# Harvesting the Talents of Minority Students: A Look at Achievement Disparities in Rural Minnesota Schools

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Challenges faced by Minnesota's rural school districts in addressing the future needs of students, families and communities emanate from myriad factors that are best understood through an analysis of intercultural relationships and the ecological dynamics of political, economic and educational systems. For example, current state funding formulas and school size have rendered rural districts at a disadvantage in terms of infrastructure, resources, and teacher recruitment and retention when compared to larger suburban and urban Minnesota districts (Thorson & Maxwell, 2002). Undoubtedly, these weaknesses will impact rural districts' capacity to address student needs. One issue that is of increasing importance to rural communities is the quality and degree of the achievement gap between majority and minority students within their local school districts. Another issue of growing concern across the state is the over- and under-representation of minority students in special education programs.

These are important issues deserving our attention. However, rather than problem solve by focusing narrowly on a student's academic achievement, the model we will propose later in this paper is an integrated approach that brings together representatives from all stakeholder groups to examine the student's educational context nested in other complex and interconnected systems. We provide the guidelines and structure that will allow communities to undertake this self-reflective analysis in light of their own unique issues and concerns.

### Overview of Rural Challenges and the Ecological Model

The challenges facing rural schools in the 21st Century are correlated with increasingly diverse student populations and have been well documented at the national level (Banks, Cochran-Smith, Moll, Richert, Zeichner, LePage, Darling-Hammond, Duffy &

McDonald, 2005; Lee, 2002; Rochon, Herrara, Barnhardt & Brisk, 2002). For example, the achievement gap between white and minority students persists and has been shown to shift in degrees as different groups grow and cluster in various geographic areas (The Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2006). Furthermore, the tendency of school districts to place minority students in special education programs also appears to correlate with demographic shifts. The number of minority students identified with learning disabilities or emotional-behavioral disorders often exceeds the numbers expected based on the representation of that minority group in the nation's population (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Rural districts have experienced a significant growth in the number of students representing a wide spectrum of national, racial and ethnic backgrounds (Nathan, 2006). The changing demographics in Minnesota have caused educators to reflect and reexamine how education has been provided to rural communities, especially as economic and population transitions in rural communities affect quality of life and funding for education. For example, in rural areas, half of the overall total population growth has occurred within minority groups who are younger than their white counterparts, represent a notable number of ethnic backgrounds, and who often experience a disconnect with what is occurring in majority classrooms (Gillaspy, 2006).

To gain a clear picture of achievement gap and disproportionate representation issues in rural Minnesota districts, the authors first reviewed national data related to Minnesota specifically. We then examined a number of databases provided by the Minnesota Department of Education specific to American Indian, African American and Hispanic students. Various obstacles were encountered in the search for "clean" and meaningful data. We discovered that there was no easy manner of gathering the relevant information for rural districts alone. Where information has been aggregated (or disaggregated) in meaningful ways, rural district results are not necessarily presented, since frequently only data for larger districts are reported. One outcome of our research, therefore, points to the fact that data-gathering and reporting efforts related to rural districts need to be improved. As an example, as the Minnesota Native American population accounts for less than 2% of the population, this group is considered statistically insignificant and is therefore frequently absent in policies that are designed to address the population at large. This oversight has the unintended effect of marginalizing an entire population and placing students from that group at additional risk of failure. In addition, we contend that methodologies should be user-

friendly, meaningful, multidimensional, and culturally sensitive. Based on what we can determine from national and state trends, we offer recommendations for addressing the achievement gap and over/underrepresentation challenges faced by rural districts and communities.

