The Schools
ST. PAUL
CHILDREN
Deserve

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DEAR COMMUNITY:

Teaching in St. Paul Public Schools was a destination for me because I knew our schools had a gorgeous student population that reflected our world. I also found an amazing group of dedicated, talented colleagues I am honored to work alongside and represent. I know the members of the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers join me in feeling extremely privileged to teach our students.

That privilege is met with a palpable responsibility to meet the needs of all of our students, often in precarious or uncertain conditions. However, these conditions, such as unstable housing and lack of affordable healthcare (just to name a few), don't keep us from producing our best efforts teaching— they keep us up at night. Our commitment to return to our students each day produces an unstoppable determination in us to advocate for everything our students deserve. Our urgency in eliminating disparities among our students is so important to us that we chose to teach over anything else we could have done.

It is that sense of urgency and that commitment to our students and families that fueled the process we designed to collectively produce the priorities you see in this document. We have been working on including more and more people in our negotiations process over the last eight years and that work-in-progress led to our most ambitious engagement yet. Last November we sent invitations to SPFT members, parents and community members to be part of two book clubs that would intensely study and discuss the schools our children deserve with the intention of recommending contract language to our teachers, education assistants and school/community service professionals for our upcoming negotiations. These

groups of parents/teachers/community members held two listening sessions to solicit additional thoughts and suggestions in December and March. Additionally, SPFT members were surveyed over the winter, collecting our highest responses in a decade weighing in on our priorities. All of these ideas were presented to our Executive Board and bargaining teams in April for adoption.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Ros Carroll for facilitating our process to listen, reflect and act. Thank you, Dr. Carroll, for your leadership and for your faith in us. Thank you very much to the parents, community members and SPFT members who took a great deal of their time to listen, reflect and recommend action. We are also very grateful to the American Federation of Teachers, President Randi Weingarten, and the staff of the Human Rights and Community Relations department for your ongoing support, encouragement and lessons.

The result of that work is collected in this document and will be featured in our 2013-15 contract negotiations beginning May 2, 2013. Please join us in our work to create world-class teaching and learning in Saint Paul Public Schools.

Together,

Mary Cathryn Ricker

Mary Cathryn D. Ricker, NBCT
President

SAINT PAUL FEDERATION OF TEACHERS BELIEVES THAT OUR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES DESERVE:

EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD

Saint Paul students deserve and benefit from regular access to a wide range of supporting professionals, including school nurses, counselors, social workers and librarians. Schools must ensure that students and their families have easy access to many different kinds of academic and social services.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Saint Paul teachers should have time to communicate regularly with parents, with a focus on a shared vision for students, not just reaction to day-to-day behavior. The home visit program should be continued in order to best build productive, long-term partnerships with families.

SMALLER CLASSES

Small class sizes increase the benefits of many other parts of school. They allow for better individual instruction, stronger relationships between teachers and students, more frequent communication between teachers and families, and deeper teacher feedback. Saint Paul students deserve a school system that sustains a focus on small class sizes, especially for our most disadvantaged students.

TEACHING, NOT TESTING

There is too much pressure in our school system to focus on narrow, culturally biased standardized tests and lockstep curricula. Saint Paul teachers are professionals who can and do have higher expectations for students than these limited tools. They need freedom to teach to those higher expectations using a variety of techniques, to assess the true depth of student learning in culturally relevant ways, and to provide the kind of feedback and differentiation that leads to real learning. Saint Paul students deserve more time for learning and less time spent on testing.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION

Saint Paul students deserve a culturally relevant education. Administrators, teachers and other staff need rich opportunities to learn from each other, and others, how to best serve everyone from the unique cross-section of the world that makes up Saint Paul Public Schools, and to do so at every point in the educational process. Every effort should be made to prioritize the expertise of Saint Paul's staff of color, the largest percentage of educators of color in the state, to lead this work.

HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Saint Paul teachers deserve teacher-directed professional development. It should be led by teachers for purposes such as advancing and enhancing technology usage, assessment practices, differentiation skills, and cultural responsiveness, with a focus on student outcomes and specific methods. Furthermore, teachers should choose the direction of their individual development, so long as that direction is tied to the outcome of their evaluations under Minnesota state statute.

ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL

Learning begins before students enter kindergarten, and continues after they leave the K-12 system. Every Saint Paul child entering kindergarten in the Saint Paul Public Schools deserves access to a high-quality early childhood education. Additionally, schools should serve as centers of community learning.

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EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD

SCHOOL NURSES

The conventional conception of school nurses is limited to small-scale reactive work—handing out adhesive bandages or sending students home for being sick—but this is not the whole story. In reality, school nurses often play a role in the identification and evaluation of, and/or ongoing support for students with special needs. They provide assistance in helping students manage chronic illnesses or other health conditions. They provide education and referral services on health and wellness related issues including vision, hearing and nutrition.[1]

The combination of strong relationships with students and the well-documented connection between health and learning means that the presence of an appropriately trained and resourced school nurse can have significant, measurable benefits for student achievement.[2] More than most other staff, nurses have a relationship with students that is entirely nurturing.[3] While many other staff help students address internal and external barriers to appropriate behavior and effective learning, and in doing so imply judgmental evaluation, school nurses are more likely to be perceived as wholly oriented towards helping students improve or maintain their health.[4] This gives nurses a unique position as a potential primary point of contact for addressing student wellness needs.

In 2011-12, Saint Paul Public Schools had 65 licensed school nurses, out of 722 in Minnesota.[5] This made for a K-12 student-to-nurse ratio of roughly 570-1 in Saint Paul and 1,142-1 statewide. These numbers include some less than full time positions, and the nature of the student body – particularly the higher concentration of low-income and at-risk students – in Saint Paul means that students would benefit from a smaller ratio in a way that helps narrow the achievement gap between different groups.

There are 570 students for every 1 school nurse in SPPS

OUR GOALS

◆ *Work with school nurses to appropriately and adequately meet the needs of all schools and programs in SPPS.*

◆ *Guarantee, at minimum, a full-time nurse available each day in every school.*

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

The official role of guidance counselors has evolved over time. A few decades ago, counselors served primarily as specialists in responsive services and vocational development; now, however, their work has been more integrated into the school system's larger focus on achievement and accountability.[6] As a result, guidance counselors are now expected to be more proactive and collaborative in closing achievement gaps and raising academic performance across the board. They are also often expected to be involved in dropout prevention[7] and the college search, application and fund-seeking processes.[8]

This has led to a great deal of discussion within and around the broader community of guidance counselors, and there are significant variations in individual counselors' interpretations of their roles and responsibilities to their students, schools and communities.

