

A User-Driven Education System in Minnesota

Supplementing Standardized Tests with Comprehensive Needs Assessments and
Community Developed Discipline Policies

A white paper by the Minnesota Department of Education's
Student Advisory Committee



An Initiative of Minnesota Alliance With Youth

Preface

The Student Advisory Committee

As Education Committee to the Minnesota Youth Council, the Student Advisory Committee is composed of 8th-12th graders from all eight of Minnesota's congressional districts who serve as legislative committee representatives to the state legislature. The Student Advisory Committee provides consultation, representation, and student leadership to the Minnesota Department of Education while mitigating tokenism, manipulation, and the involvement of young people purely as decoration or display. The Committee believes that by working towards a Minnesota that shares power with young people, the state becomes a better place to live for all to live, no matter one's age.

The Student Advisory Committee is a subcommittee of the Minnesota Youth Council and an initiative of Minnesota Alliance With Youth. In 2013, the Minnesota Youth Council became the first and only legislatively mandated 'voice of youth' to a state legislature in the country.

Background and Framing

During April and May of 2017, representatives of the Minnesota Department of Education's Student Advisory Committee attended regional community meetings regarding the new federal education bill, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). During these meetings, Student Advisory Committee (SAC) members heard teachers, staff, and administration share stories about how they have seen students suffer mentally and emotionally due to standardized tests resulting in anxiety, vomiting, and hyperventilation, which result sometimes in sick days. The SAC has also heard adults relate personal experiences, including an instance where a student was found trying to climb out of a second story bathroom window rather than take a test. On top of these stories, we, the members of the SAC, have own experiences of the distance and insecurity that grows between friends, heightened levels of stress and anxiety in both students and teachers, and cultures of unhealthy competition due to standardized tests.

Unfortunately, the trends at these ESSA regional meetings were adults and young people advocating strongly against standardized testing yet essentially being told that it is "just the way things are" and that we need to take "baby steps." As the only young people at these meetings, we left feeling disappointed that our voices were not heard. The meetings were about the future of Minnesota students, but our presence there—the only students in the room—felt acknowledged for only our presence rather than for our ideas, questions, comments, and concerns. In response to this tokenism we decided to write this position paper laying out our reasons for not supporting standardized tests and our suggested alternatives.

We did not make this position paper a research essay. We include some research, but it is more important to articulate our perspectives than to spend time compiling research. Instead we decided to focus on communicating our and our constituents' thoughts on standardized tests and their alternatives.

We also know that since Minnesota is a local control state, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Minnesota Commissioner of Education do not have direct influence over many of the recommendations we make. This should not be a reason to not try. Systemic

change requires collaboration across departments, districts and schools, and with communities across Minnesota.

Introduction

The Student Advisory Committee believes school staff, students, and local communities deserve to be part of an educational system that is connected to their student body and in a community and environment that celebrates the needs, backgrounds, and experiences of young people instead of putting them down. Schools that strive to meet these ideals would have ample opportunity to grow because instead of focusing on the narrow results of a test, a bigger picture would be revealed, one that shows what is happening inside of a school beyond what is measured by standardized tests. This would in turn enable students, teachers, and administration to make changes where changes need to be made.

Unfortunately, while standardized tests as we know them have only been part of the US education system in the last century, the last 40 years, they are already seen as the normal way of assessing schools and the only efficient way to measure school performance. This is a polarizing system that ignores students that do not receive the support they need, and has little regard to the students, teachers, families, and communities that speak out against it.

As Minnesota writes its state plan for the new federal education bill, Every Student Succeeds Act, and figures out how to find overlap with the state law, World's Best Workforce, we, the Student Advisory Committee to the Minnesota Department of Education, conclude that the Minnesota Department of Education needs to take this opportunity to write two supplements to standardized testing into Minnesota's state ESSA plan: **(i) comprehensive needs assessments (CNAs) for every school and (ii) district-wide community developed discipline policies.** To this end we first lay out the limits of testing to improving students' school and education experiences before addressing how CNAs and community developed discipline policies address these experiences.

Why the Student Advisory Committee believes standardized testing needs to be paired with other assessment tools

Over a five month process of research, attending meetings, talking with education professionals, and reflecting on our own experiences as a different kind of educational professionals, we have concluded that standardized testing has major shortcomings, which is unfortunate because our education system is built upon testing.

