

NINA MOINI: New scorecards are out for school districts across the country. Known as the Education Scorecard, the results in Minneapolis Public Schools show large achievement gaps across race and class. The findings are based on average test scores from 2022 to 2025.

Our next two guests have worked to address educational disparities in Minneapolis for a long time. They're here to talk more about what to make of these numbers. Joining us is Bernadeia Johnson. She was superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools from 2010 to 2015. She's also currently a professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Thanks so much for your time this afternoon, Professor Johnson.

BERNADEIA JOHNSON: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: We're also very glad to have with us Jennifer Stern, who is CEO of Great Minnesota Schools. They're a nonprofit that works closely with public and charter schools in Minneapolis. Thank you for being here as well, Jennifer.

JENNIFER STERN: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: So to set the scene for our listeners, the top line from this report is really that students of color and low-income students in Minneapolis are ranking at the very bottom in math and reading performance when compared to similar students in other districts nationally. Meanwhile, white students and non-low-income students are ranking near the top.

Professor Johnson, I'd love to start with you. As someone who was superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, what context do you think would be helpful for our listeners to understand this data and the disparities we're seeing here?

BERNADEIA JOHNSON: Well, first of all, I would like to say that these gaps have existed for a while, and I think it's important for folks to know that the report card is pointing at a macro level. And what's important is that the district superintendents and school leaders are looking at their individual school data, so they can better understand what they need to do to address the challenges that exist.

And these challenges are everything you can imagine. It's the resources, but also, I would say, the professional development and training that we need for every student and every teacher and leader in the building, especially when I think about the work that I'm doing now, where we're trying to develop teachers and leaders to be racially and culturally competent and ready to look at the data in ways that help us address and be very specific about the needs of our students, and not this broad approach when we're looking at data on a macro level.

I think it's our first start-- developing teachers and leaders. And partnering with great community partners like Great Minnesota Schools and others that are out there that are ready to provide targeted support to meet the needs of our students.

NINA MOINI: That's a great point about individual schools and individual needs. And Jennifer, I'd love to zoom that even further in, maybe to a classroom. And can you help our listeners to understand how it is that one could see such different outcomes for students who are in the same district, or maybe even the same school or classroom?

JENNIFER STERN: Yeah, absolutely. There was a lot of research done several years ago just talking about how you'll see very different expectations, very different instruction, classroom to classroom, building to building. And those differences do result in these types of disparities.

All kids need teachers who have high expectations for them. They need to be taught grade-level content and be given grade-level assignments. They need to be in a warm and supportive environment. And you'll see that that just isn't consistent. And especially for our kids of color, they are not getting that rigor. They're not getting that challenge. They aren't receiving the same level of high expectations as white kids are.

And I'd say this isn't just a Minneapolis problem. This is a national problem. These gaps exist in every district across the country, but they are pretty pervasive here in Minneapolis. And a lot of that comes down to, what's happening in instruction in that classroom? Are kids receiving grade-level content? Does the teacher believe in them? Are they challenging them? Are they supporting them? And is that teacher getting the support they need to be able to be an effective instructor for those kids?

NINA MOINI: And that reminds me--

BERNADEIA JOHNSON: If I just--

NINA MOINI: Oh, of course. Please.

BERNADEIA JOHNSON: I'm sorry. I just want to have this conversation because I agree wholeheartedly with Jen and the fact that all of those things matter in implementation. But I'd like to actually start with the person's-- the individual thinking about race and thinking about being racially conscious and their mindset about what they believe students, individual students, are capable of doing.

If I don't believe in my own capacity and don't believe in the capacity of the children that I'm serving, then you're just not going to get a start, a head start at all on those things, because I don't believe that kids are capable of achieving at high levels. That's why I believe that mindset really starts early in terms of getting great instruction.

NINA MOINI: I do feel like the past five or so years, since the pandemic, or six years now, have been especially difficult for people in many positions feeling like they have the support that they need. It's been some very stressful times. I mean, both of you can answer. I'll start with you, Jennifer. What do you think about how the landscape has changed in the past five years? And do you see that as impacting these scores at all, even though some of these trends, as you both have said, have been ongoing?

