

StarTribune

State integration task force adopts plan to close achievement gap

Article by: KIM MCGUIRE

Star Tribune

February 7, 2012 - 11:46 PM

A bipartisan task force approved a plan Tuesday that begins to spell out how Minnesota schools can better spend \$108 million in funds to integrate schools and close the ever-widening achievement gap.

Among the task force's recommendations: giving the state Department of Education power to withhold integration funds if a school can't show it's making progress boosting student achievement, providing better access to college readiness programs for low-income students, and creating incentives for school districts that reduce racial disparities through voluntary school choice programs.

The task force did not recommend specific changes to the program's funding formula, which currently pays out the most dollars to Minneapolis and St. Paul schools.

Its recommendations will be submitted to lawmakers next week. Ultimately, it will be up to them flesh out the details of how roughly 137 Minnesota schools tap into funds provided by the state integration program, which is set to expire in 2013.

"We hope legislators can see the bipartisan value contained in this report, which spells out a commitment toward ending segregation in the schools and provides clear purpose for this program," said Scott Thomas, educational equity coordinator for the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan School District and the task force's co-chairman.

For almost a year, the task force has been wrestling over the question of whether the funds should be used to combat segregation, or, as GOP members of the Legislature have argued, use the money for literacy programs and other efforts to narrow the state's achievement gap between white and nonwhite students.

In the end, the task force gave a nod to both, calling for the creation of a program called Achievement & Integration for Minnesota (AIM), responsible for coming up with a new integration rule that prohibits school segregation. Among other things, AIM revenue should be pumped into programs such as full-day kindergarten for low-income families and Advancement Via Individual Determination, a college preparation effort, according to the task force recommendations.

Task force members also stopped short of endorsing what promised to be a controversial proposal -- consolidating the metro integration districts. Instead, the group suggested lawmakers determine whether there's merit in the idea.

Two members of the 12-member task force voted against the plan and will be submitting separate reports to lawmakers.

Katherine Kersten voted against the plan because she said it didn't include meaningful academic requirements for schools that receive the money.

"This is just the same thing we've had for years with a little window dressing," said Kersten, a fellow with the Center of the American Experiment who contributes columns to the Star Tribune editorial pages.

Kersten and other critics of the integration aid program contend that the funding hasn't produced the intended results. Since the state started doling out integration dollars, the achievement gap has barely budged and the number of segregated schools has increased at least eightfold. A 2005 legislative audit was extremely critical of the program, determining that several schools weren't spending the money as lawmakers intended. Since the Integration Revenue Program spread beyond Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth in the late 1990s, school districts have received roughly \$950 million in funding. Before that, about \$300 million in aid went to the Twin Cities and Duluth.

Under the current formula, Minneapolis gets \$480 per pupil in integration money, St. Paul gets \$445 and Duluth gets \$206. But some other districts with high populations from minority groups, such as Columbia Heights or Worthington, get far less. Most districts required to carry out an integration plan get either \$129 or \$92 per pupil.

At this stage in the debate, metro school officials were relieved to know that the task force supports the program's continued funding.

"I think it does provide more clarity for school districts," said Scott Croonquist, director of the Association for Metropolitan School Districts.

Kim McGuire • 612-673-4469

© 2011 Star Tribune