**National Indicators of Minnesota's Progress**

Assessment data compiled by the Minnesota Department of Education indicate a continuing lag in educational improvement and progress of minority students. The numbers are gleaned from the National Center of Educational Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress and National Indian Education Study. Figures 1 and 2 depict the academic progress made by Minnesota's students on NAEP tests. With the inserted line depicting target goals, one can see that Black, Hispanic, English language learners and special education students have not met target goals for achievement.
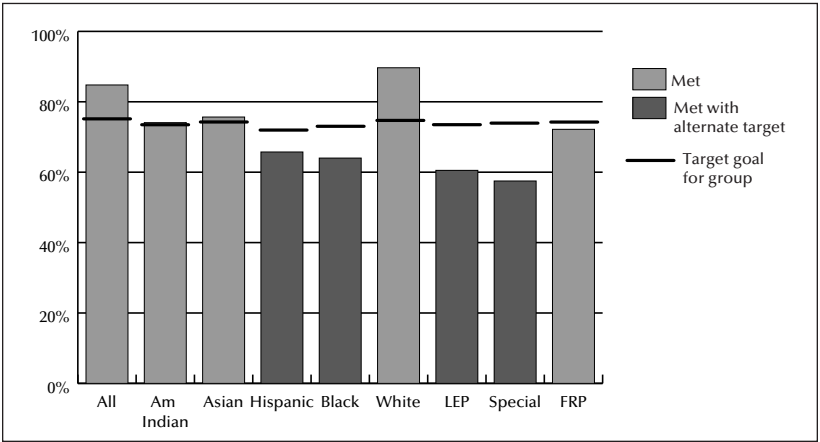
*Figure 1:* *2005 NAEP reading scores for various student groups.*
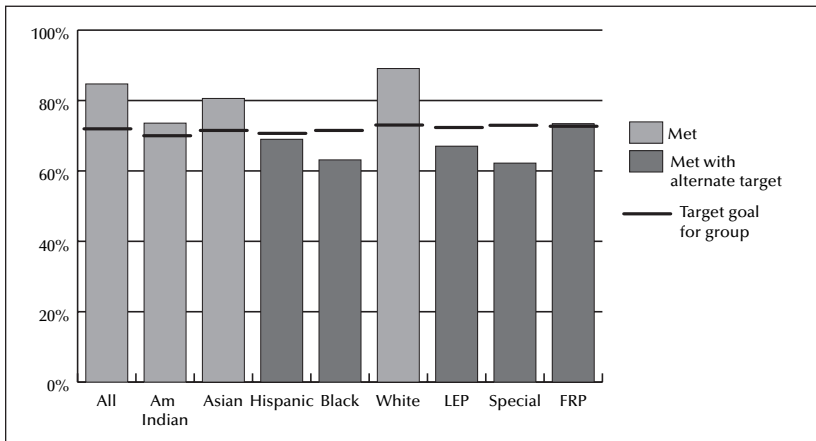


*"FRP" indicates students living in poverty.*
*Source: Minnesota Department of Education*

***Figure 2:*** *2005 NAEP math scores for various student groups.*



*Source: Minnesota Department of Education*

**Attendance**

In addition to specific achievement data, national data on factors correlated to student achievement show a slightly lower overall school attendance rate for Minnesota minority students. American Indian students appear to have the lowest attendance rate. While providing an explanation for this disturbing fact goes beyond the scope of this paper, this is the sort of data that would provide questions for discussion and exploration provided with the model we will outline.

