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PURSUING RACIAL JUSTICE

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21ST CENTURY



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Using a Racial Equity Impact Analysis in the Minneapolis Public Schools

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Prompted by a community-based alliance called the Education Equity Organizing Collaborative, the Minneapolis Board of Education agreed, in 2008, to use a racial impact assessment to inform decision making related to its Changing School Options initiative¹. The initiative was a school board proposal to cut school district operating costs by reorganizing school enrollment and transportation routes. The school board's use of the community-driven "Race, Cultural and Economic Equity Impact Assessment" resulted in the selection of a plan that mitigated any adverse impact on communities of color.²

The Minneapolis School Board Equity Impact Assessment

The Minneapolis Board of Education sought, in spring 2008, the Education Equity Organizing Collaborative's support for a proposed \$60 million school funding referendum on the November 2008 ballot.³ The collaborative, being a multiracial and

¹For an in-depth discussion of racial impact statements and their uses in advocacy, see William Kennedy et al., *Putting Race Back on the Table: Racial Impact Statements*, in this issue.

²Minneapolis Public Schools, *Race, Cultural and Economic Equity Impact Assessment of Changing School Options* (2009) ((1) Minneapolis Public Schools, *Changing School Options Revised Plan and Variations: Pre-reading for 7/14 Board Work Session*; (2) Minneapolis Public Schools, *Changing School Options Revised Plan and Variations: Appendix to Pre-reading for 7/14 Board Work Session*; and (3) Minneapolis Public Schools, *Changing School Options, Revised Plans and Variations, Appendix B, Attendance Boundary Maps*) (all on file with Jermaine Toney).

³See Organizing Apprenticeship Project, Education Equity Organizing Collaborative (n.d.), <http://bit.ly/1bxR6PV>.

multicultural alliance of community organizations advocating equity in public schools, was seen as a civic player. The collaborative's partners at the time included Migizi Communications (an American Indian organization), Somali Action Alliance, Isaiah (a multiracial faith-based coalition), the Coalition of Black Churches, and the Organizing Apprenticeship Project (which supports community organizers and racial justice advocacy and convened and staffed the collaborative).

The collaborative advised the school board that a racial, cultural, and economic impact analysis of how students of color, American Indian students, and other schoolchildren would be affected by approval of the referendum would have to be done before the collaborative could support the referendum. The collaborative commissioned the Organizing Apprenticeship Project to conduct the racial impact analysis because the project had analyzed the racial impact of state legislative and budgetary proposals.⁴ The project had, in turn, received training and consulting from our Applied Research Center, a national racial justice think tank and promoter of equity tools such as legislative report cards on racial equity and racial impact assessments.

The school district's enrollment for the 2008–2009 school year was 40 percent African American, 30 percent white, 17 percent Latino, 9 percent Asian, and 4.5 percent American Indian.⁵ Even though students of color constituted 70 percent of total enrollment in the district, there was a wide gap in reading proficiency test scores between students of color and white students.⁶ In the 2006–2007

school year only 31 percent of the district's African American students were proficient in reading, while 35 percent of Latino students, 33 percent of American Indian students, and 43 percent of Asian students were proficient in reading. In comparison, 82 percent of white students were proficient in reading.⁷ Only 32 percent of low-income students, that is, those who received a free or reduced lunch, were proficient in reading.⁸

The Organizing Apprenticeship Project's racial impact analysis revealed that if voters failed to support additional school funding, the academic achievement gap across different racial groups would widen.⁹ Voter approval of the referendum would result in the maintenance, but not expansion, of disparities. The collaborative actively and visibly supported the referendum. Voters approved the referendum by a historic margin, with significant support from voters of color.

That same year the Minneapolis Board of Education again sought support from the collaborative, this time for the Changing School Options initiative, a proposal to save operating costs by reorganizing services. The initiative offered three options to solve the fiscal difficulties brought about by declining student enrollment and rising transportation costs: school closures, rewired pathways in school enrollment options, and changed school transportation routes.

This time the collaborative asked the Minneapolis School Board to conduct an equity impact assessment of the initiative's proposed options. The collaborative supplied an assessment framework: the Pocket Guide to Budget Proposals: Racial and Economic Equity Assessment

⁴See Kennedy et al., *supra* note 1 (discussing Organizing Apprenticeship Project type of racial impact statement and how it has been used elsewhere).

⁵Minneapolis Public Schools, Summary Statistics: Racial/Ethnic Breakdown from 1978–2009 (Dec. 28, 2009), <http://bit.ly/169zc3M>.

