

# Local Lessons

## Five Case Studies in Community-Driven Education Reform

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While much of the current energy in education reform is focused on top-down, “10,000 foot” reforms at the state or federal level, many real education solutions occur at the local level.

These solutions take many forms, but they tend to have certain things in common. By examining several cases of community-driven education reform, we can identify some key lessons.

### **Lesson 1: Each community has specific needs.**

When Grand Rapids, Hibbing, and other districts brought the University of Minnesota’s Principals Academy program to their region, they were responding to the need for developing their schools’ human capital.

### **Lesson 2: Community-driven reform changes the classroom.**

In Rochester, the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Project partnered with the local teachers’ union, the Rochester Community and Technical College, and others to improve teacher training on identifying and responding to the effects of military deployment on students.

### **Lesson 3: Local ideas start with local diversity.**

The challenges brought about by anti-LGBT bullying in Anoka-Hennepin may be part of a broader national trend, but coming up with the right response for the school district required the activism, leadership, and ideas of local community members.

### **Lesson 4: Schools respond to true crises in the community.**

After tornadoes devastated north Minneapolis, schools were one set of anchor points in the community. When communities act to strengthen their schools, they build public institutions that help their neighborhoods respond to many different kinds of problems.

### **Lesson 5: State issues are local issues.**

The Saint Paul Federation of Teachers’ decision to fight both constitutional amendments in 2012, while supporting their local school levy, came from the knowledge that these statewide issues were of immediate significance to students and families.





To support local education reform, communities can:

- ✓ Encourage community organizations in the public sphere.
- ✓ Seek diverse community partners.
- ✓ Focus on results.

Additionally, the state of Minnesota can:

- ✓ Validate local successes.
- ✓ Support many kinds of local collaboration.
- ✓ Increase funding so schools move from starvation to innovation.

This is a particularly promising time for Minnesotan progressives to support community-driven education reform, and we cannot let the moment pass without acting on it.

# INTRODUCTION

## The Persistent Need for Education Reform

For as long as the United States has had a public education system, there have been calls for education reform. From the swinging pendulum of teacher-centered versus student-centered pedagogy to the slow, uneven, but inexorable expansion of public education access to include all students from kindergarten through high school graduation, people have been working to change the country's education system.

This is still the case today, although today's fights are not about equity of access to education, but rather concern over equity of outcomes.



**Much of modern education reform has been what we could term “10,000 foot” reform.**

## The Insufficiency of 10,000 Foot (Top-Down, Choice-and-Accountability, Donor-Driven) Reform

Much of modern education reform has been what we could term “10,000 foot” reform. From “A Nation at Risk” on, concern has been focused at the system level and on aggregate student performances. This sort of focus has meshed well with school choice policies, which advocate a change in the system of authority over schools.

The 10,000 foot focus is also a good fit with a variety of policies aimed at increasing “accountability” by assigning rewards and punishments to teachers, principals, and schools based on student outcomes (most frequently, though not exclusively, as represented by standardized test scores).

## The appeal and mindset successes of 10,000 foot reform.

10,000 foot reform is rooted in concern over a variety of persistent, nationwide educational equity gaps between groups of students.

Typically evaluated along racial and/or socioeconomic lines, these equity gaps include test score gaps, high school graduation rate gaps, postsecondary admission gaps, and postsecondary completion gaps. Since these problems have been measured and described at the system level, changing policies at the system level has been a logical approach.

This has led to a gradually expanding collection of policy changes in a growing number of states. These include the expansion of a variety of different school choice models, as well as a variety of different accountability systems. These approaches tend to reject the mindset that the key levers for educational change are inputs—funding, teachers with advanced degrees, etc.—in favor of a mindset that prioritizes student outcomes over systemic inputs.

This mindset change is important, and marks one of the key differences between modern reform and most historical reform.

Having secured the understanding that all students have a right to a public education through the end of high school, the next goal for equity is ensuring that all students achieve at high levels. To the extent that previous equity questions were about access, a focus on inputs made sense; the goal was equitable educational opportunity, and inputs were a good proxy for opportunity.

Now that the goal has shifted to achievement, outcomes are a more important proxy for equity than inputs. The distinction matters, as resources are not a guarantee of outcomes. How states, districts, and schools use their resources matters, too. The shift to an outcomes-oriented mindset is one of the key accomplishments of 10,000 foot reform. While there are reasonable arguments to be had over the degree of control schools and systems have over outcomes, maintaining a focus on outcome equity is and should be a defining aspect of education policy discussions.

### **The classroom failures of 10,000 foot reform.**

Where 10,000 foot reform has failed has been in its diagnosis of systems change as the best lever for advancing educational equity. The 10,000 foot approach tends to assume that systemwide inequity is the result of failures in distributing authority and setting incentives.

By changing authority structures (e.g. promoting school choice, changing who has control over hiring and firing practices) and altering incentives (e.g. encouraging competition between schools over students, rewarding or punishing teachers based on student outcomes), 10,000 foot reform assumes that education professionals will change their behaviors in ways that advance educational equity.

While many concerns over authority, incentives, and rules in the education system are founded in legitimate problems, the overwhelming focus on changing how the system runs has not had a significant, sustainable positive effect for most students.

Observers have begun to note that, even when 10,000 foot policy successes have been achieved, they have not translated to meaningful, effective changes in school or classroom practice. Some 10,000 foot reform advocates take this as a sign that more systemic changes need to be made so that educational practices finally do change.