**Figure 3:** *2004 NAEP attendance data for various student groups.*
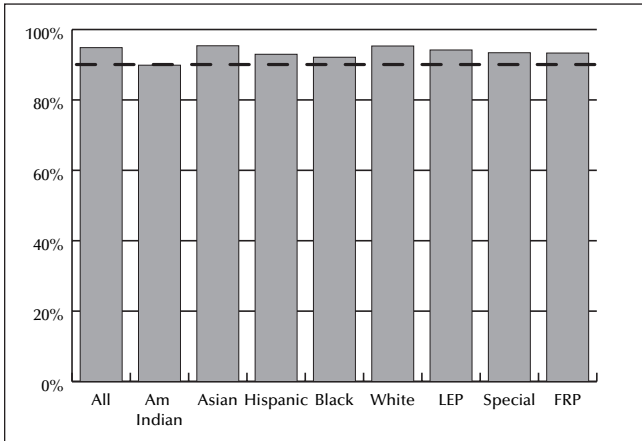


Source: Minnesota Department of Education

## Poverty

The 2000 census also shows more minority students living in poverty than their white counterparts. For example, the percentage of American Indian children 0-17 living below the poverty level in Minnesota during 1999 was 35%. Other racial groups were: White, 6%, Black, 34%, Asian, 24% and Latino, 23% (U.S. Census, 2000).

## Minnesota's State Proficiency Indicators

The information in the following tables show the 2005 Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) test subtest scores by various subgroups and are ranked from most successful to least successful. In the interest of space, only data for third grade and tenth grade will be shown. The numbers indicate that American Indians/Alaska Natives, Hispanic, Black and English language learners continue to achieve at a lower level than the White and Asian students.

*Table 1:* 2005 MCA Grade 3 reading assessment, percent proficient.

| Area | All students | White | Asian | American Indian | (FRP) Low SES | Hispanic | Black | LEP/ELL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Literal | 80.29 | 83.23 | 74.39 | 72.16 | 71.65 | 68.13 | 67.74 | 65.00 |
| Interpretation Evaluation | 75.00 | 77.81 | 69.04 | 67.44 | 66.67 | 63.15 | 63.07 | 60.22 |
| Literary Passages | 84.83 | 87.42 | 79.92 | 77.75 | 76.92 | 73.33 | 73.58 | 70.83 |
| Information Practical Passages | 76.02 | 78.96 | 69.80 | 67.93 | 67.33 | 63.83 | 63.48 | 60.65 |
| Main Idea | 80.15 | 83.15 | 73.95 | 71.75 | 71.40 | 67.80 | 67.35 | 64.70 |
| Information Processing | 80.55 | 83.27 | 75.18 | 72.91 | 72.00 | 68.73 | 68.45 | 65.55 |
| Inference | 74.47 | 77.2 | 69.0 | 67.53 | 66.27 | 62.73 | 62.87 | 60.07 |
| Compare Contrast | 89.00 | 91.50 | 85.00 | 82.25 | 81.75 | 78.00 | 77.00 | 75.75 |
| Analysis | 69.00 | 72.13 | 61.13 | 59.88 | 59.88 | 56.38 | 56.50 | 52.75 |

*Source: Minnesota Department of Education*

*Table 2:* 2005 MCA Grade 10 reading assessment, percent proficient.

| Area | All Students | White | Asian | American Indian | (FRP) Low SES | Hispanic | Black | LEP ELL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Literal Explicit | 81.17 | 83.94 | 75.61 | 71.94 | 70.89 | 67.61 | 62.56 | 58.83 |
| Interpretative Analytical | 69.45 | 72.5 | 62.41 | 58.0 | 57.45 | 55.09 | 49.41 | 44.68 |
| Critical Evaluative | 66.14 | 69.07 | 58.71 | 55.14 | 54.79 | 51.64 | 47.36 | 41.71 |
| Reading Complex Information | 71.04 | 73.98 | 63.98 | 60.27 | 59.67 | 56.88 | 51.96 | 47.06 |
| Technical Reading | 84.17 | 87.00 | 80.83 | 75.00 | 73.83 | 70.17 | 63.83 | 61.00 |
| Main Idea | 80.48 | 83.30 | 74.22 | 71.30 | 69.91 | 67.04 | 61.48 | 57.26 |
| Identify Bias Point of View | 70.94 | 74.06 | 64.56 | 59.06 | 58.94 | 56.22 | 50.67 | 46.39 |
| Analyze Evaluate Text | 60.46 | 63.38 | 52.85 | 49.23 | 49.08 | 46.00 | 42.38 | 36.38 |

