Critical Milestones in a Student's Life

For more than a decade there has been a consensus in education circles that there are certain critical milestones in a young person's academic life that determine their future success. The importance of these milestones has been embraced by local school districts, state departments of education, nonprofit educational partners, foundations, researchers and academics. Locally these milestones have been at the center of the work of Generation Next, the coalition of of business, government, education and community groups that have worked together on a cradle to career initiative for the Twin Cities.

Five of the six milestones deemed critical are:

- Kindergarten Readiness
- Reading by Third Grade
- Eighth Grade Math Proficiency
- High School Graduation
- Post-secondary Attainment

In addition, social emotional learning is a sixth factor correlated to academic success, though there is not a strong consensus on how to measure it at this time.

Kindergarten Readiness

Kindergarten readiness is key, not only for our children and our public schools, but also as a measure of how we are doing as a community to prepare our youngest generation for school. Moreover, numerous studies over 40 years show that children who have access to quality preschool experiences begin kindergarten ready for school and ready to learn.

For more than 15 years Minneapolis Public Schools used a tool known as Minneapolis BKA (Beginning Kindergarten Readiness), a 15-minute one-to-one standardized assessment of reading and

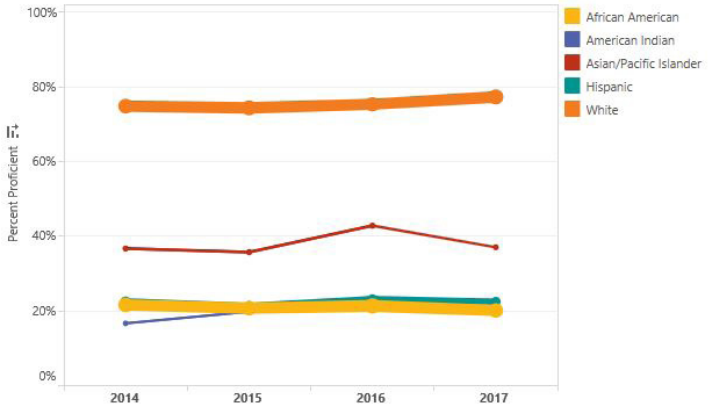
numerical skills that was administered to incoming MPS kindergarteners. Over the time it was used, there were increased investments in early childhood education both from the state and the philanthropic community, resulting in a steady rise in the number of children assessed and their level of readiness. Nearly 70% of children were deemed ready for K in the final year that assessment was used.

Recently the state recommended a different standardized tool to assess kindergarten readiness. Therefore, MPS discontinued using the BKA and started to utilize that new assessment tool. Since last fall was the first year it was used with all incoming kindergarteners, there is no ability to compare trends over time. One data point that has remained steady according to the District's own research, however, is that low-income children of color who participate in the District's preschool High Five program are more prepared than their peers for kindergarten.

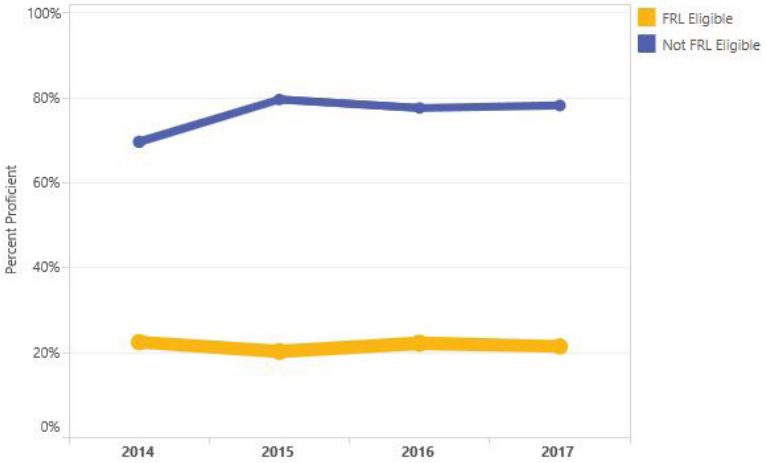
Reading by Third Grade

Acquiring foundational reading proficiency by the end of grade three is considered critical for future academic success. It is often said that children are "learning to read" until the 3rd grade and are "reading to learn" after that. The Minnesota Department of Education rejects that formulation arguing that students are building reading skills throughout their academic careers. Moreover, some students are accelerated in reading by the time they enter kindergarten. All agree, however, that acquiring strong reading skills by third grade is key to future success. Unfortunately, by the end of 3rd grade, our state MCA assessments show a profound reading gap, with 77% of white students proficient and only 20% of African Americans proficient. (This statistic include a large number of East African students who are also English Language Learners). The gap is also closely correlated to poverty.

