunity for a high level of academic achievement.
- Support the development of quality teaching and teacher leadership.

A SAMPLING OF FINDINGS

In Minneapolis, of the 3016 students who should have graduated in 1999, only 1425 did so, 1060 students dropped out, and another 531 students continued their education past the four-year mark. In Saint Paul, 1469 of the 2457 students completed their educations on time, 518 students dropped out, and 470 students continued their high school education.

Students from low-income families are at the greatest risk of dropping out, regardless of race or ethnicity. Low-income white and black students had nearly the same graduation rate in the class of 2000, suggesting that poor students of any racial or ethnic background face similar challenges in finishing school.

The language spoken at home is not a major obstacle to high school completion. In Minneapolis, 47 percent of students from English speaking families graduated on time in 1999, compared to 50 percent of students from families where English was not the primary language.

The report identifies a range of social forces that impact student achievement, including family background, employment, pregnancy and mental health. But ultimately, the committee concluded that despite these external factors, the schools can and must provide solutions to keep all students in school until graduation day.

Special thanks to the Minneapolis Foundation, the St. Paul Foundation and the St. Paul Companies for their support of this study.

The charge to the committee

On March 28, 2000 the Citizens League Board of Directors approved the following charge to the study committee on finishing school and improving outcomes for core city youth: *While statewide school completion rates remain high in Minnesota, our core cities continue to lose an unacceptable proportion of students, especially students of color, before graduation. This is not a minor issue of interest only to the core cities or a footnote to statewide completion statistics. People without at least a high school diploma are unlikely to earn a family living wage. An economy short on labor cannot afford to leave anyone behind. The youth that disappear from our schools can show up in the criminal justice and social service systems. This Citizens League study will examine what our schools can do to improve the alarmingly low completion rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.*

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

The Citizens League Study Committee on School Completion Rates in Minneapolis and Saint Paul was co-chaired by George Latimer and Gary Cunningham. A total of 32 individuals took an active part in the committee. The Committee met 23 times between October 25, 2000 and May 9, 2001. The Citizens League Board of Directors approved the report on June 26, 2001. In addition to the chairs, the members of the Committee were:

Curt Boganey
William Connelly
Cheryl Dickson
Joanne Englund
Sandy Hale
Gary Joselyn
Benjamin Kanninen
Larry Kelley
Pradeep Kotamraju
Tom LaForce
Charlotte Landreau
Todd Lefko
Dick Little
Maxine Mandt
Malcolm McLean

Patrick O'Leary
Bharat M. Parekh
David Pence
Stanley Peskar
Jack Rossmann
Anne Rozga
Dudley Ruch
Jim Schneider
Hal Schroer
Alan Silver
Kenneth Stewart
William Svrluga
Tom Swain
Dale Swanson
Kathleen Vellenga

Thanks to the Office of Indian Ministry, Macalester College and Powderhorn Community Center for providing meeting space for the committee.

Membership Application

Name _____

Address _____

Home Phone _____

Work Phone _____

email _____

Membership level:

- Donor \$1,000 and over
- Sustaining \$500—\$999
- Contributing \$200—\$499
- Family \$75
- Individual \$50
- Student \$20
- enclose what you can

Method of payment:

- Check enclosed
- Bill me
- Charge \$ _____ to my
 Visa Mastercard Discover

Card # _____ Exp ____/____

Citizens League
708 South 3rd Street, Suite 500
Minneapolis, MN 55415
612-338-0791 fax: 612-337-5919
email: info@citizensleague.net

Copies of the full report, *A Failing Grade for School Completion*, are available from the Citizens League office (free to members; \$10 per copy for non-members). The report is also available on the web at www.citizensleague.net.