

# Working TOGETHER

to empower parent and community school leadership and involvement



*Minnesota*  
**DREAM FUND**



- **31 percent** of all Students of Color and American Indian Students are classified as English Language Learners for a total of 61,292 students.
- **Fewer than 14%** of Latino students tested proficient or above in math in 2008.
- **Only 11%** of American Indian students in Minnesota scored proficient or above on the 11th grade math test in 2008.
- **1 in 10** African-American 4th graders reads at or above grade level.
- Minnesota's student/counselor ratio is **799:1** – the third worst in the nation.

From the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership's 2009 State of Students of Color and American Indian Students.

## AMERICAN DREAM DEFERRED

The American dream is a promise of the opportunity for prosperity and success that transcends differences in race, gender, and income. Many of us share the belief that every child should have an equal opportunity to succeed in life, college, and career. Yet for some of our children, the path to educational achievement is fraught with barriers. Word's getting out that Minnesota is home to one of the worst racial achievement gaps in the nation. The bottom line is: our schools are not meeting the needs of our children. Out of the 200,000 students of color in Minnesota's public schools, only 41 percent will graduate from high school. What that means – for the children, their communities, and our region – will depend on how much we are committed to changing the educational system to work for all students, not a select few.

Students, parents, and community groups are in the best position to identify the unique challenges and opportunities facing their specific cultural communities. Yet, they are least represented in discussions on education policy – from the Parent-Teacher Association to the Legislature.

The Minnesota Dream Fund was established to eliminate barriers to educational achievement impacting women, people of color, and tribal communities. The fund supported the creation of two diverse coalitions of community groups, who are forging a path to more effectively listen to, engage, and mobilize parents and communities of color to impact education.

We believe there shouldn't be a fine print to the American dream that excludes

some of our children. As foundations, we invested accordingly, and distributed a combined \$1 million for groups to engage and empower communities to advocate for broad systemic changes in education, and develop accountability in the system to realize achievement among students of all racial and cultural communities.

With 11 community groups participating in these two coalitions, Minnesota Dream Fund partners have a wealth of stories to share. We've highlighted just a few here, but encourage you to follow their work directly to learn what's worked for them and the communities they serve. They have experience working across racial and cultural lines, building powerful parent engagement to ensure children of color have access to the highest quality education available.



# Communities IN ACTION



## MOTHERS SHOW DISTRICT THEY KNOW BEST

Hawa Farah, a mother of three from Somalia struggled to help her children succeed in school. In dismay, she watched her school-aged children fall behind.

“I wanted to help them, but my hands were tied because I don’t have an education and I’m not wealthy enough to hire a tutor,” Hawa said.

She took her children to the library but would often come home without getting any help. In a desperate attempt to help her kids succeed in school, she attended a listening session on education for Somali parents in Minneapolis.

In Hawa’s experience, the underlying barrier to success in school facing her children was her lack of formal education. Other important challenges facing members of the Somali community include: lack of bilingual education sites, need for bilingual teachers and teaching assistants, and the absence of resources and tools to engage parents in discussions on education.

Somali Action Alliance, an organization that builds the power of the Somali community through social change and action, organized the listening session Hawa attended with support from the Minnesota Dream Fund. The group held a series of meetings with Minneapolis Public Schools district leaders to bring in community input, and show education administrators where barriers to quality education exist and how we can eliminate these challenges. Hawa became one of the most involved parents in this effort.

When her neighborhood faced the closing of two community schools where the majority of students were Somali, she and others were concerned about where to send their kids. She quickly joined efforts to work with Minneapolis Public Schools to negotiate with the district. They found success through collaboration and were able to save one school when the district took their suggestion to combine Longfellow into Pratt.

“The listening sessions exposed us to core needs, and the parents’ insights gave us a close perspective on the issue. When the parents saw their voices were valued, they stayed engaged like Hawa Farah.” said Hashi Shafi, the Executive Director of the Somali Action Alliance.