1. Learning lessons from standardized tests is slow and requires additional steps: Testing requires multiple years of administration before becoming fully statistically reliable, which makes it difficult for Minnesota's education system to be responsive and adaptive. Additionally, the tests are not structured to foster understanding as to why results are the way they are. To do this, more money, time, and energy is needed to not only find the 'why,' but then to find the 'now what.' Furthermore, adults answer these questions and rarely, if ever, partner with young people to find the 'why's' and the 'now what's.'
2. The form itself does not do anything to educate or build skills other than how to take tests: The form of testing—wherein students across the state and country take time out

of their school day to take a timed test with strictly enforced individualism—deviates from social realities of team-based professional work. Additionally, we believe that the methods of testing are contradictory to commonly cited purposes of education (developing a strong citizenry and a globally competitive workforce), since tests promote isolation, single answers, and inequitable access to preparation resources.

Furthermore, standardized testing does nothing to engage a person's support system, community, or other resources. It is a process that almost idealizes isolation and the paradoxical 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mindset.

3. Standardized testing is one way public school funds go toward private companies out-of-state instead of into local communities: Standardized testing is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry. There are times when it makes sense and is appropriate for public institutions to contract with private companies, but we feel the current education system's relationship with the testing industry is not appropriate. We believe public school is a right and a public good, which is undermined when public dollars go from Minnesota communities to out-of-state private companies at the rate it does in our state. For example, in 2015 Minnesota signed a \$33 million dollar, three year contract with Pearsonⁱ for administration of MCAs. We are not saying that spending money on measurement is necessarily bad. We are saying that money is taken out of communities at the expense of young people and that young people seem to be getting the short end of the stick. On top of that, the test preparation industry, which includes test prep classes and tutoring, was estimated to be \$13.1 billion dollars in 2015 in the US, and more than \$78 billion globally.ⁱⁱ From our own experiences and conversations with constituents, we are positive that this generates elitism amongst student bodies since only students with time and money have access to additional preparation, which contributes to inequalities and undermines equal access to public education.
4. The picture painted by standardized testing is shallow and incomplete: Standardized tests measure a very narrow range of schooling (math and reading) and types of intelligences. They do not allow the full range of human skills, creativities, different learning abilities, and intelligences to be expressed. By their very name they are standardized, yet there is no such thing as a 'standard human' and attempts to make humans standard is dehumanizing. According to the St. Paul Federation of Teachers, tests are not designed to measure enough breadth and depth of the learning expected from students.

In addition to testing inherently minimizing difference instead of building off it, standardized test results have a difficult time showing anything meaningful at a class and school level.^{iii iv} The available measurements that meet data requirements—such as being administered in all schools statewide or the collection of results comparable across schools—means there are very few ways of gathering 'acceptable' evidence. Furthermore, when a system shifts its focus to its own measurements, said measurements become incapable of measuring what they were originally design to measure. In addition to invalidating measurements, a measurement-driven system like Minnesota's education system makes governance and administers the center of the system instead of learning and the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, widespread test anxiety makes test results less worthwhile. We should therefore seek out new ways to measure success so that students are seen as humans versus a test

score, and recognize the various aspects that contribute to an individual's performance, not just the performance of a student in a unique situation.

5. Standardized tests are authoritarian: Typically, students have no part in developing school curriculum. Students are required to go to school, where there are few ways to have power in schools and education systems, and when there is it is very limited and largely adult approved. Tests are designed and administered in ways that limit student power, a particular issue when tests are also extremely limiting to different intelligences, abilities, preferences, cultures, and languages. Instead, school systems have created cultures and expectations that students attempt to fit themselves to a version of the 'good student' that is narrow and unhealthy and view students who get low scores as 'lesser than.' Standardized tests are authoritarian in that they suppress difference and require conformity to an 'authority' on what is and is not 'standard.'
Standardized testing is depersonalized and generates social anxiety, cultures of unhealthy competition, and stress for teachers, families, and students. This leads to numerous and growing negative health effects which is well-documented. For example, in 2015 a third of students experienced some form of test anxiety, which was 15-25% higher than in the previous decades.^v Young students and adults both need to feel valued and supported in a learning environment rather than plagued by the pressure to be perfect to a standard that was created by someone who has no understanding of their background and abilities. Testing increases stress, enforces an impossible idea of 'perfection,' and is an inaccurate measure of a teacher's ability and a student's future.

A testing centered education is not a student-centered education. Tests contribute to an education system that is non-democratic as it leaves the most influence in the hands of a few and rarely, if ever, includes students and community members in the process of determining ways of assessing students. Furthermore, the content of these standardized tests do not incorporate intercultural competencies, emotional or spatial intelligences and ignore our peers of color or low income, immigrant and refugee, LGBTQ+, and differently-abled peers. Tests determine so much of school climate and success and often have negative effects. Yet, they measure such a small part of life. The structure of testing is a barrier to developing students' intrinsic motivation to connect with the school community and school work since we are continually herded toward following the way of things without critically questioning the system or inclusively working with adults to fashion an education system worthy of a pluralistic democratic society.

