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Minnesota to Seek NCLB Waiver Renewal

U.S. Department of Education praises state's progress

ROSEVILLE – Two years after receiving a waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, the U.S. Department of Education has reviewed Minnesota's progress under the waiver and issued a report commending the state's new accountability system as meeting all expectations and requiring no additional steps.

This stamp of approval comes as the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is preparing to submit its intent to renew the waiver with minor changes that strengthen the state's accountability to ensure all students graduate and are ready for career and college.

The state is seeking to hold schools to a higher threshold of accountability. Under the original waiver, schools needed more than 40 students in any one subgroup (e.g., minority students, English language learners, students in poverty) to be held accountable for meeting established targets. Revisions to the waiver would reduce the minimum to 20 students in any one subgroup.

"We're raising our expectations," said Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius. "The bar just got higher, and now more kids count—that's a good thing."

In 2012, Minnesota was one of the first 10 states in the nation to receive a waiver, giving MDE the flexibility to implement a new accountability system for Minnesota schools. One of its key goals is to reduce achievement gaps between white students and students of color by 50 percent by the year 2017. Next week MDE will release district-by-district data showing progress towards this goal.

This new accountability system measures a school by reviewing student-level data and providing teachers and administrators with meaningful feedback about how their students are performing academically. Schools can use this information to identify where their students are struggling and where support is needed. The department has used this information to identify schools across the state that are struggling and then provide strategic support and resources to accelerate student achievement.

"Minnesota was on the leading edge of states looking for greater accountability, and now we have confirmation that we're on the right track," said Cassellius. "The tremendous progress our students are making is encouraging and a direct result of our great teachers and school leaders. Just as important, students are working harder than ever before to meet higher standards, and we are doing more to support our schools in reaching every child."

Because of this new system of support, more than 70 percent of struggling schools improved student achievement and narrowed achievement gaps. Furthermore, the state has moved from a strictly punitive system of accountability to one that also recognizes and learns from the highest achieving schools. This year 20 Minnesota schools were recognized for their third consecutive year as a Reward school.

One key piece of this success can be attributed to the focused statewide system of support proposed in Minnesota's initial waiver application through the Regional Centers of Excellence.

The centers were created around the idea that successful school improvement requires a stronger system of support across the state. The centers are located throughout Greater Minnesota and staffed by reading, math, special education and English language learner specialists. Regional center employees work alongside school staff, partnering, listening and observing as they collaborate to find solutions to raising and accelerating student achievement. Working with multiple schools also allows regional center staff to share best practices between schools. Last year, staff from the regional centers spent more than 14,000 hours providing direct support to schools.

Last session, Governor Mark Dayton and the Legislature recognized this tremendous progress and invested an additional \$2 million to expand the Regional Centers of Excellence from three regions six. This investment will provide more schools throughout the state direct access to the support they need to raise student achievement.

This strategic, Minnesota-grown approach to accountability made possible by the federal waiver has also helped Minnesota make progress toward closing achievement gaps for the first time in over a decade.

According to the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)—otherwise known as the “Nation’s Report Card”—Minnesota fourth graders posted the best math scores in the nation. African-American students in fourth grade made big gains in math, performing fourth-highest among all African-American students in the country, compared to 24th in 2011.

This year’s test results also showed significant progress in reading among Minnesota fourth grade students. Minnesota fourth graders performed 10th-best in the nation in 2013, moving up from 22nd just two years ago. Additionally, gaps between white students and African-American and Hispanic students closed by 10 test points—a roughly 25 percent improvement since 2009.

The successes are not limited to the elementary grades. Eighth-graders posted the highest scores ever on the national test, and for the eighth consecutive year Minnesota seniors scored at the top of the nation in ACT scores.

Given that academic success in later grades depends on a great start to a child’s education, the state’s progress in preparing our youngest learners for kindergarten is also notable. In December, MDE’s annual study of kindergarten readiness showed that more Minnesota children entering kindergarten are prepared for success since the inception of the study in 2002. In fact, almost three quarters (72.8 percent) of children were determined to be ready for kindergarten, up from 60 percent in 2010, showing that the state’s focus on early learning is paying off.

[Read the U.S. Department of Education’s letter and report.](#)