Third grade reading proficiency by ethnicity
Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA)



Third grade reading proficiency
by free and reduced lunch (MCA)



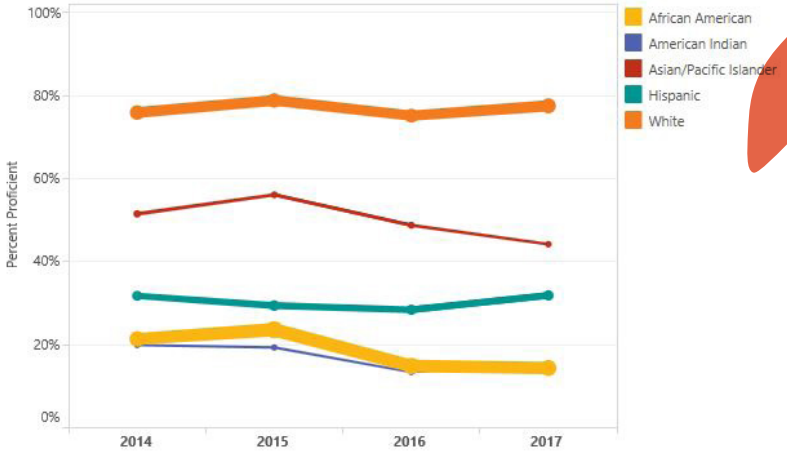
Eighth Grade Math

Experts argue that strong math skills by the end of eighth grade predict the ability to be successful in high school math, as well as a student's capacity for success in science, engineering, technical fields and many of the trades. In Minnesota pre-high school math skills are measured by the MCAs (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) at the end of eighth grade.

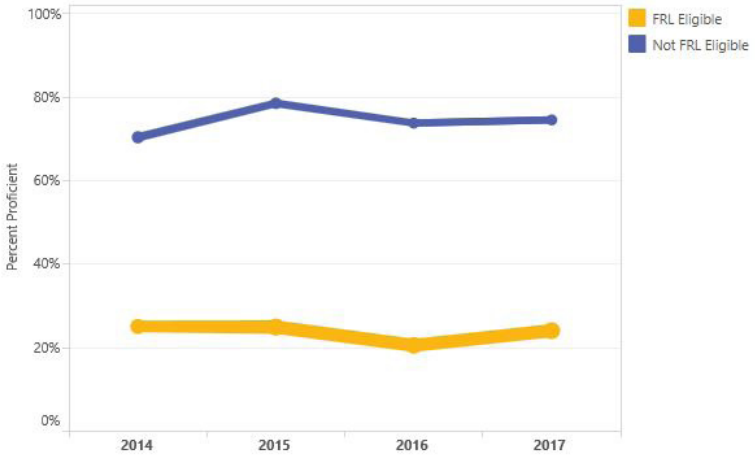
Again, one can see alarming disparities between the math proficiency of white students and students of color, with the widest spread being between white students at 77% proficient and African American students at a shocking 14%. These numbers reveal how our academic achievement gaps are among the worse in the nation and an embarrassment to all people in Minneapolis who care about the future of our children. Whatever one may feel about testing (which will be discussed in another issue paper) the fact remains that the disparities in outcomes are alarming.

The data on 3rd grade reading and 8th grade math has been compiled by the MPS Department of Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Accountability using data from the Minnesota Department of Education. A more detailed and granular examination of this data can be found on the MPS website.