*Source: Minnesota Department of Education*

**Disproportionate Representation of Minorities in Special Education**

Another problem facing minorities is their disproportionate identification for special education services. While African Americans, Native Americans and some Hispanics are frequently over-identified for special education and under-identified for gifted and talented programs, the opposite is true for Asian American students. U.S. Department of Education data collected in 1995 indicated that 16% of the student population in the U.S. was African American. In contrast, African Americans made up 21% of special education enrollments in the United States. However, according to the 1998 OSEP calculations, approximately 14% of African American students were actually receiving special education services. Calculations using "odds ratios" indicate that African American students in particular are 1.18 times more likely than white students to be placed in special education programs (Donovan and Cross, 2002). Furthermore, African American students, in contrast to all other racial/ethnic groups, appear to be at the highest risk for placement in programs for emotional-behavioral disorders (Donovan & Cross, 2002). A similar trend can be found here in Minnesota where data gathered in 2001-02 indicate that 5.56% of the general education population is comprised of English-speaking African American students; however, these students represent 13.88% of the population identified as emotionally-behaviorally disordered (E. Watkins memo, 2003).

The data for English language learners is less clear. In a two-year longitudinal study, it was found that both over-identification and under-identification are occurring and that while the number of ELLs in special education is similar to the state average, some teachers report they are no longer even referring ELLs because of the belief they will not be found eligible regardless of whether or not they indeed have a disability (Hoffman, 2003).

Table 3 below reflects data collected by the Minnesota Department of Education regarding disproportionality of minority placement in special education programs for the 2001-02 academic year. This chart compares general education enrollment with the proportion in special education (all programs) and with the individual disability categories of Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and Emotional/Behavioral Disorder (E/BD). Figures for each racial group are subdivided according to home language status as a means of distinguishing students who are immigrants, refugees and/or ELLs.

*Table 3: Minnesota students placed in special education programs, 2001-02 K-12 comparison.*

| Group | Home Language | # in Gen'l Ed | % of Gen'l Ed | # in Special Ed | % | # in SLD | % | # in E/BD | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Am. Indian | English | 13,824 | 1.86% | 3,583 | 3.55% | 1,273 | 3.38% | 1,079 | 6.11% |
| | Non-English | 349 | 0.05% | 75 | 0.07% | 24 | 0.06% | 10 | 0.06% |
| Asian | English | 10,310 | 1.39% | 872 | 0.86% | 214 | 0.57% | 94 | 0.53% |
| | Non-English | 30,599 | 4.12% | 2,335 | 2.31% | 1,074 | 2.85% | 78 | 0.44% |
| Latino | English | 9,565 | 1.29% | 1,671 | 1.66% | 645 | 1.71% | 292 | 1.65% |
| | Non-English | 18,341 | 2.47% | 1,960 | 1.94% | 989 | 2.63% | 151 | 0.86% |
| African Am. | English | 40,521 | 5.46% | 9,366 | 9.29% | 3,841 | 10.19% | 2,451 | 13.88% |
| | Non-English | 9,030 | 1.22% | 422 | 0.42% | 126 | 0.33% | 49 | 0.28% |
| White | English | 603,350 | 81.34% | 79,956 | 79.27% | 29,368 | 77.95% | 13,394 | 75.87% |
| | Non-English | 5,921 | 0.80% | 627 | 0.62% | 122 | 0.32% | 56 | 0.32% |
| All | English | 677,570 | 91.35% | 95,448 | 94.63% | 35,341 | 93.80% | 17,310 | 98.05% |
| | Non-English | 64,200 | 8.65% | 5,419 | 5.37% | 2,335 | 6.20% | 344 | 1.95% |

*(From E. Watkins Memo, 2003)*

**Planning for Talent Development of all Students**

Although the data currently available lacks adequate specificity for delineating the nature and extent of the achievement gap and disproportionality experienced within all Minnesota ruralplexes, it stands to reason that the trends identified across the state are evidenced within rural districts. Furthermore, it is clear that additional sources of data are needed to illuminate patterns and trends.  As the demographics of rural areas change and become culturally, racially and ethnically more diverse, we recommend that the following question be addressed by each community: "What information (assessments), resources (human and tangible), collaborative relationships, and organizational policies and procedures are needed to prevent or curtail academic failure and inappropriate special education placement of American Indian, African American and Hispanic students?"

