



Duluth News Tribune: Local View: Here's one change to boost our failing public-education system

Page Amendment would ensure all Minnesota children have a civil right to a quality public education.

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The Minnesota state constitution has been amended over 100 times since its ratification in 1857, though one provision of the constitution has remained unchanged: Article XIII, Section 1. The education provision.

The provision from 1857 designed our public-school system to be “uniform” and “adequate.” Minnesota’s public-school system is functioning exactly how it was designed. But Minnesota children and families deserve more than “adequate” from the compulsory system.

An October 2019 study by the Minneapolis Federal Reserve showed that Minnesota leads the nation in education gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The problem persists in all 87 counties of the state. Most troubling, these gaps have been widening over the last two decades and getting worse with the pandemic response of hybrid and distance learning. We must face this immediately with transformative education policy.

The Page Amendment is exactly that policy. The proposed amendment to the Minnesota state constitution would provide each Minnesota child with a civil right to quality public education. Centered on children and families, the amendment would establish education as a paramount duty of the state, bolstering collective responsibility to close our education gaps and do better by all Minnesotans.

I am a citizen of the Leech Lake Nation and a mother; equity issues are central to my life’s work. I’ve built youth programming, advocated in child-protection court, and worked for systems change. Predominantly serving Indigenous, rural, and children of color, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges and nearly criminal disparities for our children.

For example, Minnesota ranks 47th in the nation for American Indian students who graduate on time and 50th for Black and Hispanic students, according to Minnesota Compass. Even when students graduate on time, they too often aren’t college-ready. Only 25% of Black students and 26% of Hispanic students are prepared for college, as the Minneapolis Federal Reserve reported in its October 2019 study. Subject proficiencies are disparate, too. Reading and math proficiency for children of color, Indigenous, and lower-income students are more than 20 points below the state average. Low-income white children have worse educational outcomes than white children from higher-income families.

By taking a look at the intersection of education and quality of life in our state, we can better understand the long-term economic impact of these disparities. Those who don’t attain a high school diploma experience twice the poverty rate of those who do, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. U.S. Census figures show that Black and American Indian families in Minnesota earn significantly



less than white families, averaging \$36,849 and \$35,148, respectively, to the median white family income of \$73,027.

I served on the Virginia City Council from 2008 to 2018. The council was nonpartisan and community-oriented, partnering with the local school districts and regional officials to prioritize the education of our children. We have the opportunity to advance the Page Amendment with these same values in mind: bipartisanship and community partnership. With the most diverse legislative body in the history of Minnesota, we're poised to get this accomplished.

Once passed by the Legislature, Minnesotans would have the opportunity to approve the amendment, which would immediately provide a civil right to quality public education. This civil right would ensure that the state has a duty and responsibility, a much-needed change to a failing institution.

The pandemic is wreaking havoc on our school system, breaking open our already excessive education gaps. It's never been more clear that we need education reform in Minnesota that targets the status quo. Targeting the system is the only way to solve the systemic issues we're facing. For all Minnesotans, the Page Amendment is an opportunity to make powerful and impactful changes today for a better tomorrow.

Nevada Littlewolf is executive director and campaign manager of Our Children MN, a bipartisan coalition working to pass the Page Amendment (ourchildrenmn.com). She served on the Virginia City Council from 2008 to 2018 and is a citizen of the Leech Lake Nation.