*Somali Action Alliance is a member of the Educational Equity Organizing Project, which was funded by the Minnesota Dream Fund, and continues to work collaboratively on behalf of students and families of color.*

I wanted to help them, but my hands were tied because I don’t have an education and I’m not wealthy enough to hire a tutor. Hawa Farah, a mother of three from Somalia

## Parents want to participate in the PTA and other activities at their children's schools, but the lack of translators and translated materials prevents parents with limited English proficiency from getting involved.

### EMPOWERING LATINO PARENTS, INSPIRING STUDENTS

Brandon Vazquez is a ninth grader in Minneapolis Public Schools. Last year, he and other Latino students were among the last to register for classes.

"I don't feel valued when I see every other group registering for classes before me," Brandon said.

Parents of eighth graders throughout the state find it difficult to navigate the complex world of high school registration. We know this process shuts out parents who aren't aware of the school's expectations of them, or understand how to help their children sign up for classes. With Minnesota's high students-to-counselor ratio, it's clear that there isn't adequate support from the schools. But what happens when parents aren't equipped to support and advocate for their children either?

By the time these students do register, some of the best courses are filled. We know that a vigorous curriculum is the foundation to college success, and without these challenging classes, students will not be prepared for college or career.

The underlying issue facing Brandon is that his parents don't know how to help him get the coursework he needs for success. They want to participate in the PTA and other involvement opportunities, but without a translator or printed materials in Spanish, these vehicles aren't accessible. Other important challenges facing the Latino community include: lack of community representation in local school leadership, lack of parent-friendly tools that overcome language and cultural barriers, and the absence of a liaison or system to help parents support their children.

Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER) is a community-based research organization that served a critical role in the Minnesota Dream Fund sponsored Brown Power Base Project. The project worked to engage and empower African-American and Latino communities to advocate for necessary changes in education. Through research, organizing, and advocacy, they highlighted and addressed important inequalities like the story of Brandon and his classmates, which would otherwise remain hidden. The experience of participating in the Minnesota Dream Fund allowed HACER to improve the educational achievement of Latino students by facilitating cooperation among community members, non-profit groups, and public agencies to better understand and serve the needs of these students.

Rodolfo Gutierrez, the Executive Director of HACER, says groups found success through research and collaboration. "What worked for us is we did our research first to identify the needs of the community, then we tried to build awareness around the issue, and then, we worked to establish a coalition," he said.

*HACER is a member of the Brown Power Base Project, which was funded by the Minnesota Dream Fund, and continues to work collaboratively on behalf of students and families of color.*





## OVERCOMING GENERATIONS OF MISTRUST

Three generations ago, American Indians in Minnesota were introduced to the motto “Kill the Indian, save the man.” Children were removed from their homes and brought to schools that sought to erase any sign of Indian culture.

Two generations ago, American Indians were exposed to racial discrimination and struggled to preserve their language, culture, and spiritual traditions in a school environment that didn't force assimilation, but still didn't value their identity.

Today, Melissa Baker goes to school every day and doesn't see her community reflected in the curriculum or the environment of the school. She goes home, and her family members harbor mistrust of the school due to negative experiences with the education system. A painful history quietly persists, and American Indian students find themselves falling through the cracks of our public education system. As the smallest ethnic population in Minneapolis Public Schools, American Indian students often feel invisible and their needs go unmet.

“After years of mistrust, it was time to work together for the kids,” Elaine Salinas, the President of MIGIZI Communications said.

The underlying issue here impacting Melissa is generational strife between the education system and American Indian families. Other important challenges facing these students include high teacher turnover rates in Minneapolis, lack of culturally appropriate curricula, and the absence of efforts to involve parents.