Rural residents will need to identify and work with the unique combination of resources, risk factors, stressors and intercultural dynamics that are embedded within their specific communities. Obviously, this is a tall order that will require leadership from both school and community members around issues that are sometimes politically contentious and divisive. Leaders will need to rely on intercultural skills in communication and consensus-building as they seek to resolve differences among community members and build tolerance for diverse cultural perspectives, styles and values and goals.

In order for communities and their respective school districts to analyze how the issues of achievement gap and disproportionate representation are impacting their student populations, we recommend the use of a four-dimensional axis designed by Linda Winfield (1991).

**Dimension I**: **Multi-Dimensional Assessment**

Since the enactment of NCLB legislation, the number of standardized assessments has increased dramatically. While assessment data is essential for planning and accountability, there is also a danger in the heavy reliance on one method of measurement. Standardized test scores are particularly vulnerable to misuse and misinterpretation, especially when cultural factors related to diversity are present. It is important to consider that these assessments generally represent a dominant cultural viewpoint that values, and therefore assesses, a specific cultural literacy. Conversely, information representative of non-dominant cultures is not valued and is not assessed. Because of these limitations,

standardized tests tend to reveal what a minority student does **not** know, but fail to illuminate the literacy indigenous to his or her own culture. This deficit view generates the premise that a gap exists and also attributes the deficiency to the child rather than looking for explanations within the educational system. Research has also revealed that increased testing can negatively impact how students view themselves. This is particularly true for students whose first language is not English (Zacarian, 2006).

Given this attitude, it is likely that many English language learners would perform poorly on tests due to low expectations and a resulting lack of motivation. Measurement theory informs us that, in order for a test to be truly valid, students must give their assent by responding with their best effort to do well on the test. Ysseldyke and Christenson (1993) have suggested that heavy reliance on standardized tests tends to restrict the focus of data analysis and related intervention planning to the following:

- An emphasis on the student's **characteristics** as the source of the problem
- An emphasis on understanding the **causes** of problems in order to prescribe **treatments** (similar to the treatment of "disease" in a medical model)
- An emphasis on the **description** of the student's problem
- "**Why**" questions dominate
- Interventions are targeted at **students only**

In light of the measurement fallibility inherent in the heavy reliance upon standardized tests, it is clear that districts would gain a more reliable and accurate picture of minority student achievement by expanding their methods to include those that demonstrate a greater degree of cultural sensitivity. We suggest that an ecological assessment approach provides a more valid method for determining academic progress among minority students. This orientation adheres to the following assumptions:

- The focus of assessment is on **interrelationships** between students and instructional environments
- The **interactions** among micro- and macro-systems are considered in the analysis
- The emphasis is on **problem solving** (not restricted to problem description)
- "**What**" and "**how**" questions dominate
- Interventions are targeted at **students, teachers, parents, peers, and instruction** (Ysseldyke and Christenson, 1993)

Measurement methods that tap the complex variables correlated with student learning, including cultural influences, will undoubtedly give educators more accurate data for use in intervention planning. As districts seek to close the gap between culturally diverse student groups, they will need to reduce the mismatch between the learner and the educational environment. Based on the research of Deno (2002) and Walker and Shinn (2002), a five-step strategy, described below, has proven to be successful in promoting growth in areas of learning and behavior for students who are challenged by their current educational environments. The model identifies the nature and extent of specific problem areas and utilizes methods for consistent, persistent, and meaningful monitoring of progress toward goals and objectives.