In addition to these formal roles, counselors have certain informal benefits as a result of their position. In contrast to classroom teachers or school administrators, counselors' role is primarily nurturing rather than evaluative or authoritative (i.e., their primary roles are to support students without conferring judgment in the form of grades or behavioral discipline). This puts counselors in a unique role to support students in a context clearly oriented toward helping students rather than requesting or demanding compliance for the sake of compliance. Part of the counselor's role, then, is encouraging a safe learning environment for all students and leveraging their relationships with students to promote that sense of safety.

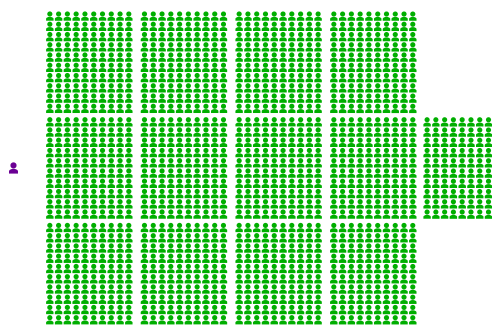..

"It's unbelievable that we are one of the worst in the nation for counselor ratios ... The many needs are there; however, we don't have the staff to address the needs of the students, community, and still do the business required in running a building."

— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment

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In Minnesota, the overall ratio of students to counselors has been reported at 771:1, and has routinely been one of the highest in the country.[9] Many of these counselors are operating at the secondary level, leaving the elementary ratio at 3,428 students to 1 counselor.[10] Many elementary schools end up sharing counselors as a result. Given that many interventions tend to be most effective when applied at younger ages, it would be reasonable to infer that the high statewide ratios mean that many opportunities for positive intervention are being missed.

In Saint Paul, the Minnesota Department of Education identifies 78 counselor positions serving district schools, 16 of which are in elementary positions.[11] In a district of 37,840 K-12 students, including 20,582 K-6 students,[12] that makes for a districtwide student-to-counselor ratio of roughly 485-1 and an elementary ratio of 1,286-1. The districtwide calculation includes ALC students and counselors, who have a generally smaller ratio. Excluding ALC students and counselors produces a ratio of roughly 661-1. The American School Counselors Association recommends a 250-1 ratio.[13] That recommendation, however, is for the general student population. A district like Saint Paul Public Schools with a disproportionate number of students from low-income backgrounds would presumably be better served by a still smaller ratio.

There are 1,286 students for every 1 elementary school counselor in SPPS

As a caveat, these averages obscure site-to-site variations in student-to-counselor ratios, many of which can get much larger than the averages reported here.

Our Goals

- *Reduce student-to-counselor ratios to be in line with ASCA recommendations (i.e., 250-1).*

- *Increase counselor specialization (e.g., specific focuses on gifted/talented, special education, college application, etc.).*

- *Incorporate guidance counselors into staff-directed professional development to support the development of differentiation skills, culturally relevant education and other areas.*

- *Increase regular access to counselors. Students will feel safe at school and have people to go to when they don't feel safe.*

School Social Workers

Where once the roles of school counselors and school social workers were relatively discrete, there has been significant convergence in recent decades. The responsibilities of a counselor delineated in the preceding section more closely resemble some of the work traditionally done by social workers. For their part, social workers have seen their responsibilities evolve from a historical focus on environmental and family factors to a more collaborative model, in which social workers find themselves as key players in multidisciplinary teams working to help students overcome or transcend various barriers to academic and personal success.[14] This includes working to maintain a safe environment for all students.

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"Social workers, nurses and counselors are a must! There are many kids who need that extra support."

— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment

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Again sharing a similarity with counselors, social workers' primary interactions with children tend to focus on the holistic needs of children rather than primarily on academic work or behavioral compliance (as is more common for classroom teachers

and school administrators). This creates a different relationship dynamic between social workers and students, which in turn allows social workers to take the lead or be a primary contact point for multi-tiered efforts to help students.[15]

According to MDE, in 2011-12, there were 106 school social workers in the Saint Paul Public Schools, and 1,231 statewide (although some of these were not full-time positions). During the same school year, the Saint Paul Public Schools had 37,063 K-12 students and the state as a whole had 824,858 students enrolled. This made for a student-to-social worker ratio of approximately 350-1 in Saint Paul and 670-1 statewide.[16]

Our Goals

- *Reduce student-to-social worker ratios to 250-1, or some other number agreed upon by social workers and other staff.*

- *Ensure that at least one social worker is present in every school during all hours that school is in session.*

- *Increase regular access to social workers. Students will feel safe at school and have people to go to when they don't feel safe.*

Librarians

Of all the roles discussed so far, school librarians have likely seen the largest evolution in the nature of their role over the past few decades, while in the same time, St. Paul students have experienced the greatest decline in access to their expertise. The advent of the Internet and the digitizing of many resources previously accessible only in book form has fundamentally altered the nature of the school librarian's job. In many cases, the job itself has been retitled as "media specialist" or "media literacy specialist," as librarians have voluntarily expanded their purview to include the use of current technology to serve the same basic purposes as older methods of research.[17]
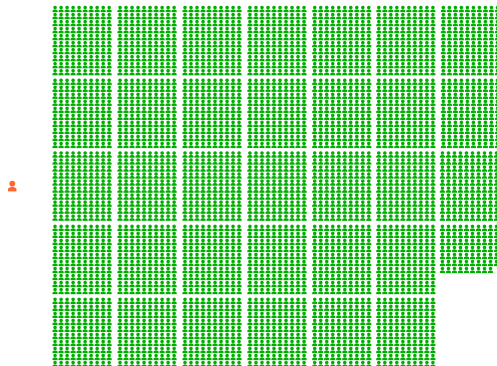
Not only do librarians (and media specialists, etc.) provide direct services to students in the form of helping them navigate modern research tools and techniques, they have also been linked to broader academic gains. In

part, this may be because an active presence in the library affects school climate in a way that reinforces other messages and values around learning. In any case, adequately staffed school libraries have been found to correlate with higher test scores, even when controlling for the effects of poverty.[18]

Of Minnesota's 166 licensed librarians in 2011-12, three were in the Saint Paul Public Schools.[19] Additionally, there were 773 "media generalists," of which eight were in Saint Paul. Classifying the media generalists as similar to the modern conception of a librarian, this made for a district-level student-to-librarian ratio of 3,369-1 and a statewide ratio of 918-1. Again, a district like Saint Paul Public Schools with a disproportionate number of students from low-income backgrounds would presumably be better served by a still smaller ratio.

