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# In Minnesota, we must think broadly about school integration

By Robert Wedl and Bill Wilson

The face of Minnesota is changing, and so must our integration policy.

Following *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, the method to ensure that children of color would attend better schools was to transport them to schools that white children attended. Why? Because the white schools had better curriculum, better teachers, better facilities and better everything. Courts ordered schools to integrate, to eliminate intentional discrimination based on race but also so that black students could attend the better schools.

Minnesota districts, including Minneapolis, intentionally discriminated against black children. But intentionally segregating students by race is far different from our current situation, in which students of color are the predominant population at numerous schools because of demographics and/or parental choice. Minnesota will not tolerate intentional racial segregation, and no credible evidence exists that either district or charter schools are doing so.

Let us be clear. Both of us support integrated communities. However, where people live is driven largely by policies addressing housing, transportation and jobs, and adults have chosen not to comprehensively address those matters.

The world is moving to Minnesota, and those arriving are primarily persons of color. Between 2000 and 2010, people of color comprised 86 percent of the state's growth. The numbers of Asian and black children tripled, and the number of Hispanic children quadrupled. By 2050, the state will not have a racial majority.

This pace has been accelerated in our schools. The St. Paul district has 78 percent students of color; Minneapolis, 67 percent; Brooklyn Center, 84 percent; Columbia Heights, 76 percent; Richfield, 65 percent; and Robbinsdale, 54 percent. Districts in Greater Minnesota also are



experiencing major demographic changes.

Of greater significance, perhaps, is the difference in the cultures and values of our new immigrants, as many of these parents are intentionally choosing schools predominantly with students of color. Given these demographic changes, integrating schools, as sought by recent litigation filed against the state, would require huge movement of students over wide geographic areas. That would not be fair to our children, many of whom are attending schools their parents chose based on the student's needs and aspirations.

The real question today must be how to achieve better learning for all, regardless of a school's racial composition. Charter schools and some districts in the metro are creating schools and programs with a wide range of models, so learning becomes more personalized. But the recent litigation would both require increased transport of students and erode parental rights to choose. We believe parents ought not be told where they must send their children to school because of the color of their skin.

While the plaintiffs in the litigation suggest that an adequate education can be provided only in a school that has racial balance, there is no consensus among sociologists who study the issue whether integration improves learning and closes achievement gaps. While there are some schools where it has indeed occurred, numerous charter schools in Minnesota and elsewhere with predominantly students of color are doing exceptionally well. We would suggest that when students are learning, it is primarily because teachers are competently providing instruction and motivation and, of course, where parents are making sure that students attend school daily.

We must try new approaches and improve our current efforts.

- First, we must accelerate Minnesota's commitment to early childhood education, both with scholarships for low-income children and Gov. Mark Dayton's preschool for 4-year-olds program.
- Second, we must personalize learning so each student is motivated to learn. We should use methods such as MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports), based on gold-standard research but not present in Minnesota's urban schools.
- Third, we must redesign and innovate — for instance, empowering professional teachers to make the learning decisions at the school or merging grades 11-14 to increase postsecondary success and work-readiness.
- Fourth, we should have students experience the rich cultures around them by providing interschool, multicultural activities, including using the digital platform with which students are expert to link them around the world in learning activities.



- Fifth, we must emphasize Minnesota’s commitment to a culture that values learning. Re-create the “Brainpower State” in Technicolor!

How to proceed with improving learning for all students must be the key question for policymakers. The future of this nation depends on us doing that — now.

*Robert Wedl was commissioner of education for Gov. Arne Carlson, deputy commissioner for Gov. Rudy Perpich, and is now a senior associate with Education | Evolving. Bill Wilson was commissioner of human rights for Gov. Wendell Anderson, a member of the St. Paul City Council and is founding director of Higher Ground Academy charter school in St. Paul.*