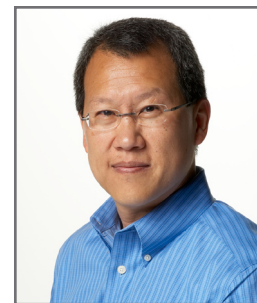


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Al Fan

Close the Achievement Gap!

By Al Fan.

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In recent months we have again seen a series of sensational headlines about the crisis in Minnesota's charter schools. Sensation aside, several legitimate facilities issues were identified. So there will be tweaks to the comprehensive charter-law overhaul of 2009, which, with strong support from charter-sector leadership, substantially increased the oversight and accountability for charter schools. We continue to refine the nation's best charter school law.

Unfortunately, the sound and fury of the most recent concerns about charter schools again masks the real crisis in Minnesota's public school system.

Minnesota continues to have one of the nation's largest achievement gaps between white students and students of color served by its inner city schools. The gap exists systematically in both district and charter schools.

Minnesota's appalling achievement gap is a CRISIS — exponentially more important than any other issue in public education today. Where are the screaming headlines about this crisis? Where are the Senate hearings on closing the achievement gap? Where are they?

We at Charter School Partners believe that the charter sector provides the best and most proven avenue for closing the achievement gap as exemplified by the remarkable efforts of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem's Children's Zone, Yes! College

Prep in Houston, Green Dot Schools in Los Angeles, and numerous other national networks like KIPP, Achievement First and Uncommon Schools, among many others.

Replicating school success, mostly charter school success, is now the avant-garde movement in American education today. Yet, here in Minnesota, we have not yet embraced this movement. The Obama administration's \$4 billion Race to the Top program specifically outlines these "closing the achievement gap" strategies, spelling out strict criteria for states to incorporate these proven principles and practices, or be denied federal money. Despite the clarity of the charge to improve our schools, we in Minnesota have not seemed willing to do "whatever it takes" to close the achievement gap.

Fortunately, in the state's Race to the Top submission, almost 90 percent of Minnesota's school districts and charter schools, as well as 28 union locals, including Minneapolis and St Paul, overrode Education Minnesota's "concerns," which focused more on protecting the adult members of teacher unions than on protecting the interests of the state's most vulnerable children. Unbelievably, Education Minnesota's President Thomas Dooher has publicly stated that he would rather lose hundreds of millions of dollars for our public schools than to give up on any union positions like performance pay and alternative certification. But this status-quo approach has yielded no significant change to the achievement gap in the last three decades. Where are the headlines and the Senate hearings on Mr. Dooher's recalcitrance? Why hasn't he been called out on this?

On our website (charterschoolpartners.org), we lay out the strategy for the state's schools – district and charter – to provide high quality educations for all children and close the achievement gap. We didn't make this up. We looked to what is happening nationally in New York City, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Houston. While our focus has been on charter schools, this strategy works for district schools as well. These elements include the following:

- **Start new high-achieving schools:** Getting new high-performing, high-achieving schools in the pipeline is key. While it takes several years to start up a new school, it is the most effective way to increase the number of high-achieving schools.
- **Replicate successful schools:** Once school models prove that they work and serve students well, quickly duplicate what works.
- **Move good schools to great schools:** By incorporating best practices, focusing relentlessly on student achievement, and making a commitment to excellence, Minnesota can have many of its schools move from Good to Great.
- **Refresh low-performing schools:** “Refresh” efforts are complicated and often don't work. Boards, cultures and leaders are often dug in, and low achievement can be codified in school culture. However, sometimes a new dynamic injected into the school, most notably a new leader focused on achievement, makes a “refresh” effort worthwhile.

- **Close down chronically underperforming schools:** OK, Minnesota, buck up. This is part of the cycle of success. Minnesota Nice has not wanted to go here, but we must. Other communities, including Denver, have developed criteria and the will to actually do the hard work of shutting failing schools — district and charter — down.

So let's come together – district and charter – and do whatever it takes to close the shameful achievement gap that exists in Minnesota.

Al Fan is Executive Director of Charter School Partners (charterschoolpartners.org), a newly formed nonprofit organization with national and state foundation support, whose mission is to improve academic achievement in Minnesota's charter schools.