As discussed for other positions, these numbers may still not capture the full problem, as some of the listed positions may not be full time or may be spread among so many schools that their overall effectiveness is decreased.

There are 3,369 students for every 1 librarian in SPPS

Even with those caveats, this appears to be a particular area of weakness for Saint Paul relative to the rest of the state. To illustrate, consider the change in ratios from school nurses to librarians. For the state, the ratio shrank slightly (1,142-1 for nurses compared to 918-1 for librarians), while for Saint Paul it grew dramatically (from 570-1 for nurses to 3,369-1 for librarians). This suggests that library support is a particular area of weakness for Saint Paul Public Schools relative to the rest of the state.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Improve the student-to-media specialist ratio so that students have equal access to the information literacy skills they need to be college and career ready.*

◆ *Clarify the roles of librarians and media specialists to reflect students' current needs.*

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Public schools are in the relatively rare position of being a near-daily point of contact between the public and resources from the government and interested nonprofits. While schools cannot and should not be solely responsible for supporting their students' families, they do have the opportunity to efficiently and effectively deliver a variety of services that can help families thrive. For example, some schools have successfully integrated clinical services that have improved both access to health care and real health outcomes for students and their families.[20] Others have offered guidance to families looking for housing solutions. There is still a significant amount of untapped potential, much of which would benefit both schools and students without requiring much in additional resources from the district.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Continue to expand and pursue opportunities to coordinate with community-based support services to best serve families.*

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

TIME TO COMMUNICATE FREQUENTLY

It is by now well established that family engagement with student learning is a core component of student success.[21] One way to facilitate that engagement is to have regular communication between teachers and families.[22] However, many teachers find themselves torn between many different tasks, and so communication with families too often doesn't happen outside of pre-planned structures like conferences and reactions to particular behavioral or academic crises. What's more, many families have work schedules or other concerns that make attending conferences difficult, further reducing opportunities for communication. If we are to truly strengthen the communication between teachers and families, teachers need the time to engage in that communication. Time would also allow them to communicate with families in ways that better fit those families' schedules and needs.

OUR GOALS

- ◆ *Reduce class size.*

- ◆ *Reduce paperwork needs and other time demands on teachers that take them away from productive family engagement.*

- ◆ *Increase availability of translation services to make teacher/family communication easier.*

- ◆ *Increase flexibility for conferences and other types of family engagement.*

WORKING TOGETHER ON A POSITIVE VISION FOR STUDENTS

As described earlier, much of the current communication between teachers and families is in reaction to particular student actions or performance. Rarely do teachers and families have the opportunity to talk proactively about a positive vision for the student in question. Too often, this reactive communication can, through misunderstanding, devolve into blame-shifting, accusations or other forms of conflict. It would be far more beneficial for students for teachers and families to act as partners in identifying what they want for students, framing future conversations in terms of how well the student is moving toward that vision.[23]

In part, this requires significant engagement with families early in the student's time with the teacher (and, in many cases, would ideally happen before the school year begins). Again, this requires time for teachers to communicate, but it also requires cultural proficiency so that those early conversations can be most productive. Different cultures and families have different views of the appropriate roles for families relative to teachers in the education process, and it is important for teachers to have the understanding and skills to respond appropriately to those views.[24]
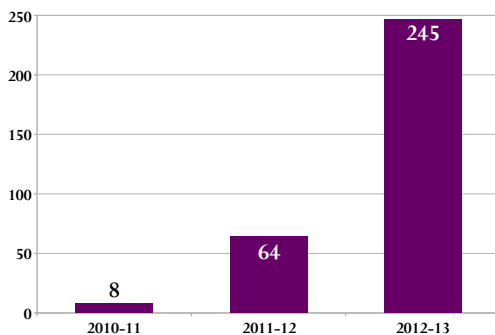
OUR GOALS

- ◆ *Arrange for conferences of a significant length at the beginning of the school year.*

- ◆ *Provide opportunities for teachers and families to construct high expectations together.*

- ◆ *Provide schools the flexibility to design their own conference structure.*

THE HOME VISIT PROGRAM

In the 2010-11 school year, SPPS started a home visit program, originated by teacher Nick Faber. In that first year, eight teachers, largely concentrated at John A. Johnson Elementary School, were trained, and between them engaged in 12 home visits. In the 2011-12 year, the program expanded to 56 teachers in 20 buildings. As of this writing midway through the 2012-13 school year, 181 teachers in over 40 buildings have been trained, with 120 visits made so far this school year.[25]

Total Number of Teachers Trained for Home Visit Program

This program has on the whole been valuable for the participating teachers and families, and it represents a significant amount of potential for future strength in teacher/family communication. The program creates opportunities for proactive engagement of families, stronger relationships between teachers and families, and better understanding for teachers of the circumstances from which their students come. It also has the potential to be a source of information about other ways the district can support its students' families. Putting more resources into growing the program and finding more ways to increase the time available to teachers to engage in it would further develop the program and realize its potential even more than has already happened.

OUR GOALS

- ◆ *Invest more resources to expand the home visit program.*

- ◆ *Take steps to increase the time available to teachers to engage in home visits.*

SMALLER CLASSES

CLASS SIZE MATTERS

Theoretical Basis

The theoretical arguments in favor of smaller class sizes are largely intuitive. A smaller class means that the teacher can spend more time individualizing the educational experience. Instruction, assessment and feedback, for example, can all be differentiated with more attention to individual students. Teachers also have the potential to have more frequent, in-depth, one-on-one interactions with each student. Also, teachers can spend more time interacting with each student's family, building connections and strengthening home-based support for students' educational progress.

Research Evidence

For various logistical reasons, controlled experiments about class size are difficult to organize and conduct. As a result, much of the research on class size comes from nonexperimental studies (for example, comparing the performance of pre-existing classes of different sizes in the same subject and/or grade level).

One such study examined the relationship between class size and standardized test scores in math and reading in Alabama. It found small effects from reductions in class size in both subjects, although it found a "threshold effect" in reading at 25, meaning that class size reductions below 25 students per class did not correspond to increases in test scores. For example, shrinking a class from 24 students to 19 wouldn't be expected to improve reading scores, since both numbers are already below the threshold of 25 students.