⁶Dave Heistad, Research, Evaluation and Assessment, Minneapolis Public Schools, Achievement Gap Trends (n.d.), <http://bit.ly/18FWqCn>.

⁷*Id.* at 7.

⁸Research, Evaluation Assessment Department, Minneapolis Public Schools, Spring 2010 MCA-II and MTELL District Summary Results 5 (July 1, 2010), <http://bit.ly/17czk0O>.

⁹Jermaine Toney, Organizing Apprenticeship Project, Weighing the Racial Equity Impacts of [Minneapolis] Schools Referendum (Sept. 30, 2008), <http://bit.ly/15QJa86>.

Questions.¹⁰ The Organizing Apprenticeship Project previously used and shared the Pocket Guide with state lawmakers to assess the racial impact of state budget proposals.

The Pocket Guide has five assessment questions:

1. How does the proposed action (policy, budget, or investment decision) impact racial and economic disparities in Minnesota?
2. How does the proposed action support and advance racial and economic equity in such areas as education, contracting, immigrant and refugee access to services, health, workforce and economic development?
3. Have voices of groups affected by the proposal, budget, or investment decision been involved with its development? What solutions were proposed by these groups and communities?
4. What do you need to ensure that proposals are successful in addressing disparities—what resources, what timelines, and what monitoring will help ensure success for achieving racial and economic equity?
5. If your assessment shows that a proposed policy, budget, or investment decision will likely increase disparities, what alternatives can you explore? What modifications are needed to maximize racial and economic equity outcomes and reduce racial and economic disparities?¹¹

The board voted unanimously to authorize the district staff to use the assess-

ment. The board was eager to know how the proposed changes would affect their constituents. The assessment also gave the board an opportunity to ensure that the initiative's benefits or harms would be evenly distributed across different racial groups.

Though initially reluctant to conduct the analysis, the school administration eventually created an interdepartmental team and secured a contractor to help in the research, analysis, and writing of the assessment. Some team members saw a gap between what the collaborative was requesting and what data the school could realistically compile for the assessment. The school board member assigned to coordinate the analysis convened a face-to-face meeting with key board members and the working team. They all began to see an accurate way to model the impact of the changes by using high research standards.

The collaborative wanted to ensure that community organizations had access to accurate information. But some members of the school staff research team feared public scrutiny and critique of the school's racial impact analysis. Again, face-to-face meetings between collaborative leaders and the staff team helped diffuse this tension. The meetings revealed a shared commitment to equity and an agreement to use data to bring out the truth in order to allow the board to choose an implementation plan that would prevent disparities. This partnership opened a path for a doable and useful analysis.

The main task in using the assessment tool was to pull together data to see how each identified option for implementing the initiative would have an impact on different students and communities. The district team gathered data on student enrollment differences by resident zone; the team paid close attention to the proportion of students of color, English language learners, enrollment trends over

¹⁰Jermaine Toney, Organizing Apprenticeship Project, Pocket Guide to Budget Proposals: Racial and Economic Equity Assessment Questions (March 18, 2009), <http://bit.ly/1ak9gTZ>.

¹¹*Id.*

the last five years for kindergarten and certain grades, and attrition within the public schools. The team also analyzed by resident zone the number of magnet programs, the proposed school closures, the programs proposed to be closed, the number of students who would and would not have to change schools. And the team looked at the cost savings of each option and the number and racial percentages of students who would be disrupted, that is, students who would have to change schools.

The district's racial equity analysis revealed that Plan A, which established solid school boundaries, saved the district \$8.5 million while potentially disrupting 9,200 students. The plan disrupted 39 percent of students of color compared to 52 percent of white students. Plan B, which rebalanced zone capacity, saved a little less than Plan A, \$8.2 million, while disrupting only 8,550 students. Under this plan, 43 percent of students of color were disrupted compared to 33 percent of white students. Plan C, which minimized disruption, had the largest savings, \$9 million, and disrupted the fewest: 4,920 students. Plan C caused the disruption of 22 percent of students of color compared to 25 percent of white students.¹² Plan C was clearly the best plan for all kids facing disruption—students of color, English language learners, low-income students, and white students. Still, this final option meant that major schools serving Somali students would be closed while many American Indian students would be forced to change schools.

Because the equity analysis broke down the data by race and culture, each community was able to see how the school initiative's options would have an impact on it. American Indians constituted only 5 percent of the district's student population, but 26 percent of those students would have been adversely affected by the plan. The Somali community would have been adversely affected by the proposed

closure of two schools; the Somalis' access to an anchor school critical to their community would have been affected.

The school district, with an accurate picture of the potential racial effects of the different options, now had an opportunity to make appropriate changes in the school district's proposals and to engage direct stakeholders in collective problem solving.