In a pluralistic and democratic society, society members should strive for public institutions (like public school) to reflect those in it. Yet, the people who decide what happens when a school underperforms on standardized tests rarely include parents, teachers, students, or other community members, and when they do it seems to be because the community is protesting. The reality is that testing creates barriers between schools and communities. When a school is lacking a resource, the school's staff, principal, and school board address these issues from the perspective of what *they* believe *their* students need. Another way to go about addressing the needs of students and in turn their families is to just ask them! Involve students and communities in fashioning solutions they want.

Supplements to Standardized Tests

The reliance on testing and the hesitation to move away from it leaves many wondering why testing seems to be the only measurement tool our society has. In addition to recommending that standardized testing be reduced to as little as possible, the Student Advisory Committee advises Minnesota's Commissioner of Education to write two policies into Minnesota's Every Student Succeeds Act state plan to supplement standardized tests: (i) Comprehensive Needs Assessments and (ii) community developed discipline policies.

Comprehensive Needs Assessments (CNAs)

Comprehensive needs assessments are part of what the Minnesota Department of Education calls the Record of Continuous Improvement. MDE describes the Record of Continuous Improvement as "designed to support schools in facilitating and documenting the school improvement process. The template includes district and school information; a comprehensive needs assessment; school action plans to support reading, mathematics, graduation, and other goals; School wide Title I Program summary; and an appendix of additional tools for school improvement."^{vi} In other words, CNAs essentially ask, "what is our data telling us and what are we going to do about it?" Currently, "data" are such things as MCA scores, graduation rates, what courses are offered, referrals, and attendance. These are collected by a school's data team.

Why CNAs?

It is necessary to make sure that no student gets pushed out or is prevented from succeeding, but standardized testing by itself does not measure this efficiently or accurately. The problems of standardized tests outline above can be addressed by CNAs in the following ways:

1. CNAs are efficient: While learning lessons from standardized testing is slow and requires additional steps to make meaning of results, the purpose of CNAs is to find that meaning and then make action steps: whether they are celebrating and sharing successes or creating plans to do better. Yes, standardized test scores are currently used in CNAs, but we believe that what standardized tests are supposed to measure, like racial disparities or student growth, can be measured by less stressful assessments and by CNAs themselves. Additionally, since CNAs do not necessarily require multiple years to be valid, Minnesota's education systems can be more responsive. Furthermore, finding school specific data is hard with standardized tests since they need to be statewide and be able to be compared across schools. CNAs also allow specific schools to share what is working with other schools.
2. The process of creating CNAs is itself an educational opportunity: CNAs are meant to engage the school and district communities in a shared goal of improving schools for students. CNAs are a process with similarities to or components of participatory action research, service-learning, community engagement, and experiential education. Building on research from these practices, we are convinced that CNAs can develop self-actualization, critical reflection, social intelligence, intercultural intelligence, problem solving, and teamwork.

3. Funds for CNAs are used to build community: Whereas funds for standardized tests and preparation go to private companies, funds that support CNAs are invested back into communities since CNAs require community outreach and participation. Funding for CNAs can result in increased involvement and ownership from community members and students and therefore a larger support base upon which a school can draw. Additionally, if community based CNAs are integrated into school report cards, the current method of communicating a school's story with the larger public, CNAs have the potential to shift the statewide culture of comparing schools from deficit-based to an asset-based view of students.
4. CNAs are holistic: The result of CNAs are more holistic than just standardized tests, and CNAs have the potential to become more holistic than what they are now. Standardized tests measure a narrow slice of knowledge and abilities that have little bearing on a student's future success. By contrast, CNAs have the potential to bring communities together to identify context and celebrate the diverse strengths of the student body. This could actually be more what families already want, as demonstrated by the *Star Tribune's* 2017 Minneapolis parent/guardian survey showing that after-school opportunities, diversity, and support services offered are more engaging statistics to parents than test scores.^{vii} With CNAs, schools can supplement their test scores with characteristics that actually say something about the school, like their civil rights, demographics, health and safety, community participation, and involvement of parents and students. Factors that go beyond math, science, and reading can draw in parents and guardians with information about the community and give more information that matters.