Math did not experience this threshold effect, so we would expect to see test score gains in math when reducing a class from 24 students to 19. The effect of class size on math scores was more pronounced than the effect on reading even above the threshold.[26] (This is consistent with a general trend in educational research, where math scores are more susceptible to school-based interventions than are reading scores.)

Another study in Texas examined class sizes roughly between 13 and 21 students per class. This study found a substantial amount of variability in the apparent effect of class size reduction, although it did find positive effects of smaller class sizes on reading without a threshold for every grade below 11th, suggesting perhaps that older, more independent learners are not as affected by class size reductions. In general, the study found that the effect of class size reduction was smaller once the class size dropped below 18 students.[27]

A 1988 study of National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data found that increased class sizes tracked with higher test scores generally. The primary exceptions were for the range of class sizes between 16 and 30 students per class in social studies and science (though not math or English). Some of this can be explained through the tendency to place struggling students in smaller classes—demonstrating the limitations of "natural" studies without experimental controls—and a more sophisticated analysis by the same researcher found a broader range of positive impacts for class size reduction, although they were strongest in science and social studies, and the effect size was much smaller than several non-school factors, like family background.[28]

Combining these U.S. findings from studies conducted in Norway,[29] Sweden[30] and various countries in East Asia[31] suggests that class size reduction as a general policy results in neutral-to-positive results. These results are complicated by a variety of caveats, and they are further complicated by the relative scarcity of controlled, experimental research. As one last note, many of the arguments about a lack of effect of class size reductions come from literature reviews conducted by Hanushek, and particularly from his 1997 review on the subject. These have been contested by Krueger, as well as by some of the more recent studies already cited.

THE TENNESSEE STAR EXPERIMENT

The one frequently cited controlled experiment in class size research is the Project STAR study in Tennessee. This study randomly assigned students to classes of different size and tracked their performance in math, reading and science on a standardized test commonly used for such research (the Stanford Achievement Test). While not used by Hanushek in his literature reviews, others arguing for nonexistent effects of class size reductions, as well as those arguing for class size reduction only creating benefits for particularly small class sizes, base their work on initial interpretations of the data from the Tennessee study.

However, other recent analyses, including one by Krueger[32] and one by Konstantopolous and Chung,[33] find that reducing class sizes does have a positive effect, particularly when sustained over multiple years, and does not have a critical threshold below which gains begin. While these analyses are not able to identify the cost effectiveness of class size reduction relative to other possible interventions, they do suggest that it is a viable strategy for improving student performance (at least on the measures used by the study in question). It is worth noting that the Project STAR study focused primarily on younger grades, and the subsequent analyses have confirmed that students who received multiple years of small class sizes sustained their gains through the high school years.

"When studies are given equal weight, the literature exihibits systematic evidence of a relationship between class size and achievement."

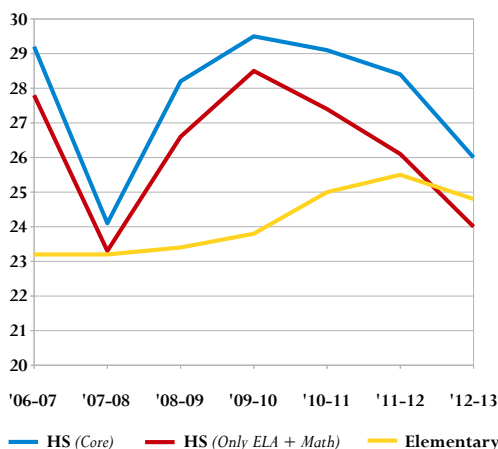*— from "Economic Considerations and Class Size," Krueger, 2003, p.F59*

One final consideration, reflected in many of the studies discussed previously, is that the overall effectiveness of class size reductions does depend in part on how well teachers capitalize on the potential benefits of class size reduction. Even studies like Krueger's analysis of the Tennessee STAR project note that there is variation between schools and classrooms in the magnitude of benefit from class size reduction.[34] This suggests that teacher- and school-related factors do influence the degree to which class size reduction benefits students. This makes intuitive sense. To pick an extreme example, a class of five students would learn as much in an empty room as a class of 35 students would. On its own, however, the existence of such a hypothetical or the observed variation between actual classes is not enough to discredit the value of class size reduction when handled properly.

CLASS SIZE IN SAINT PAUL

The Saint Paul Public Schools Data Center, accessible via the district's website, provides data on district-level class size trends from the 2006-07 school year to the 2012-13 school year.[35]

Class Size Trends in SPPS, 2006-13

The district-level data reveal some interesting trends. For the purposes of the following discussion, "elementary" refers to K-6 (using the district's definition) and the "core" for junior high and high school refers to the combination of English/language arts, mathematics, social studies and science.

According to the district's data for 2006-13, the average elementary class size has increased by 1.6 students, moving from 23.2 students per class in the 2006-07 school year to 24.8 students per class in the 2012-13 school year. The biggest growth occurred in second grade, where the average class size increased from 22.2 students per class to 24.6 students per class. In general, the increases to elementary school size could be a cause for concern, as the available research suggests that class size changes have the largest impacts when they occur in the early grades. It should be noted that elementary class sizes peaked in the 2011-12 school year and have come down somewhat in the 2012-13 school year.

Junior high has seen a more modest increase in class size, with the average core class increasing by 0.75 students from 2006-07 to 2012-13. Within the junior high core, the biggest increase came in English, where average class size grew from 21.3 to 23.5. Within the core, only mathematics classes have on average declined, shrinking from 25 students per class to 22.9. As a final interesting note outside the core, junior high physical education courses grew dramatically from 26.6 students per class to 31 students per class. Also noteworthy is that the two core courses not attached to high-stakes standardized tests (social studies and science) have larger average class sizes (26.3 and 26.5, respectively) than English and math (23.5 and 22.9, respectively).

High school has seen reductions in class size in each core subject, for an average core decrease of 3.2 students per class (from 29.2 to 26). The biggest reductions came in math, where average class size shrank by 4.7 students between 2006-07 and 2012-13, from 27.8 to 23.1. Interestingly, this now means that every elementary school grade has a larger average class size than the average high school math class. (Average elementary class sizes range from a low of 23.6 students per class in kindergarten to a high of 25.9 students per class in fifth grade.) Similar to junior high, the two high school core subjects not attached to high-stakes standardized tests have higher average class sizes (28.7 in social studies and 27.2 in science) than those tested subjects that are linked to high-stakes consequences (24.9 in English/language arts, 23.1 in math).

