

February 16, 2022

Dear Chair Davnie and Members of the House Education Finance Committee,

As our Councils have done every year since 2017, we are here to share a united message from the three State Ethnic Councils and the Indian Affairs Council in strong support of the Increase Teachers of Color Act - H.F. 3079 - as our top joint priority in education.

As state agencies, we are tasked with the important charge to advise and inform State Lawmakers about our constituent communities and their needs. As you heard from the youth who testified, they are yearning to see more of themselves reflected in their teacher — racially, ethnically, and culturally. However, the gap between the increasing diversity of students in schools and the lack of diversity of teachers widens each year. Addressing this severe shortage is key to narrowing our state's persistent opportunity and achievement gaps, which disproportionately impact our constituent communities. If Minnesota students today had equitable access to teachers who reflect students' diversity as several statutes assert that they should, there would be 22,000 BIPOC teachers instead of the fewer than 3,000 we have today.

While we are grateful for the notable increase in state investments in various grant programs last legislative session compared to the minimal appropriations of the past, which have contributed to the severe shortage of BIPOC teachers, legislative investments made last session were just 37% of what was estimated as needed to move the needle and increase the percentage of BIPOC teachers. We are encouraged to learn of the tremendous school district response to the expanded Grow Your Own grant program, and we urge you to fully fund all the district projects throughout the state that have been proposed for this grant program. Increased funding as proposed in this bill for the important Collaborative Urban and Greater Minnesota Educators of Color Program is also crucial because these grants support BIPOC teacher candidates already in the pathways to become teachers. Funding has not increased since the program was made competitive in 2017 and yet the number of institutions receiving grants has more than doubled. Increasing investments for concurrent enrollment Intro to Teaching courses is also important, and we are urging you to adopt the proposed, new Closing Education Opportunity Gaps grant program so schools have focused resources to address systemic inequities impacting youth, families and staff from our communities.

Like previous iterations of this bill, H.F. 3079 will strengthen policy to help ensure a greater return on existing and proposed increases in state investments by addressing systemic barriers to recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers of color and American Indian teachers. It is a comprehensive set of policy proposals, most of which were heard in this committee last year and incorporated in your omnibus bill last session but that did not make it into the final omnibus bill sent to the Governor. These proposals have been informed by feedback from hundreds of parents, students, educators, and others from our communities over the past seven years. In years past, we are pleased that legislators from both parties in both chambers have supported the Act, and that dozens of educational organizations have expressed their endorsement despite having strong disagreements on other pieces of legislation.

The Councils, our communities and the Coalition to Increase Teachers of Color and American Indian Teachers in Minnesota have a sense of urgency on this issue, as our students' learning continues to be impeded by structural and systemic challenges that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic and have worsened the state's wide opportunity and achievement gaps.

Over the course of the pandemic, our families have expressed that the policy language included in this bill could have mitigated a number of the communication issues and lack of support they experienced during shifts to and from distance learning. It is important that this bill would require districts to have plans to ensure that curriculum is “rigorous, accurate, anti-racist, and culturally sustaining” and that learning and work environments “validate, embrace, affirm, and integrate the cultural and community strengths for all students, families, and employees.” These strengthened plans will be critical in addressing the wide-ranging impact that COVID-19 has inflicted on student learning. Students’ mental health is suffering these past two years even more than before due to the pandemic and current events. More than ever, it is important for students to have teachers who understand racial and generational trauma and who can provide the support they need to deal with their mental health and be successful in school.

Research has clearly demonstrated that ALL students benefit from diverse teachers. Research is also clear that gaps narrowed for students who are of color or American Indian who have teachers reflecting their diverse backgrounds. We must be responsive to their needs. Together, we can and must change the trajectory for these students.

Many schools across the state are struggling to stay open due to daily workforce shortages. A recent national study found that the highest rates of those voluntarily leaving their jobs were among those working in education. This bill will not only address the shortage of teachers of color and American Indian teachers, but increasing teachers from our communities will address the overall teacher workforce shortage in schools.

Our Councils and communities have called for racial justice in all aspects of society. If we are to expect different results in our effort to narrow our achievement gaps, we must do things differently as a state and concertedly address opportunity gaps. In this regard, H.F. 3079 represents significant, positive change that will make a difference in the lives and learning of students.

We strongly recommend that your Committee fully support all proposed investments and supporting policies in the 2022 Increase Teachers of Color Act.

We appreciate the leadership demonstrated by Chair Davnie to prioritize hearing this bill and Representative Hassan for serving as lead author.

Thank you for your leadership in doing what is right for all students in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

Shannon Geshick | Executive Director | Minnesota Indian Affairs Council

Rosa Tock | Executive Director | Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs

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Linda Sloan | Executive Director | Council for Minnesotans of African Heritage