



Contrary to report, Minneapolis school officials weren't bullied to back program

Article by: Jeff Hayden and Bobby Joe Champion

September 18, 2014 - 11:22 PM

We were troubled by claims from Minneapolis public schools (MPS) officials last week that they were strong-armed into partnering with Northside community-based organizations — under duress from ourselves (“North Side school effort called failure,” Sept. 12).

We were even more taken aback by a claim from an unnamed official that we went so far as to threaten to withhold state aid in order to get our way.

Untrue. We were not involved with anything of the sort.

What we were involved with is an ongoing struggle to address the single most critical issue for the future of our community and state: closing the underlying opportunity gap that leaves a staggering number of black youths without a diploma and the skills they need.

The case in question revolves around two community-based organizations — the Minneapolis Urban League 13th Grade Initiative and the Community Standards Initiative (CSI) — that came before the Legislature with two separate funding requests during last biennium’s budget debate. We were proud sponsors of both.

Both bills moved through the customary, transparent committee process in the Minnesota House and Senate, each being endorsed for inclusion in the larger education budget bill. Ultimately, the 13th Grade Initiative, which focuses on identifying and assisting young adults who are unemployed and not on a path to college or a career, was appropriated only \$600,000 of its \$1 million request.

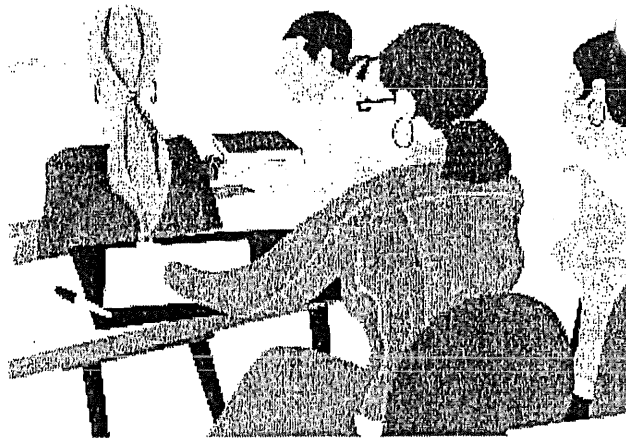
The second funding request, for CSI, a community group designed to engage at-risk students during and after school, was moving in a similar direction until MPS officials offered an alternative. Rather than administer funds for community-based programs at the state level, MPS officials argued they would be a better arbiter for establishing and financing these partnerships.

After the usual discussions and negotiations among all the stakeholders, we landed on a compromise. In their next budget, MPS agreed to create a \$500,000 funding stream devoted to community-based organizations aimed at closing the achievement gap, provided they had accountability measures and success metrics in place. Because both the 13th Grade Initiative and CSI had already won broad legislative support, they would both be considered for — not guaranteed — funding through this grant.

With the process now out of the Legislature’s hands, we played no role as MPS negotiated a \$375,000 contract with CSI over the course of a year, which the school board approved unanimously on its consent agenda last May. We were similarly not involved in MPS’s recent decision to end its contract with CSI.

Nonetheless, we are disappointed by this latest news and are deeply concerned over what we fear is a signal that MPS is unwilling to pursue good faith partnerships with community-based organizations in support of their underperforming schools.

Year after year, we lament the status quo, as far too many of our children continue to fall through the same cracks and gaps, beginning adult life without a diploma and unable to get a job or support themselves. The contributing factors are well



SW Parra • Fresno Bee/MCT,

known: low reading proficiency, high absenteeism, low parental involvement, behavior problems and excessive suspensions.

As a result, Minneapolis public schools graduated only 43.6 percent of black students last year.

When you think about how many children of color over the course of the last 10 years have been failed by our current approach, you can see how the impact of this academic achievement gap extends beyond a few Minneapolis neighborhoods. When you stop and reflect on the changing demographics in our state and our nation, you begin to understand how it will impact everyone's future prosperity.

Considering all of this, as we wrestle with policy remedies for the chronic disparity in academic achievement among students of color in Minneapolis, we are confronted with what experience has taught us — meaningful, lasting change requires collaboration and buy-in from all the stakeholders in the community.

By funding the Northside Achievement Zone, for example, we have seen the strides a neighborhood can make when a community-based organization takes a holistic approach, assisting families through their immediate poverty while putting their children on pathways to college and careers.

Less important, we won bonding dollars to support Minneapolis Swims' effort to renovate the Phillips pool so they can advance their mission to give swimming lessons to the neighborhood's African-American kids (who are up to 10 times more likely to drown in a swimming pool than are white kids).

We were also eager to support the aptly named Everybody Wins MN program, which is reinforcing our underperforming schools by partnering employees from area businesses and organizations with more than 1,000 students for regular, one-on-one reading sessions.

Of course there are no simple solutions to the achievement gap, but these success stories demonstrate how everybody working together in a super-local, community-building initiative can improve outcomes for young people. Based on this model, we believe groups like CSI and the 13th Grade Initiative have the right idea. Working in collaboration with students, teachers, parents and administrators is essential to achieving better family engagement, higher attendance, and more rapid intervention before it's too late.

We always expect scrutiny of our effort to build partnerships with community groups and we welcome any extra attention paid to the stark racial disparities in Minneapolis schools. But we challenge critics to look at the model and the priorities of these community-based organizations — not the personalities — as they offer constructive solutions to resolving the achievement gap.

Jeff Hayden and Bobby Joe Champion, both DFLers, represent Minneapolis in the Minnesota Senate.

© 2014 Star Tribune