Of course, individual schools and classrooms will deviate from these average trends. Nonetheless, it is clear that districtwide trends are toward clearly increasing class sizes at the elementary level, moderate increases in the junior high core (save for reductions in math) and significant reductions in the high school core.

Furthermore, the positive effects of class size reduction for students tend to compound with multiple years' inclusion in smaller class sizes. A corollary of this is that the detriments of larger class sizes will similarly compound relative to student performance prior to the class size increase. Since the increases in elementary school class size have occurred in every elementary grade, students for the past few years have been exposed to increasing class sizes. 2012-13 marks the first time since 2007-08 that elementary school class sizes have decreased rather than increased on average.

This suggests that many of the students who were in elementary school during the time of increasing class sizes (particularly during the time between 2009-10 and 2011-12 when average elementary class size increased from 23.8 to 25.5) have been exposed to less favorable circumstances than those who went before. Some have now moved on to a middle school experience where many class sizes have been slowly increasing with time. Only in high school will they experience truly reduced class sizes, although research suggests that the high school years are when the benefits of smaller class sizes are at their lowest. On the whole, this suggests a shortsighted approach to class sizes in SPPS that could have negative impacts that do not fully manifest for several years.

Another potentially disturbing trend is the excessive focus on only reducing class sizes in high-stakes subjects at the expense of non-high-stakes subjects. Even though an MCA test has been rolled out in science, there are as yet no consequences attached to it, while the math and reading tests carried potential consequences for schools throughout the NCLB era, and may yet again depending on future developments in state and federal education policy. The preference for lower class sizes in (high-stakes) tested subjects may produce some gains in those subjects, but at some hidden cost to student learning in untested subjects that have appreciably larger class sizes. This suggests a misalignment of district priorities toward what is tested rather than what constitutes an ideally comprehensive education for students.

OUR GOALS

- *Reduce class size across grades and subjects, with particular emphasis on earlier grades and our most disadvantaged students.*

- *Ensure that class size reduction is aimed at benefiting all grades and subjects, not just those that are subject to standardized testing.*

- *Link class size reduction to other specific efforts (e.g., strengthening teacher/family communication, increasing individualization and differentiation of instruction, etc.).*

TEACHING, NOT TESTING

STANDARDIZED TESTS ARE TOO NARROW

Too much time is spent on testing and test preparation in Saint Paul schools. Students are effectively spending weeks, if not months, not engaged in classroom learning. Standardized tests can serve an important role in education, giving a snapshot picture of how a system or district's students are doing. However, when too many consequences are attached to those tests, there is pressure on districts, schools and teachers to change what and how they teach to more closely align with the content and format of the high stakes tests.[36]

This would not be a source of as much concern if the tests assessed the full breadth and depth of learning expected of students. However, at present the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) only assess select standards in math, reading and science.[37] Furthermore, the tests are not designed to assess the highest levels of learning in the particular standards they do test.[38]

To construct a testing regime that offered enough breadth and depth to assess all standards at the highest levels would require months of testing alone, before even considering test preparation. This is clearly not practical.

While the MCAs are required by the state, the district engages in its own standardized testing. The district's testing provides feedback quickly enough that it can be used by teachers, in contrast to the MCAs, whose results are not available until well after students have left the grade in which they were tested.

OUR GOALS

◆ *A commitment to a full, comprehensive education for students rather than a narrow focus on tested standards.*

◆ *Define comprehensive education as rich access to arts, music, physical education, world language and other liberal arts throughout our pre-K-12 system.*

◆ *Prioritize teacher-designed methods for measuring student learning.*

EXCESSIVELY REGULATED CURRICULA RESTRICT TEACHERS' PROFESSIONALISM

In an effort to mediate the effects of student mobility, increase consistency across the district and align instruction with the particular tests used to assess schools, there are grades and subjects in SPPS that use heavily scripted curricula. In some cases, teachers are expected to maintain the exact same pace with others using the same curriculum. Despite their intentions, the effect of prescribed curricula in much of the district constrains teachers unnecessarily and prevents meaningful student engagement, undermining their initiative and negating teachers' professional training and experience.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Trust teachers to agree upon common curricular checkpoints and/or general timelines without restricting them to lockstep execution.*

◆ *Respect teachers' professional experience and allow for flexibility to innovate, explore and differentiate around a rigorous core curriculum.*

TEACHERS HAVE HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

Teachers tend to have higher expectations for their students than the expectations set by the standardized tests used as "accountability" measures. Teachers in general wish to teach content beyond those standards tested by the MCAs, and they wish to teach to higher levels of learning. However, too often they find their initiative in pursuing these higher expectations discouraged by a systemic expectation that they focus on standardized test scores.

"Let teachers teach again with creativity, passion and love for students instead of to test scores… Give families a chance to see teachers love their job because they love their students."

— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment

It is past time to acknowledge the limitations of the expectations set for students by the MCAs (while noting their importance in establishing a statewide minimum set of expectations). Classroom assessments and instruction should be seen as the core of education and treated as such by the district. Teachers should have the time and freedom to develop student skills like research and problem solving above and beyond those opportunities laid out in required curricula.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Facilitate professional discussions of what constitute appropriately high expectations for academic, behavioral and social success so that we all share the same clear expectations for preparing our students for college and career.*

◆ *Prioritize assessment as a skill for ongoing professional development, with emphasis placed on classroom assessments over mandated standardized tests.*

A VARIETY OF TEACHING TECHNIQUES

As has been well documented in research, different students learn best through different kinds of classroom experiences.[39] However, the vast majority of instruction takes place in a way that favors students whose strengths lie in logical/mathematical intelligence and verbal/linguistic intelligence, at the expense of those whose strengths lie elsewhere.[40]

As particular examples, students should have time for discussion, collaboration, originality, elaboration, fluency and flexibility. They should be able to routinely engage in project-based learning, multidisciplinary learning and experiential learning.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Consistently honor and encourage a variety of teaching techniques and styles so students see the love teachers have for our work rather than factory-style delivery.*