Eighth grade math proficiency by ethnicity (MCA)



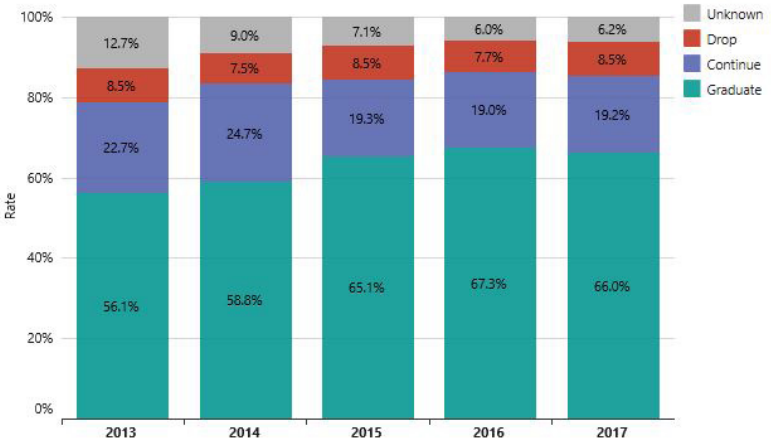
Eighth grade math proficiency by free and reduced lunch - (MCA)



High School Graduation

A four-year graduation rate is the metric required by the federal government to assess and compare rates and trends across the US. On the one hand this provides useful standardization to compare grad rates across a vast country. On the other hand, the criteria for graduation vary so widely from state to state that comparisons can still be rather murky.

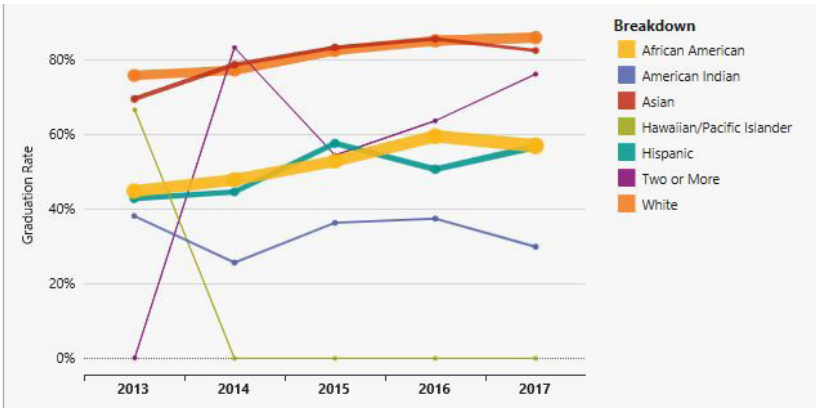
Change in Graduation Rate Over Time



High School Graduation (cont.)

It should also be noted that in a district like Minneapolis, there are many students who begin their education late, are still learning English in during high school or have other barriers preventing them from graduating in four years. They are noted as "continuing" students on the chart below.

Change in Graduation Rate by Ethnicity



The overall graduation rate in MPS has been largely steady for the last three years at about 66%. However, a look at specific ethnic groups tells a wholly different story with only 30% of Native students graduating in 4 years compared to 86% of white students. Black and Hispanic students graduate at a rate of 57% and Asian students are at 82%.

Post-secondary Attainment

In this moment, high school graduation is simply not enough. The demands of the job market, the ability to access high-wage employment and the capacity for economic well-being throughout one's lifetime increasingly require a person to pursue some post-secondary education after high school. That may yield a technical credential, a two-year degree from a community or technical college or a four-year degree from a college or university. Regardless of where one acquires a post-secondary degree, it is a key indicator of future economic success.

Within the first year of graduation, 72% of MPS graduates from the class of 2014 had enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college program. This was an increase of 10 points over the class of 2013.

Among students attending a post-secondary institution in the first year, approximately two-thirds entered a 4-year institution compared to one-third in a 2-year institution. ***However, the rate of degree completion after six years tells a more sobering story. Only 38% of the students graduating high school from MPS were able to attain a degree in six years.*** While it is laudable that 72% of graduates start a degree program, only 38% of those high school graduates obtain their intended degree.

This phenomenon is known as college persistence and completion. The reasons for the inability to complete college in six years are myriad, especially for low-income students. They include the need for college-level remediation which impacts total financial aid, the ring cost of higher education generally, the diminishing availability of affordable loans and other financial aid, the stress of having to support one's parents, children or extended family, poor advising leading to lost career opportunities and much more. Many programs exist to address these challenging realities, but these also will require public policy solutions.

We cannot deny the facts. There is much work to do to overcome academic disparities and create a more equitable and prosperous future for all young people in our community. We can do it, but not if we put our heads in the sand and deny that the disparities exist, that testing and accountability are the problem or that wishful thinking will make the changes that are necessary. We can and must do better.