JENNIFER STERN: Yeah, that's a great question. I think kids fell further behind during COVID. Minneapolis was out of school and doing virtual learning for a pretty long time, one of the longest periods of time. And I think that time in virtual learning where kids fell further behind is still reflected. Kids have not yet caught up to pre-pandemic levels of achievement.

And so I do think that is-- I also think, you hear about the rise in technology and social media and phones, attention spans. All of that is true. So I think it makes the job of the teacher harder than it's ever been before. But I don't think it means that it's impossible. And I think if you look at the data in the scorecard, there are lots of districts and school districts across the country that are making really strong progress, and they're doing that through putting in place science of reading, putting in place really strong curriculum, really strong teacher supports.

To Bernadeia's point, they have high expectations. They believe that all kids can achieve at high levels. And then they're putting in place the accountability and the systems and the supports to make that happen.

NINA MOINI: Bernadeia, what would you like to see?

BERNADEIA This starts at-- I'm sorry, I'm talking over you.

JOHNSON:

NINA MOINI: Oh, no, no. That's OK.

BERNADEIA It starts with no excuses. We can't have any excuses. We have to be very diligent and persistent in trying to address this achievement gap. And it means, again, we can't make excuses, it means that we have to really think about the communities we serve and the relationships that really matter.

JOHNSON:

If you think about COVID, the relationships weren't there. I mean, technology is not the same as having that relationship with the teacher to student, and teacher to families, and teachers and families and students and communities. All those things matter. Students do not live in isolation. They live in communities. And these are communities where we need to actually align the resources and support also for these students, because if we don't do that, when you look at districts like Minneapolis, they have a large majority number of Black, Brown, and multiracial students that they carry a disproportionate share of the burden and responsibility of the learning that we have to pay attention to.

So I really think that we have to think about also, the Metro Surge, all these things disproportionately impact students and their ability to be in schools and to have great instruction.

NINA MOINI: I want to ask you both before we go, and that there are a lot of efforts around solutions and a lot of good things happening, as you said, Jennifer, in a lot of districts and classrooms as well. But some of the problems unique to this time have gotten worse. You mentioned Operation Metro Surge, which led to some more absenteeism, which has been a problem for a long time. But I think since around the height of the pandemic as well. What changes or challenges are you anticipating will carry into the next year that you're going to be preparing for or looking closely at, Professor Johnson?

BERNADEIA I think one of the issues is that we have to start looking at the structures that we have. We have to really invest in what matters, and that's what's in the classrooms. So I think we may be looking at possibly school closures, consolidations, and I think also looking at supporting our leaders, so that they're able to be the instructional leaders. They want to be by giving them support and the resources to do so to do the same for their teachers. All of that is important.

JOHNSON:

The needs are so great, and that's why community organizations matter, like the North Side Achievement Zone and GMS, among others. I'm just naming those because I'm very familiar with their work. And so we have to figure out how to leverage those community organizations that want to help us do the work in strategic ways, not just for health sake, but really being focused and targeted, as I know those two organizations are.

NINA MOINI: Anything else you'd like to just lastly add, Jennifer?

JENNIFER STERN: Yeah. I think what I'm excited about is that Minnesota passed the READ Act a few years ago. Schools are in the early stages of implementing the science of reading. And when you look at the data across the country, I think you see very good alignment between effective implementation of strong literacy practices and improved outcomes.

And so MPS is in the first year of that work. Schools are early in that implementation. I think as we look forward, it's going to be critically important that schools are effective at implementing new curriculum, that they're putting in place strong coaching for teachers to make the instructional shifts, to teach literacy see differently.

And so I'm really hopeful and optimistic about, can we make sure that leaders are getting the training they need to coach teachers and that teachers are getting the support they need to put in place new literacy practices? I do believe if that implementation happens well, we'll see an improvement in scores.

But it's early. Implementation thus far has been mixed. But I think it's really important. And I think the more we can track implementation, hold schools accountable, give teachers the support in making the shifts, I think we'll see some good changes over time.

NINA MOINI: All right. Thank you both so much. Would love for you both to join the program again. Appreciate your expertise.

JENNIFER STERN: Thank you for having us.

BERNADEIA JOHNSON: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: Bernadeia Johnson is a professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She's also a former superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools. And Jennifer Stern is CEO of Great Minnesota Schools. We reached out to Minneapolis Public Schools for a statement on this report, and we will add their response to this story online when we get it.