Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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In an area that is generally considered one of the more progressive in the nation, when it comes to educating children of color, the Twin Cites is among the most regressive.

In a region full of wealth, talent and resources, children of color are failing scholastically at an alarming rate. In a report released this past September by the city of Minneapolis, only 47 percent of African American third graders in Minneapolis public schools were reading at or above grade level. That is compared to 91 percent of white students in the district who are reading at or above grade level. The same report revealed that in 2011, a paltry 36 percent of African Americans in the district completed high school within four years, compared to 67 percent of their white counterparts.

The achievement gap is not unique to the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) district. Though concerning, the numbers are better in St. Paul where the four-year graduation rate for public school African Americans was 52 percent in 2011 as compared to 73 percent for whites.

With little exception, the gap between whites and students of color in the region remains.

That is why a group of area government, education, business and community leaders have banded together to form the Generation Next Partnership. The partnership is being touted as an unprecedented collaboration and has received a $2 million federal grant and an additional $2 million in matching funds from area corporations such as General Mills, Target and 3M. Selected to head the group is Michael Goar.

Goar was raised in Minneapolis and comes to Generation Next after serving as the deputy superintendent and of the Boston Public Schools. He said the Twin Cities gap is simply unacceptable.

“The road blocks we face are artificial ones,” said Goar. “We can overcome the gap and my role is to facilitate this discussion. We got to this place not overnight, but we need to create a sense of urgency.”

Goar said with Generation Next, he expects to see a lessening of the achievement gap within the next two years. “That’s as long as we move forward together,” said Goar. “The complexity and urgency of this work requires all hands on deck. We cannot coast to change. All of us must act deliberately to ensure that all of students are graduating from high school.”

Generation Next was inspired by the Cincinnati Strive Partnership, which has been replicated in several communities, including Portland, San Francisco, Boston, Houston and Milwaukee. The Strive Partnership unites stakeholders around educational issues, goals, measurements and results, and then actively supports and strengthens strategies that work.

The Twin Cities partnership started with the African American Leadership Forum and the University of Minnesota, which both identified the Strive model as a potential way to systemically improve student achievement.

Goar said the benchmark goals of Generation Next are to improve kindergarten readiness, 3rd

grade reading, 8th grade math scores and graduation rates for students of color. He said the ultimate goal is to prepare students of color for post-secondary education.

“To accomplish these goals, we are working toward creating networks –a place where best practices can be shared. Evidence-based decision making is taking place and will focus on collective action, investment and sustainability,” said Goar.

Kim Nelson co-chair the Generation Next Leadership Council said the community as a whole must be invested in lessening the student achievement gap.

“For many complex and deep-rooted reasons, we have struggled in our many efforts to achieve true educational equality in Minnesota,” said Nelson who is the senior vice president of external relations for General Mills and president of the General Mills Foundation. “We all have a role to play in supporting our schools and supporting our youth – in enabling every child to reach his or her full potential.”

Nelson said The Generation Next Partnership is based on a holistic cradle-to-career framework for change, focusing on the full educational continuum including critical transition points to ensure the developmental progress of students of color.

“Currently, the Twin Cities has more than 500 programs that are focused on closing the achievement gap – each with different goals and ways of measuring success – and our philanthropic community contributes over $90 million each year to support these and other educational organizations,” said Nelson. “Though enthusiastic, our response to our education crisis is fragmented and uncoordinated – lacking a shared vision on attacking the problem and generating the most effective solutions.”

Minneapolis mayor, R.T. Rybak said everyone must be held accountable for the failure to educate a vast number of students of color.

“We have an achievement gap crisis and immediate action is needed,” said Rybak. “There should be zero tolerance for teachers, superintendents, parents and mayors not delivering for our kids.”

Rybak did tout the successes of programs such as the AchieveMpls STEP-UP program. Rybak said the program, which places young people from Minneapolis in paid internships with local companies, nonprofits and public agencies and provides work readiness training, has helped its participants to excel in school and graduate on time. The mayor said many of the STEP-UP students go on to attend college.

Chanda Smith Baker, president and CEO of Pillsbury United Communities, said she is hopeful Goar and Generation Next can strengthen achievement for students of color.

“It’s about a shared role and shared measurements for achieving goals,” said Smith Baker. “When it comes to students there’s got to be a consistency of expectations – whether they are in Minneapolis, St. Paul, charter schools or suburban school districts.”