



Smart INVESTMENTSSM IN MINNESOTA'S STUDENTS

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ISSUES AND POLICY FOR STUDENTS IN GRADES 4 THROUGH 8

THE ISSUE

Minnesota's students in grades 4 through 8 need to reach grade-level proficiency with their coursework and stay on track in preparation for their next level of schooling and beyond. This need is especially acute for students of color and students from low-income families.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR MINNESOTA

- **Offer quality academic preparation** that pushes students to achieve their potential and aligns what they learn with the coursework they'll do in high school.
- **Provide support to students who need it** – tutoring that ensures their success with rigorous coursework and mentoring that better connects them to adults who can help.
- **Adopt evidence-based practices, programs and reforms** to improve the quality of education for Minnesota's students.

WHY IT MATTERS

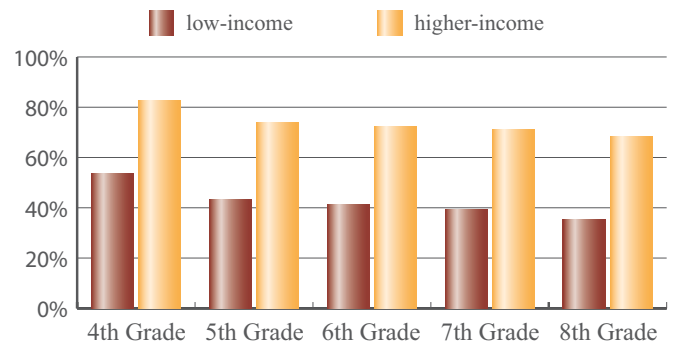
- Good reading and math skills in 4th and 8th grades improve the likelihood that students will succeed in middle school and be ready to take and pass rigorous coursework in high school.¹
- On-track educational progress boosts the chances that students will graduate from high school,² setting them up for success in higher education and for significantly higher earnings throughout their lives.³
- Academic achievement in grades 4 through 8 keeps students on course to master the skills and knowledge that are increasingly important for today's jobs⁴ and important, too, for sustaining Minnesota's economic vitality and quality of life.

CHALLENGES FOR MINNESOTA

- The results from statewide testing in 2009 show that almost one in five students in the 7th and 8th grades failed to meet Minnesota's math standards, and another one in five only partially met those standards. For Minnesota's reading standards, almost one in seven of the 7th and 8th graders failed to meet them, and almost one in five only partially met them.⁵
- Minnesota's educational system must raise the performance of all students but most especially those who lag behind because the greatest returns on investment come from addressing the greatest disparities in opportunity and achievement.⁶
- About one-third of Minnesota's public school students come from low-income families.⁷ As a group, these students are far less likely than their higher-income counterparts to show proficiency in basic math and reading skills, according to the state's standardized test results. In 2009, the share of low-income students in grades 4 through 8 that met or exceeded the math standards ranged from only about 35 to 55 percent, depending upon the grade, and the share meeting or exceeding the reading standards ranged from only about 45 to 55 percent.⁸

PERCENT OF STUDENTS WHO MET OR EXCEEDED STATE MATH STANDARDS IN 2009

Minnesota must raise all scores and address the proficiency gap for low-income students



Source: Minnesota Department of Education.

- Gaps exist, too, for proficiency in reading and math among students of color and American Indian students in grades 4 through 8, with the largest disparities among Latinos and African Americans – the state’s two largest communities of color.⁹ Already Minnesotans of color account for twice the share of the state’s student population (24 percent) than of the overall population (12 percent), and a growing percentage of Minnesota’s students will be children of color in the coming years.¹⁰
- More than 40 percent of Minnesota’s children ages 10-12 and about 15 percent of children ages 6-9 are regularly left on their own without supervised care during the school year.¹¹ Unstructured out-of-school time exacerbates the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers.¹²

SMART APPROACHES

For its initiative on *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students*, Growth & Justice assembled a stellar steering committee of experts and practitioners to review research on cost-effective approaches and programs to improve education. Smart investments address real disparities and actual student needs. The steering committee called for a significant increase in public-sector investment and private-sector engagement in the following smart approaches for students in grades 4 through 8.