In their current form, CNAs do not encourage including information other than math and reading, and they do not require student involvement. This is changing with Minnesota's transition to well-rounded education policies under ESSA, but for recommendations for how CNAs can reach full potential of being holistic, see below.

5. CNAs have the potential to be more democratic, equitable, and empowering: Rather than concentrating the power to change schools in the hands of the few, CNAs spread power throughout the school community. By having a chance to equitably address the 'whys' behind areas for improvement and create action plans together, the education system engages students in open, democratic processes that we believe would lead to higher graduation rates.

However, there are some shortcomings of CNAs that we advise be addressed in the following ways in order for them to reach full potential:

1. Expand CNAs: CNAs currently only have to be administered to Focus and Priority schools under current federal education guidelines, Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I and Title III family engagement requirements, the statewide network of Regional Centers of Excellence, and World's Best Workforce requirements. We advise the Minnesota Commissioner of Education to guide and advocate for efforts to integrate CNAs into every school and district.
2. Require and incentivize schools to work with students to create CNAs: In addition to surveying the student body, students should also be involved in the school's data team.

Rather than creating extra work for staff and students, we have concluded that gathering input for CNAs can be done in a way that allows students to reflect on their educational experiences and for empowerment to be considered a more successful way of teaching and managing schools rather than student disempowerment. Title 1 and 3 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and ESSA require a “family engagement” portion, but student participation is not required which leaves out vital perspectives and opportunities for developing critical awareness and ownership.

3. Require that discipline responses be tracked and included for every student group, every teacher, and every school: Discipline data—who is disciplined in what ways for which reasons—is lacking or not easily accessible in many areas. In order to gain a full picture of the effect the school-to-prison pipeline has on Minnesota’s student body and school system, more complete and accessible data is needed.
4. Develop and add a Student Engagement Rubric: MDE’s Continuous Improvement in Districts and Schools webpage does not currently have a rubric for students when it should. This rubric should be created together with young people.
5. Change the format of the records of continuous improvement to be more inclusive: In its current format, it is very standard and technocratic. Some version of the form should be accessible to students and communities, including ELL students.
6. CNAs are an intervention: Recognize that the process of student and community engagement can be an intervention in itself that fits MDE’s ‘fit’ and ‘feasibility’ requirements. Additionally, make interventions created by private vendors equitably accessible to schools and districts.
7. Invest in human capital: Fund the education and staff training required to best engage with students and communities. Authentic, culturally competent partnerships between school systems and communities requires recruiting, retaining, and training long-term staff that can develop relationships that grow a school’s success together.

CNAs would allow schools and individual communities the chance to report back on their needs instead of having a higher branch determine their needs for them. CNAs would allow Minnesota school systems to develop skills necessary for democracy. In order for these benefits to take place however, adults who manage and fill education systems need to work with young people as people instead of things to be controlled and measured.

Community Developed Discipline Policies

Comprehensive Needs Assessments open the door to exciting opportunities to connect schools with communities and grow widespread support for schools. However, while CNAs gather information on suspensions, referrals, expulsions, and other discipline policies, they do not have much power to change how district discipline policies are created; that still rests with school boards. Yet disparities in discipline policies and institutionalized barriers to equal treatment is a major obstruction to a student’s and school’s success. Additionally, communities do not have much institutional power to change policies since school boards develop discipline policies and are not beholden to students and other people who are affected by the policies. Yes, school

board members are elected, but there are systemic disparities in our election system and beyond voting, school boards do not always make decisions transparently or hold meetings that are accessible to students and parents. This is especially a problem when policies created by school boards are at the center of the school-to-prison pipeline. Therefore, the Student Advisory Committee advises the Minnesota Department of Education—and the rest of the statewide education community—to make community developed discipline policies a reality throughout Minnesota.

How discipline policies are made now and why it is a problem:

Discipline, like other policies that affect the whole district, is decided by school boards.

While school boards are elected officials, it is difficult to challenge and change discipline policies once they are in place, particularly for people unfairly and historically affected by discriminatory discipline policies. We believe that the *process* of deciding discipline policies—where power rests with a few who are not the ones who would feel the effects^{viii}—is a major contributor, maybe the root, of the school-to-prison pipeline and push out. This is an issue for a number of reasons:

