

February 14, 2023

Dear Madam Chair Kunesh and Members of the Senate 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 Teachers of Color Act - S.F. 0619 as our top joint priority in education.

As state agencies, our important charge is to advise and inform State Lawmakers about our constituent communities and their needs. If Minnesota students today had equitable access to teachers who reflect students' diversity as several statutes assert they should, there would be 22,000 BIPOC teachers! Instead, there are fewer than 3,000. However, this 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.

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. We also ask for full funding for the Underrepresented Student Teacher grant, where in Fall 2021, grant recipients taught in 7 out of 8 statewide shortage areas in education. Thus, illustrating the power of strategic investments in programs like these to tackle shortages of BIPOC teachers and teachers in shortage licensure areas simultaneously.

Like previous iterations of this bill, S.F. 0619 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, which have been informed by feedback from hundreds of parents, students, educators and others from of 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 education 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. Students' mental health is suffering these past three years even more than before due to the pandemic and current events. More than ever, it's 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.

Our Councils and communities have called for racial justice in all aspects 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 address opportunity gaps. In this regard, S.F. 0619 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 2023 Increase Teachers of Color Act.

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

Sia Her | Executive Director | Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans

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