- **Quality academic preparation** through good instruction, strong curriculum and meaningful assessments of student progress. Academics in grades 4 through 8 should align with what students need to succeed in high school and in their post-secondary education, with an emphasis on math and reading.
- **Intensive tutoring assistance** targeted to increase the academic success of low-performing students as they take rigorous coursework.
- **Both school-based and out-of-school support efforts** that better connect students to teachers, parents and other adults who can serve as mentors, help with school work and keep kids on track in school. Example support programs include Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the middle-school initiatives for Check & Connect and Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS).
- **In-school programs and reforms** rooted in evidence-based research and aimed at helping students achieve, preventing problems with academic progress and intervening with students when problems occur. Examples include the Success for All program, which helps schools use structured curriculum and instructional methods to improve education for disadvantaged and at-risk students, and the AVID program for middle schools, which targets teaching and support efforts at students who are capable of completing rigorous coursework but are falling short. The new What Works Clearinghouse from the U.S. Education Department offers evidence-based [practice guides](#) for improved education.

SMART INVESTMENTSSM IN MINNESOTA’S STUDENTS

The Growth & Justice proposal for *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students*, available [here](#), highlights research-based, cost-effective policies, strategies and programs for improving education from the early childhood years through to post-secondary study, with the aim, by 2020, of increasing by 50 percent the share of Minnesota students who successfully complete post-secondary education.

Growth & Justice identified five key education stages across three critical developmental phases – Ready to Launch, Ready for Higher Learning, and Ready for Life. This issue brief focuses on the stage for grades 4 to 8, but unless Minnesota pays careful attention to and invests in the entire continuum, we cannot reach our goal. For issue briefs on other key *Smart Investment* stages for Minnesota’s students, click [here](#).

A growing body of economic research suggests that the right investments in education can strengthen economic growth, raise the earnings power of more families and lower public costs. Educational research and economic analysis indicate that an added investment of \$1 billion a year in human capital by Minnesota would more than pay for itself.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Growth & Justice, *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students: A Research-Based Investment Proposal*, October 2008, p. 15, citing Horn & Kojaku (2001). (Growth & Justice report available [here](#).)
- 2 Growth & Justice, *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students*, p. 3, citing Battin-Pearson, et al (2000) and Kaplan, Peck & Kaplan (1997).
- 3 For estimates on the earnings impacts of high school graduation and college attainment, see Henry M. Levin and Clive R. Belfield, “Investments in K-12 Education for Minnesota,” Growth & Justice, November 12, 2007, p. 1 (available [here](#)), and Sandy Baum and Jennifer Ma, *Education Pays: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*, The College Board, 2007, p. 10, (available [here](#)).
- 4 For more on the increased educational requirement of jobs, see Laura W. Perna, “Improving the Transition from High School to College in Minnesota: Recommendations Based on a Review of Effective Programs,” Growth & Justice, November 2007, p. 3. (Available [here](#).)
- 5 Based on 2009 scores for the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment II and the Math Test for English Language Learners, with data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education. The tests are used to measure student progress toward the state’s academic standards. Among 7th graders for math, 17.3 failed to meet the standards, 21.7 partially met the standards, 40.8 met the standards, and 20.2 percent exceeded the standards. Among 8th graders for math, 19.4 percent failed to meet the standards, 22.3 percent partially met the standards, 37.6 met the standards, and 20.6 percent exceeded the standards. Among 7th graders for reading, 15.6 percent failed to meet the standards, 19.6 percent partially met the standards, 27.3 percent met the standards, and 37.5 exceeded the standards. Among 8th graders for reading, 14.3 percent failed to meet the standards, 18.9 percent partially met the standards, 31.0 met the standards, and 35.8 percent exceeded the standards.
- 6 Growth & Justice, *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students*, p. 3.
- 7 Data from the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2007-08 school year show that 264,646 of the 833,547 Minnesotans in elementary and secondary public schools (31.7 percent) qualified for the free and reduced-price school lunches offered to children from low-income families. (For the data, click [here](#).)
- 8 2009 Minnesota Department of Education data, unpublished.
- 9 2009 Minnesota Department of Education data, unpublished.
- 10 Population shares based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics for the 2007-08 school year and from 2008 Census Bureau estimates. For an example of the projections for the student population, see the Minnesota Office of Higher Education article “Minnesota High School Graduates Will Peak in 2009,” *Insight*, April 2006 (available [here](#)).
- 11 Wilder Research, *Child Care Use in Minnesota: 2004 Statewide Household Child Care Survey*, Minnesota Department of Human Services, November 2005, p. 6. (Available [here](#).)
- 12 Growth & Justice, *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota’s Students*, p. 3, citing Cooper, et al (1999) and Alexander, Entwisle & Olson (2007).