1. Zero-tolerance discipline policies result in reduced time in classrooms, which leads to lower grades and more difficulty graduating on time.
2. Research^{x x} consistently shows that punitive responses and inconsistent enforcement are not as effective at preventing repeat offenses as other practices. If anything, they create more problems. Community developed discipline policies could have the potential to make the language clearer and more fair for all. For example, a leading cause of suspension is “willful defiance,” yet there is no clear definition of this, much less a definition that was developed by school communities.
3. It undermines the right to an education and increases disparities for all since current discipline policies in Minnesota disproportionately affect^{xi} LGBTQ+ students, students with learning disabilities, and black and brown students.^{xii} Black youth comprise only 17% of the nation's public school students but they account for 32% of the students suspended.^{xiii} Research says that between 33 and 70% of people arrested have a learning disability,^{xiv xv xvi} as well as the majority of adults in prison.^{xvii xviii xix xx xxi} Discipline policies created from unequal power dynamics are at the center of the school-to-prison pipeline in Minnesota.^{xxii}
4. In addition to race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, learning ability, religion, and class, young people as a group have no formal institutional avenue for influencing what school discipline policies look like, beyond the courts, yet we are the ones who are suspended, expelled, arrested, and are the targets of discipline policies. There is also no culture or expectation of informing students of their rights as students. Instead, youth are seen as ‘less than.’

Recommendations:

In response to negative effects on school climate, Minnesota, and student well-being, the Student Advisory Committee recommends that:

1. All district discipline policies be created with more than half of the student body engaged in some way. Furthermore, we advise that at least 90% of students from groups disproportionately affected by discipline policies be both engaged and have more influence on developing the policy than their peers.
2. Community developed discipline policies be reviewed no less than every three years to allow students the chance to participate multiple times. The group that reviews these policies should be composed of people most affected by discipline policies: parents, school support staff, teachers, and students. Additionally, to make sure that communities with minority populations do not abuse their power, an independent review body should be established that has power to check inequitable discipline policies.
3. Law enforcement representatives' power is checked. Representatives from law enforcement, private detention centers, or prisons of any kind only have advisory roles at the most and do not have voting power in the decision making process.

Furthermore, there are many policies that would help bring dignity back into schools and weaken the school-to-prison pipeline. These are just a few recommendations that we encourage the statewide education community to enact in order to bring holistic improvement to young peoples' lives:

1. Change policies at the state and city level to enable student appointees on school boards to have voting powers, have no fewer than equal current student-adult membership, have power to be present at school board executive sessions, be included for the purpose of determining quorum, and provide payment or stipends all student members.
2. School-wide restorative practices be worked into school not only as alternatives to punitive discipline measures but as a culture of respect for students.
3. Elimination of district and school contracts with law enforcement agencies and an elimination of resulting positions like school resource officers (SROs).
4. Diversion options such as those offered by the Legal Rights Center be given to all students at the earliest possible point.
5. Student rights be posted in every classroom and the development of student rights be made a part of the orientation at the start of every school year for older students and a larger part of the curriculum for students in elementary-aged students.
6. End contracts with juvenile detention centers and change laws around juvenile offenses, including the minimum age that people can be arrested and/or have felony charges brought against them.
7. Increase in-school support staff like social workers, mental health professionals, and counselors.
8. Since the school-to-prison pipeline exists, student representation in the education system has a jurisdiction of sorts over juvenile and youth presence in the mass incarceration system. Therefore, continue supporting, growing, and most importantly, listening to, youth leaders in the educational system.

Conclusion

As students, as we move forward in our educational careers, we will be shaped by the critical thinking skills gained from classes, time spent one-to-one with teachers and peer tutors, time with friends and classmates, and whether we are treated with respect by administrators, staff, and teachers, rather than the four hours we spend taking an exam. It is vital that educational professionals put in the effort to work *with* students and communities to develop schools and an education system that is user driven and therefore dignified and befitting of our democracy. Standardized testing is one-sided and negative to our health, resulting data comes at the expense of students. Standardized testing is exclusionary and a use of public funds that actually harms taxpayers.

By contrast, we are convinced that together CNAs and community developed discipline policies would raise graduation rates and reduce incarceration rates more than what we have seen thus far. Using CNAs and community developed discipline policies alongside standardized tests would better allow for the actualization of ESSA's requirement of family contribution in a student's education, foster increased ownership from the entire school community, create more opportunities to work closely in age diverse groups, and generate feelings of empowerment within both adults and young people.

Writing CNAs and community developed discipline policies into the ESSA state plan would align with federal requirements with requirements created in Minnesota's World's Best Workforce law, thereby reducing the number of unique programs that MDE would need to devote scarce resources toward.

Perhaps most ambitious of all however, CNAs and community developed discipline policies implemented as we recommend, offer the opportunity for Minnesota to become nationally known for its inclusive and innovative educational policies, concrete efforts to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline, and its powerful young people.

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