◆ *Provide professional development support for teaching to multiple intelligences and broadening the variety of teaching techniques in teachers' "toolboxes."*
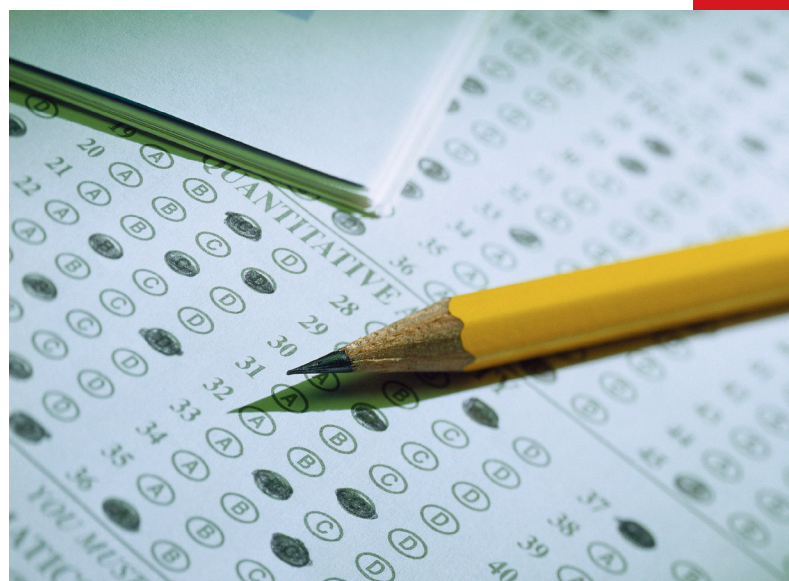
ASSESSING THE TRUE DEPTH OF STUDENT LEARNING

Having already noted the shortcomings of standardized tests, it is important to note the superior potential of classroom assessments to assess the true breadth and depth of student learning. As with instruction itself, it is important to use a variety of assessments to gauge student learning of the same content.[41]

For example, students should have the opportunity to demonstrate their learning through products, presentations, reflections and models. These assessments should be culturally accepting and relevant, in contrast to standardized tests that still contain subtle cultural biases.[42] Frequent assessments, offered in appropriate variety and receiving deep and timely feedback, are one of the best ways to help teachers make sure students are learning at truly high levels.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Give teachers greater freedom in designing a variety of high-quality assessments.*

◆ *Reduce class sizes to allow for deeper feedback, greater differentiation and truly individualized instruction in response to assessment data.*

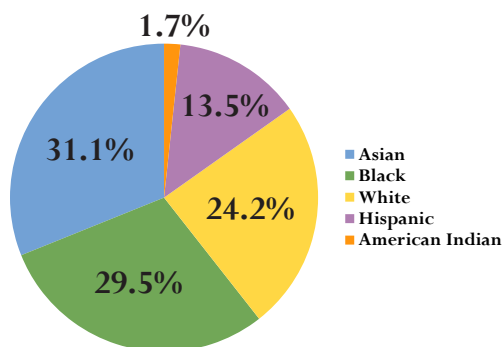◆ *Support professional development around cultural relevance, differentiation and assessment practices.*

CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN FOR ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND STAFF

The city of Saint Paul has seen a flowering of many kinds of diversity in the last 20 to 30 years. Among these are significant demographic shifts, and the Saint Paul Public Schools now serve students from a globe-spanning, unique blend of races, cultures and experiences.[43] In broad strokes, students of Asian descent made up 31.1 percent of the 2012 SPPS student population, students of African descent made up 29.5 percent, students of European descent made up 24.2 percent, students of Latino descent made up 13.5 percent, and students of American Indian descent made up 1.7 percent.[44] Of course, within those broad groups are many different experiences, and the student population includes students whose families have been in the U.S. for generations, students who are the children of immigrants or refugees, and students who themselves are immigrants or refugees. This exceptional mixture of cultures has drawn many SPFT members to the district.

SPPS Students by Race

- Asian — 31.1%
- Black — 29.5%
- White — 24.2%
- Hispanic — 13.5%
- American Indian — 1.7%

One benefit of this is that many different cultures are now represented in SPPS classrooms. All students deserve teachers, administrators and other school staff working to provide them with a culturally relevant education. Research confirms that culturally relevant educational practices produce significant benefits for students.[45] This does not mean engaging in tokenism or "heroes and holidays" level acknowledgment of different cultures.[46] Instead, it means providing an education with curriculum, instruction and assessment aimed at delivering the same skills to students in a variety of culturally relevant ways. It also means ensuring that all school staff who have regular contact with families are prepared to engage productively across cultures.

Building such an education is a long and difficult process, which is why it is important to create many opportunities for adults in the buildings to learn about how to improve the cultural relevance of their work.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Harness the interest and expertise of staff who have already invested significant time and energy in improving their own practice by supporting them as leaders of professional development that will build investment and proficiency in providing culturally relevant education.*

◆ *Support staff growth in this area. This support should be provided on an ongoing basis (i.e., incorporated into professional development happening during the regular school week) with an understanding that long-term engagement will be necessary to build credibility, develop appropriate investment and see results.*

CULTURALLY RELEVANT SERVICE AT EVERY POINT IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Creating a culturally relevant education is about more than what happens in the classroom. There are many ways that insensitivity to cultural differences can weaken the educational experience and the relationship between schools and students, and their families.[47] For example, when school personnel—administrators, teachers and others—communicate with families about discipline, postsecondary expectations, how best to support students outside of school and many more topics, there is potential for

cultural differences to lead to breakdowns in communication, harmful misunderstandings and missed opportunities for students.[48]

From the moment SPPS first reaches out to a family about pre-kindergarten offerings to the path from high school to postsecondary life, our schools need to be responsive to the many different cultures of the students and families they serve.

"All teachers need to implement culturally responsive teaching."

— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment

Of course, this does not take away from the importance of cultural relevance in the classroom. The choices, recommendations and demands made by traditional curricula (and many standardized assessments) tend to assume students are middle class, English-speaking, European descendents.[49] These assumptions simply do not apply to the majority of students in SPPS. Part of building a bridge to success in college and career for students is being aware of and responsive to their various cultures. This requires not just high expectations, but also an openness to many ways of teaching students to meet those high expectations and accepting several ways for students to demonstrate mastery of them. Ultimately, closing the achievement gap and realizing true educational equity involves educators celebrating the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students, and working to reflect that mindset in their teaching.

