

## It's time to reduce disparities in Minnesota's education system

Written by Hector Garcia  
Monday, 01 April 2013 14:12

---



Recently, the U.S. Department of Education released data that placed Minnesota last among all states in a) the rate of Hispanic students' four-year high school graduation, and b) the graduation rate gaps between white students and both Hispanic and Native American students. The same gap between Black and white students was the second-worst in the nation. The state's ranking in overall graduation rates in 2011 was 29th.

This regretful piece of news is ominous in its implications for our future. The demographic growth of minorities is much greater than that of the majority community. The growth of the Latino population in Minnesota between the Census of 2000 and 2010 was 74.5 percent --approximately 10 times that of the total population. This means that the low levels of education of minorities will increasingly affect the overall state's rankings in education and the quality of its largely aging work force.

A solution to this growing dilemma exists if we are willing to look outside the constraints of time and culture.

Since 2010, the Chicano Latino Affairs Council (CLAC) has consulted with education experts nationwide. We have performed research on programs that have significantly improved graduation rates of Latinos and reduced disparities between and within schools.

Building on this work, CLAC and Minnesota Humanities Center hired the Latino organization

## It's time to reduce disparities in Minnesota's education system

Written by Hector Garcia  
Monday, 01 April 2013 14:12

---

HACER in 2012 to do a study, to be published this month, and identify or reconfirm elements of success in such programs.

One of the programs was able to raise the high-school graduation rate of Latino students from 35 percent to 100 percent in six years.

CLAC has consulted with Pasi Sahlberg at Finland's Ministry of Education; Tony Wagner, innovation education fellow at Harvard; Finland's Consul Wargelin; and several Finnish teachers and members of a Minnesota education group who visited Finland. Educational reform in Finland has achieved not only overall excellence but, more pertinently, equity. The PISA global study by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has for several years ranked Finland's the best and most equitable education system in the world.

There are little-known parallels between Minnesota and Finland: the latter's Scandinavian population numbers approximately 5 million, but 4.7 percent are immigrants, compared to 7.3 percent in Minnesota. Some of its schools have nearly 40 percent minority students.

Finland's education reform led to dramatic economic progress. After an economic crisis in the early 1990s, in 2001 it climbed to the top position of the World Economic Forum's global competitiveness index and is referred to as the world's most prosperous nation and one of the most innovative. Four decades ago, it had a mediocre education system and an agrarian economy.

Minnesota's educational system, while good in many respects, has been unable to integrate minority communities. Programs that improve the performance of minority students have existed for a long time, but they have not been replicated sufficiently. Minnesota's challenge is one of equity in access to opportunity—in which Finland has demonstrated unquestionable success.

Minnesota's education system is competitive and market-based. Children of immigrants who have grown up in poverty, with minimal education and no English, are placed in competition with children of educators, doctors and engineers who have lived here for generations; so are children of the Minnesota poor.

Minnesota's immigrant situation today cannot be compared, as often done, with that of the early 20th century: European immigrants were then equally or better educated than native-born Americans since only about 6% of the latter had a high school education, compared to Minnesota's current 93.2%. Furthermore, the U.S. government, at the time more interested in equality of opportunity than in income, invested heavily in public high schools. Competition is today more highly valued than equity but so are fairness and a level-playing field.

Minnesota could incorporate, as part of a larger reform, a phase-in period from preschool to 6th grade, during which children of marginalized communities are empowered with resources needed to compete successfully in subsequent stages of education. This period would be modeled on the examples of Finland and American history; its benefits would include overall educational excellence, culture and language synergism.

## **It's time to reduce disparities in Minnesota's education system**

Written by Hector Garcia  
Monday, 01 April 2013 14:12

---

*Garcia is executive director of the Chicano Latino Affairs Council. This article previously appeared in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. Minnesota Editorial Forum. 3/13.*

*\*Source: Four-Year Regulatory Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, 2010-11, U.S. Department of Education*