**Step 1: Problem Identification**: Problems are defined as situational rather than person-driven and are viewed as the difference between what is expected and what occurs; therefore, two initial questions for problem solving teams to pose are:

1. What *is* expected? For example, "Satisfactory performance in the general education academic and/or behavioral curriculum for all students regardless of ethnicity, race, gender…"

2. What occurs?  This question is answered in step 2.

**Step 2: Problem Certification**: This step asks for the provision of data to certify the problem or to ascertain the degree or extent of the problem. It would be important at this stage to determine the degree to which community members view the existence of achievement gap and disproportionality conditions as a "problem" based on their value system, cultural orientation toward these issues, etc.

**Step 3: Exploring Solutions**: Collaborative planning should be designed to produce results that both "filter down" from the larger macro-system (community and district) levels to the smaller micro-system (family/student and building) levels and concomitantly "scale up" from micro-levels in order to strengthen infrastructures at school district and local community and governmental levels. Democratic, culturally responsive governing committees can participate in this planning.

**Step 4: Evaluation Solutions**: Progress must continue to be monitored through both quantitative and qualitative measures on a regular basis to determine whether the gap is closing and bias in special education placements is diminishing. If, through data

analysis, governing bodies cannot establish the success of their strategies, they will need to revise or eliminate those plans and continue to monitor for effectiveness.

**Step 5: Problem Solution**: This step involves the verification that those individuals experiencing the defined problem and those assisting with its resolution agree that it has been solved.

**Dimension II: School and Community Involvement**

Winfield (1991) found that school-community involvement became a critical variable in the success of Hispanic students. Parent and/or community-school involvement, however, is frequently too narrowly defined and is often measured by counting the number of times parents show up at school conferences or parent-teacher organization meetings. In order for involvement efforts to lead to productive results with families from diverse backgrounds, communications and activities must demonstrate the school's sensitivity to the families' cultural traditions and styles and responsiveness to their needs and stressors. We believe that schools and their respective communities should form coalitions of school and community members who are charged with providing specific supports that are valued by different cultural groups and have a track record of successful outcomes related to academic achievement. Families will only respond to supports that fit comfortably within their "world view." When teams include this critical variable into their planning, the process of "involvement" becomes bi-directional and will ultimately increase opportunities for children to engage in the learning process and thrive in the school environment.

Based on two decades of research (see, for example, http://www.search-institute.org), we recommend that school and community involvement efforts target interventions that promote resilience in families, reduce risk factors, ensure equitable access to both human and tangible resources, and honor the cultural traditions and styles of American Indian, African American and Hispanic families. Rutter (1987) defines resilience as one's ability to cope with risk, stress and adversity. The concept of resilience has been particularly beneficial for minority populations as it has shifted perspectives from "deficit" to "strengths-based" orientations.

For collaborative committees and teams to create action plans that support resilience in students, a tool such as the one depicted below can be useful for designing interventions that protect students from risk, reduce the impact of risks that cannot be prevented, and support the growth of resilience (Winfield, 1991).

| Protective Mechanisms | School Interventions | | Community Interventions | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | School-based | Classroom-Based | Family | Peers | Policymakers |
| Reduction of risk impact | | | | | |
| Reduction of negative chain | | | | | |
| Self-esteem, self-efficacy | | | | | |
| Opening up of opportunities | | | | | |

Reduction of risk impact is exemplified by changing the degree of exposure to the risk variable. For example, providing a developmentally appropriate and quality kindergarten program may reduce the risk of a child developing negative attitudes and behaviors that would be problematic in the community's formal school setting. Negative chain reactions, once risk has been incurred, can be reduced by providing appropriate supports. For example, after-school mentoring programs promote self esteem and self efficacy and often serve to fill relationship voids in the lives of students who have few opportunities to form significant relationships with positive adult role models. The fourth protective mechanism relates to a student's access to resources, such as counseling, curriculum, and talent development training, which impact his or her chances in life for school and job success.