OUR GOALS

- ◆ *Ensure that professional development is offered to all school personnel that interact with students and families (i.e. not just teachers) so that everyone has the opportunity to develop cultural proficiency.*

- ◆ *Increase the focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and assessment in classrooms.*

- ◆ *Promote the sharing of best practices that staff have found to set and meet high expectations in a culturally relevant way.*

PRIORITIZING THE EXPERTISE OF STAFF OF COLOR

At approximately 15 percent, Saint Paul has the highest percentage of teachers of color in the state of Minnesota.[50] While we are proud of this fact, we are not yet satisfied with this percentage. We have a unique opportunity to prioritize the expertise and experience of this section of our teaching corps. This means increasing staff-led professional development to give staff of color more opportunities to lead conversations and ensuring a significant role for staff of color in improving school/family communication. It also offers a unique ability to continue our work attracting a high-quality, diverse work force.

OUR GOALS

- ◆ *Design and implement a permanent practice for continuously diversifying our work force.*

- ◆ *Support staff of color to improve retention and reduce isolation in the teaching profession.*

HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TEACHER-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKS BETTER

While the "traditional" format for professional development is to bring in outside experts to speak once or twice apiece over the course of a school year on a topic chosen by school or district administration, research shows that the most effective professional development tends to be teacher-led.[51] A teacher from the same school (or at least the same district) as his or her audience tends to better know the needs of the school's students and is more likely to be seen as credible.[52] This may be because the presenting teacher has more familiarity with the particular student population being served by the school, because they have earned respect through years of service, or because they have a proven track record of mentorship and support for colleagues. In any case, this increased credibility tends to lead to increased motivation and an increased likelihood of incorporating the development topic into day-to-day teaching.[53]

Additionally, teacher-directed professional development increases the availability of the development leaders outside of formal professional development times. This means that teachers working to master the development material can more easily get questions answered or receive feedback on their ideas and attempts.[54] Teacher-directed development is also empowering for the rest of the staff; it suggests that they, too, can receive recognition and appreciation for the professional expertise they have built and continue to build.[55] In this sense, teacher-directed professional development encourages a professional climate of constant learning and growth, and does so more effectively than bringing in outside "experts."

It should be noted here that teacher-directed professional development may be unfamiliar to many faculty and administration members who have grown accustomed to the less effective but more traditional approach. As such, some schools may experience some difficulties in fully implementing this model effectively. These initial difficulties should receive support in adapting to the new, teacher-directed model, and they should not be seen as a reason to return to the old system.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Teachers design and select topics for professional development.*

◆ *Ask teachers to identify other teachers in the school or district who best execute the skills and methods they've identified for development.*

◆ *Provide logistical support to teacher experts as they prepare and deliver professional development sessions.*

DEVELOPMENT DURING THE REGULAR SCHOOL WEEK AND CURRENT SCHOOL HOURS

One major finding of the research into professional development in education is that the particular form of professional development is less important than the regular incorporation of that development into teachers' schedules.[56] In contrast, the traditional model for professional development involves one-shot workshops, typically with a heavy lecture component, with minimal regular follow-up over the course of the year.[57]

More effective models create regular opportunities for teachers to reflect on their growth, share the results of their efforts so far and identify their next steps for further development.[58] This idea in SPPS has established Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). However, the implementation of PLCs is inconsistent from school to school, and too often requires time from teachers outside of their regular school day and week. At many schools, teachers also do not have the freedom to direct professional development in their PLCs, even though that would likely increase the effectiveness of those PLCs. This combination results in many schools not realizing the full potential of PLCs, not to mention other attempts at collaborative professional development. PLCs should be built into teachers' current school hours, acknowledged as part of professional practice and not something "extra" tacked onto the end of a day or justifying an extension of the school day.

Some schools have made the PLC model work well, in that most teachers find their PLCs useful. Other schools have found different ways to incorporate effective professional development as a regular part of teacher schedules. If the time and resources put into professional development are to be spent efficiently and in a way that best helps teachers serve students, it would be reasonable to more clearly identify these schools and spread their successes.

As with the previous point about teacher-directed professional development, this can be an unfamiliar model for some teachers. Initial confusion and minor missteps during the first attempts to change professional development approaches should not be grounds for dismissing this model of professional development. Rather, schools that don't succeed in their early attempts should receive support in adjusting to this model.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Move away from factory model education delivery and toward schedules that provide development opportunities during regular school hours.*

A FOCUS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES AND SPECIFIC METHODS

One of the defining attributes of successful ongoing professional development is a focus on student outcomes and what the teacher did to influence them.[59] Effective PLCs and other development systems rely on teachers bringing in student work, identifying what they did when teaching the material and investigating student outcomes with their peers to evaluate the effectiveness of how they taught the material.[60] This approach ensures that professional development focuses on improving day-to-day student learning and allows teachers to get feedback on their attempts at implementing development topics.

It is generally better to narrow the focus of development to a few areas, such as culturally relevant pedagogy or differentiation of instruction and assessment. It is better still to further narrow down those areas to particular methods and skills.[61] "Differentiation," for example, contains many specific tools, strategies and skills. Teachers looking to develop their differentiation skills should be allowed to focus on a select few of the possible methods at any one time. As they master these methods, they can move on to other ones. In general, then, professional development should encourage teachers to hone a small number of new skills at once, with particular attention paid to student outcomes (both academic and non-academic) as a gauge for how effectively the teacher is developing those new skills.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Professional development organized around student outcomes based on teacher-designed measurements.*

◆ *Trust for individual teachers to identify a small, clear set of specific practices for development.*

◆ *Ensure that "student outcomes" is seen as encompassing non-academic outcomes (e.g., behavioral, social/ emotional) as well as academic ones.*

DEVELOPMENT BASED ON EVALUATIONS

Under state law, Minnesota is required to implement a new, recently designed teacher evaluation system.[62] This system is intended to give teachers direction in identifying areas for their own professional improvement. As a result, teachers must be given the freedom to identify the direction of their own development in alignment with their evaluation.