MIGIZI Communications is an organization that works to improve the well-being of the American Indian community by advancing social justice and positive change. The group has served as a leader in the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the Indian community and the Minneapolis Public Schools) to improve educational outcomes for American Indian students. Among other things, the MOA specifically works to change what is taught to how it is taught in way that captures culturally-specific best practices of teaching, and gives the community a sense of ownership of education of their children. The

MOA created a partnership that lead to some important actions. Three schools serving the largest numbers of American Indian students were transformed into indigenous “best practice” sites, and a Parent Involvement Center was established to better connect with Indian parents. The Minnesota Dream Fund created a timely opportunity for emerging leaders within the American Indian community to implement the Memorandum of Agreement between the Minneapolis Public Schools and the American Indian Community.

“The most important thing a community can do is to gain access to the institutions that impact our quality of life; it's important to get involved and demand the ear of the system,” Salinas said.

*MIGIZI Communications is a member of the Educational Equity Organizing Project, which was funded by the Minnesota Dream Fund, and continues to work collaboratively on behalf of students and families of color.*

## We need to move the issue from the head to the heart.

David Nicolson, Headwaters Foundation for Justice



## DEVELOPING SKILLS AND EMERGING LEADERS

Through all of this work, one of the most important and transformative elements that occurred was leadership development. Engaging community members and students to work on the issues, and getting groups to come together, helps people build valuable skills and through education are helping to create personal transformations. At the same time, they are becoming strong voices for their students, schools and communities- important lessons and skills that will last a lifetime.

## What is the Minnesota Dream Fund?

Established in early 2005, the Minnesota Dream Fund focused on eliminating barriers to educational achievement impacting women, people of color and tribal communities to transform educational outcomes of these students by improving policies and practices, mobilize public will, empower communities to create change, improve accountability and funding for public schools. This initiative was created in response to a Ford Foundation matching challenge grant to help regional groups end the need for affirmative action by the year 2030.

Between 2006 and 2009, more than \$1 million was distributed to two Minnesota coalitions, the Brown Power Base Project (BPBP) and Educational Equity Organizing Project (EEOP), charged with addressing educational disparities and achieving the Dream Fund's goals.

### BPBP PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED:

African American Family Services  
Centro Campesino  
Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER)  
Housing Preservation Project  
Institute on Race & Poverty of the University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis Urban League

### EEOP PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED:

ISIAAH  
Minnesota Minority Education Partnership (research partner)  
MIGIZI Communications  
Organizing Apprenticeship Project  
Somali Action Alliance

Through the Dream Fund, the BPBP and EEOP have ignited policy change while creating best practices and new opportunities in outreach, organizing, advocacy, and research – ultimately transforming individuals and communities.

### MINNESOTA DREAM FUND FOUNDATION INVESTORS:

Blandin Foundation  
Grotto Foundation  
Headwaters Foundation for Justice  
Knight Foundation Donor Advised Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation  
Otto Bremer Foundation  
Public Interest Projects/ National Fulfilling the Dream Fund  
Robins Kaplan Miller & Ciresi LLP Foundation for Children  
The Minneapolis Foundation  
The Saint Paul Foundation  
Women's Foundation of Minnesota



## What can I do?

Learn about the barriers to education in our community, share tips on how we can create a more inclusive and equitable education system, and connect with others by volunteering with the organizations involved with the Minnesota Dream Fund or other groups serving our children.

### CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING!

What advantages do you have?

- Meeting materials, conferences, and report cards are presented in a language accessible to my family.
- I understand and am familiar with the process of selecting a school, choosing a curriculum, and preparing for post-secondary education.
- I can walk into a school and see people who look like me represented in a wide range of roles.
- I don't have to worry about my community being left out of the discussion when important decisions on education are being made.

### CHECK OUT THE SCHOOLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

Compare resources available, courses offered, type of facility, extracurricular activities offered, and the accessibility of public transportation – **what observations can you make** about how education is delivered in different schools?

Ask yourself **what policies we need to enact** in order to improve education in Minnesota. When you identify your issue, mobilize a diverse group of like-minded parents, community members, and education advocates.

**Invest in the future** of our community by supporting programs and groups that are committed to providing a well-rounded educational experience for all our children.