The district, in consultation with American Indian leaders, tackled the disproportionate adverse impact on the American Indian community by taking a flexible approach to the proposed new boundaries. For example, an American Indian parent whose child's school would now be outside the new boundary could choose to keep the child at the old school or send the child to a school within the new boundary. This flexibility allowed for more parent choice and gave the community the chance to preserve community cohesion. According to one leader,

this almost never happens. Normally, the parent has to follow what the new rules of the game are. This time, the policy was not so arbitrarily implemented because it had the flexibility to take on parent choice. This approach was more empowering for the parents and American Indian community in general. The American Indian community is used to being victimized by policy. This choice flipped that script on its head.¹³

Similarly, communication between the school district and Somali Action Alliance resulted in maintaining an elementary school that fed into a middle school with a solid performance record and reputation for educating Somali students at this critical developmental age. Without the impact analysis, the feeder school would have likely been closed.

¹²Minneapolis Public Schools, Changing School Options Revised Plan and Variations: Pre-reading for 7/14 Board Work Session, *supra* note 2, PowerPoint slide 14. This document has Plans A, B4, and D. We changed the name of Plan B4 to Plan B, and Plan D to Plan C, for simplicity.

¹³Telephone Interview by Jermaine Toney with Elaine Salinas, President, Migizi Communications (Jan. 19, 2012).

The difference that the racial impact assessment made—affording community participation and a better solution—was significant for thousands of families and schoolchildren. According to a school board member,

had the district not done the Equity Impact Analysis, we would not have known the upcoming impacts. In general, it is just good practice to be aware of the impact of a district's decisions—to see and think about impact of decisions. This has to be more of a discipline, not a onetime thing. It has to be embedded in all the work—part of operating as a school district. Not just responding to a community group request but it has to be part of how the district does business.¹⁴

Lessons Learned

The Minneapolis Public Schools' experience in developing an equity impact assessment with community participation has much to teach us. We advocates who plan to do equity assessments should keep in mind five points.

1. **Stakeholder engagement from the outset of planning and decision making is critical.** Those most affected by the proposals at issue must be actively and authentically engaged in decision making. In Minneapolis parents were able to exert influence and shape how they would be affected *before* decisions were made rather than *after* the fact.
2. **Multiracial alliances and analyses are needed.** Communities coming together across racial and cultural lines can be powerful in driving change. Instead of competing racial lines, a multiracial and multiethnic approach to analysis and decision making can generate solutions that benefit people across all races, espe-

cially racial groups that are currently or potentially most disadvantaged.

3. **School district and community collaboration is well worth the investment.** Face-to-face meetings and the development of understanding, trust, and a working partnership pay off in producing better solutions. Collectively partners bring more perspectives, knowledge, and expertise to creating workable and equitable solutions.
4. **The use of race equity research tools is critical to success.** Having concrete frameworks and guides for conducting racial equity impact assessments helps ensure that questions are considered thoughtfully and systematically. Racial equity tools are most effective when they are part of an ongoing broader institutionwide and communitywide strategy for achieving equitable outcomes.¹⁵
5. **Equity impact assessments need to be institutionalized.** Building the use of equity tools into standard protocols can help support and sustain success so that their use is not simply dependent on the goodwill of individuals. Institutions and organizations committed to providing high-quality service to all people can explore ways to integrate racial equity tools at multiple decision-making points, and by multiple decision makers, in order to advance systemwide benefits: “We must be vigilant around equity issues. The system will act like the system, going right back to old behavior real quickly. This is why we must have campaigns, but also we must have policies that institutionalize equity.”¹⁶

Our civil rights legal framework has a strong focus on remedying problems once they have occurred. And, increasingly, lawmakers and jurists are taking a “color-blind” approach to creating and interpreting laws. Yet many laws

¹⁴Telephone interview by Jermaine Toney with Jill Stever-Zeitlin, Minneapolis School Board Member (Jan. 9, 2012).

¹⁵See Kennedy et al., *supra* note 1.

¹⁶Salinas, *supra* note 13.

that are *facially* neutral—silent on race—in their intent, are not *racially* neutral in their impact: racial equity impact assessments—while still needing further refinement and wider application—provide a proactive, participatory, and prospective approach to racial equity efforts. If developed collectively and implemented effectively, they can actually prevent ra-

cial disparities from occurring in the first place. Replacing color blindness with “equity-mindedness”—the conscious and collective consideration of racial impact during decision making—offers hope that we can affirmatively counteract racial bias and advance racial equity and social inclusion.¹⁷

¹⁷Kennedy et al., *supra* note 1.



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