While the earlier discussion of teacher-directed professional development focused on letting groups of teachers identify areas for growth, it is also important to support individual teachers in planning their personal professional development. This may be reflected in building-wide goals or specific methods identified by a smaller group of teachers, but each teacher also needs an element of autonomy and support in setting his or her own course for professional development. Administrators and coaches should be expected to support that identified professional development.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Administrators who understand and support the importance of teachers designing their own paths for development.*

◆ *Provide teachers access to resources and opportunities outside the formal evaluation/observation cycle that support reaching individual development goals.*

◆ *Design and implement a comprehensive teacher development and evaluation system that taps into a teacher's innate desire to grow and improve instruction.*
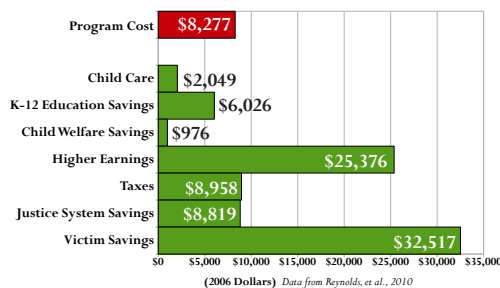
ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The earliest years of a child's life are some of the most important for his or her development. Whether one is concerned about the achievement gap or broader personal outcomes for children as they mature, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the early childhood years. As such, increased attention is being paid to the possible role early childhood education and support can play in addressing a variety of academic and non-academic concerns.

There are a few longitudinal studies of particular early childhood interventions that form the foundation for much of the scholarship about the importance of these years.[63] They find that high-quality programs not only improve academics, but also improve long-term personal outcomes for children and reduce social costs from crime and welfare.[64] As a result, the return on investment for strong early childhood programs has been put anywhere between $2.50 and $16 for each $1 invested.[65, 66]

Costs and Benefits of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program
(per participant)

Category	Value
Program Cost	$8,277
Child Care	$2,049
K-12 Education Savings	$6,026
Child Welfare Savings	$976
Higher Earnings	$25,376
Taxes	$8,958
Justice System Savings	$8,819
Victim Savings	$32,517

(2006 Dollars) *Data from Reynolds, et al., 2010*

These high-quality examples provide a starting point for understanding what makes for an effective early childhood program. Other programs have different levels of effectiveness, depending on how well they can implement the key characteristics of successful systems.[67] It's also important to remember that the total benefits of strong early childhood programs take years to fully manifest.

As such, it is important to be clear about what kinds of programs deserve support and to have realistic expectations about the timeline of their effects.

The exemplary programs in the foundational studies share certain characteristics, with small class sizes, well-crafted learning environments and extensive family engagement standing out as extremely important.[68] As the experience of Oklahoma demonstrates, a universal early childhood program increases the benefits of early childhood, as all students arrive at kindergarten better prepared to learn and early elementary teachers can more routinely lead their students to meet higher expectations.[69] Another area that deserves consideration is a stronger alignment of early childhood education with early elementary programming.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Expand full day pre-kindergarten offerings in elementary schools to reflect the conclusive evidence about early childhood's effects on elementary school and to meet community demand.*

◆ *Expand other pre-kindergarten programs, such as Early Childhood Family Education and Early Childhood Special Education, offered by the district such that every family has access to a high-quality early childhood offering.*

◆ *Continue the support and conditions through the K-12 experience in order to maximize the gains from high-quality preschool.*

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES

A growing body of research confirms that family engagement is one of the keys to success for students.[70] One way of promoting that engagement is by creating learning opportunities specifically for families. Some successful programs already exist that increase family members' academic skills so that they can better support their students' school work, as well as a variety of non-academic skills, such as financial management, that allow for indirect but inarguably important support of students' personal, physical and academic development.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Use information from teacher/family communication to design particular learning opportunities tailored to common needs/interests for a school's population of families, and make community education courses (e.g., computer/technology skills, budgeting, nutritious cooking) free for students' families.*

SCHOOLS AS CENTERS OF COMMUNITY LEARNING

Considering the rapid rate of change in today's jobs and industries as well as the value our society places on learning for the sake of personal growth, it is time to reframe our understanding of what the scope of a school system should be. Even with the many postsecondary options available in Saint Paul, too many families face financial, logistical or other barriers to accessing those opportunities. SPPS can help fill that gap, increasing opportunities for adult education above and beyond current adult education and community education offerings.

Doing more to make learning accessible to all members of the community will improve Saint Paul's workforce and economy, as well as reinforce to K-12 students that learning does not stop after they graduate from high school. It will also build the community's comfort and investment in SPPS.

OUR GOALS

◆ *Invite families and community members in to learn alongside students whenever possible.*

◆ *Expand community education offerings, introduce more variety to community education course schedules and provide free or subsidized transportation when possible.*

CONCLUSION

Education is a complex process, and designing a school system to deliver the best possible education to all students is difficult to say the least. Success depends on combining different factors that reinforce each other; for example, small class sizes make strong communication between teachers and families more likely and help teachers get the most benefit from using a variety of teaching and assessment techniques. Any one step suggested in this paper has a chance to improve student outcomes somewhat, but the biggest gains will come when all the recommendations become part of the Saint Paul Public Schools.

It may be easy to criticize our school system. Criticism alone, however, will not help our students succeed. This is true whatever one is criticizing—teachers, administrators, standardized tests, institutional racism and low expectations for students are common examples—and so we must do a better job articulating what we are for.

We are for schools that welcome and support students, families and community members. We are for teachers, administrators and families having high expectations for students, and we are for guaranteeing the resources and conditions that help students meet those expectations. We are for professional expectations of teachers combined with the freedoms due professionals. We are for a culturally relevant education. We are for giving students many ways to show their success. We are for having time to build strong, nurturing relationships with students, families and colleagues.

We are for equity in education, which is about a broader view of the achievement gap than simple test score differences. Equity in education is about opportunities, support and a recognition of students' experiences outside of school. Equity in education is about celebrating the differences among our students and preparing each student to succeed on his or her own terms after leaving school.

Ultimately, equity in education is about constantly working to make our schools better. This paper has laid out some steps for how the Saint Paul Public Schools can advance that work. Ultimately, though, that change will require collective action from many different people:

- If you are a parent or other family member of a student in the Saint Paul Public Schools, you can tell the school board, the superintendent, and your student's teachers and principal that you expect your student held to the highest standards and also offered the best possible supports in reaching those standards.

- If you are a member of the Saint Paul community, you can hold your elected officials accountable not just for talking about improving education, but for taking actual steps to support teachers and students.

- If you are an SPFT member, you can attend contract negotiations and get more involved with your union to ensure educators' voices are heard supporting professional treatment, with all the freedoms and expectations that come with it.

- Students, family members, community members and SPFT members, you can attend contract negotiations and join us in our work to create world-class teaching and learning in Saint Paul Public Schools.

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