While there is a considerable research base that confirms the importance of equitable resource allocation in preventing achievement disparities among students (Chiu & Khoo, 2005), it has been far more difficult for researchers to establish the connections among achievement outcomes and variables characterized as "human resources." For example, research has indicated that sharing similar social norms and cultural capital with the teacher (and majority of community residents) is a human (relationship) resource that is associated with higher achievement outcomes (Heath, 1983). Creating a level playing field, therefore, for children who lack the opportunity to learn from teachers representing their own cultural background will be challenging. This has been the case for many states that rely primarily on a white, middle-class teaching force and who have experienced significant difficulty recruiting minority

teachers. School administrators in rural districts have very limited opportunities to hire teachers of color due to the lack of diversity represented in their applicant pools. Fortunately, current research (e.g., Ladson-Billings) indicates that student-teacher backgrounds do not need to be matched in order for teachers to be effective with their minority students. Teachers do, however, need knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable them to be culturally responsive.

**Dimension III**: **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Teachers who have acquired the attitudes, knowledge and skills inherent in culturally responsive pedagogy adjust their instruction in response to culture, race, gender, class, and other variables. To be capable of designing and implementing such instructional variations, teachers require a degree of knowledge regarding their own and others' cultures. Curricula and/or training programs that are designed to enhance teacher skills in this area are required.

Teachers who exhibit intercultural competencies are able to identify how their own inherent unintentional biases affect their students. For example, teachers must be aware of their expectations regarding student performance and consciously alter these expectations when they inhibit student success. These teachers also learn to critically analyze their curriculum and pedagogical techniques as they interact with various cultures and challenge practices that sustain and perpetuate poor performance or disengagement from the process of schooling.

Geneva Gay's research (2000) indicates that teachers who are able to nurture academic success in culturally diverse student populations take on a role as cultural organizer, cultural mediator, cultural orchestrator and validator of student cultures. Through these roles, teachers facilitate students' strategic ways of accomplishing tasks, create opportunities for students to participate in critical dialogue regarding culture, create social contexts that provide multiple opportunities for learning, and build a context for honoring all students' cultures.

**Dimension IV**: **Collaborative Governance**

Collaborative governance is required for families, schools and communities to establish and reach goals that truly represent all stakeholders. Nationwide, many school districts have embraced "site-based decision making" models; however, just their existence does not necessarily diminish achievement disparities. To succeed in promoting the success of all constituents, stakeholders must possess a considerable degree of intercultural competency.

Democratic governance will not survive without leaders who can also help the majority population recognize the role of privilege and power as it functions within the various contextual systems. Gary Howard (1993), a white American whose heritage is firmly rooted in a Minnesota farming community, trains white educators to move from a paradigm of dominance to one of diversity. Howard makes the point that many white Americans not only choose to remain ignorant of other cultures, but have the "luxury" of doing so based on their position of privilege. Privilege, in this context, does not refer to socioeconomic status, but to the condition of never having to wonder whether or not one was denied an opportunity based on racial or ethnic background.

Based on the work of intercultural theorists such as Bennett and diversity trainers such as Howard, we assert that school-community collaborative governance bodies must include members of representative cultures as well as individuals trained in diversity leadership and inter-cultural communication. This call may require that school districts and community government provide the financial support necessary for training and sustained development of individuals.

**Conclusion**

We conclude that the presence of an achievement gap and disproportionate special education representation in rural areas of Minnesota will inevitably require unprecedented community engagement and commitment. It will be crucial for communities to reach consensus on valued goals that lead to student learning, to identify methods for determining whether these goals have been obtained, and to plan for sustained success. By using a planning model that supports the development of advocacy-oriented assessment methods, collaborative teaming for designing interventions around resilience and protective factors, and collaborative democratic governance that engages skilled diversity leaders, rural communities will be well on their way to establishing a strong foundation for nurturing the talents of their rapidly changing student population.

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