**The pressures and freedoms of systems change do not, on their own, build capacity, any more than money allocated badly does.**

However, the fundamental limitation of a systems change approach is that it does not address other aspects of the problem that are not related to authority, governance, incentives, etc. Specifically, to the extent educational equity is the result of a lack of capacity, 10,000 foot systems change cannot be expected to produce the results its advocates hope for.

Here it is important to distinguish between capacity and inputs. As previously noted, resources and other inputs are not enough to generate equitable outcomes.



Resources—including money, people, and knowledge/skill—must be appropriately coordinated to become capacity. Capacity can take multiple forms, including material capacity (physical tools and capital), human capacity (people with the right mindsets and experiences), and skill capacity (knowledge of effective practices and the ability to apply them successfully).



**Ultimately, 10,000 foot reform is limited in its ability to encourage meaningful educational change at the school and classroom level.**

The pressures and freedoms of systems change do not, on their own, build capacity, any more than money allocated badly does.

Ultimately, 10,000 foot reform is limited in its ability to encourage meaningful educational change at the school and classroom level. That kind of change depends on the aggregate impact of many smaller, community-driven reforms. The critical role of community-driven reform is too often overlooked in current education policy debates. This is unfortunate, as there are many, many examples from across Minnesota of effective community-driven solutions that build local capacity for the benefit of students.

The remainder of this report will focus on five key lessons about community-driven education reform, each of which will be illustrated with an example from a different community in Minnesota. It will close with a discussion of how local and state policies can encourage this kind of community-driven change.

## The Importance of Community-Driven Education Reform

By looking at different community-led successes in Minnesota, we can draw some key lessons about community-driven education reform. Each of the following case studies demonstrates a particular lesson, although most lessons apply to most cases.

### Lesson 1: Each community has specific needs.

#### *Grand Rapids*

Just as we wouldn't expect federal education policy designed for the needs of Mississippi to have the same effect in Minnesota, we shouldn't expect state policy designed for the needs of Minneapolis to have the same effect in Moorhead. Each community has specific needs, and while it's important to have state resources available to each community, it's also important for communities to have the power to pick the resources the best fit their needs.

One excellent illustration of this is the work done to bring the University of Minnesota's Principals Academy program to the Grand Rapids and Hibbing region. This case demonstrates how important it is for communities to stay aware of their own needs and to have a variety of local partners work together to get those needs met. It also demonstrates how state programs can provide the seeds communities need to grow on their own in the future.

## Lesson 2: Community-driven reform changes the classroom.

### *Rochester*

Translating education policy into real changes at the classroom level is a persistent challenge. For example, those who believe that linking teacher evaluations to test scores will drive teachers to change their practice in positive ways often find themselves disappointed.

Being closer to the classroom means that community-led education reformers can be more specific in identifying needed classroom changes and can be more supportive in making those changes.



**Translating education policy into real changes at the classroom level is a persistent challenge.**

In the Rochester area, for example, educators and community leaders grew concerned about the effects of military deployment on children. They knew that those effects could hurt children in the classroom, and that teachers were in a good position to identify and respond to those behaviors. They also knew that teachers needed more information about how to identify, respond to, and support children and families affected by military deployments.

A collaboration between the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Project, the local teachers' union, and Rochester Community and Technical College led to the creation of an online course (now available statewide) that gives teachers specific skills to address this growing need.

## Lesson 3: Local ideas start with local diversity.

### *Anoka-Hennepin*

One reason each community in Minnesota has its own needs is that each community also has its own population of students, families, and community members. When tensions build or particular student groups are being hurt, the response will rely on the relationships local community members can build. The level of detail needed here cannot be mandated from above; addressing the needs of Minnesota's diverse communities requires difficult work at the local level.

When concerned parents and citizens in the Anoka-Hennepin district saw LGBT students committing suicide as a result of bullying, they started a conversation that wound up involving the teachers' union, the district, and many other local leaders about what the exact response should look like in their community. This required balancing many different interests and needs, and could not have been achieved without local citizens getting specific with local educators.

The end result was a starting point for curtailing bullying behavior in Anoka-Hennepin, but building on those efforts will require continued local attention.

## Lesson 4: Schools respond to true crises in the community.

### *Minneapolis*

The term “crisis” is used a lot in education politics, and it gets applied to a wide variety of issues. Sometimes, however, a community is so profoundly affected by a true crisis that the rhetoric of education politics falls away. Schools remain an important public institution, and keeping them strong helps communities when immediate, life-and-death crises arise.

For as often as the Minneapolis school district is painted as a hotbed of conflict, when tornado strikes devastated north Minneapolis, the community, teachers, and school district came together to respond and recover. Strong connections to their public schools served as an anchor point for community leaders looking out for their own.

Schools don’t always need to take center stage to be important; in north Minneapolis, they were one point of certainty from which local leaders could start the relief work while the community grieved.

## Lesson 5: State issues are local issues.

### *Saint Paul*

Many of the cases here reflect communities dealing with issues that are reflected in other communities across Minnesota. At other times, the problem is defined at the statewide level. In those cases, real action still depends on community members connecting those statewide issues to their own experiences.

The 2012 election included two important votes on constitutional amendments, as well as many local levy referenda. In the state’s capital, the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers took a stand on both amendments as well as their local levy. The “Vote No Twice and Yes Once” campaign was grounded in several distinct local needs, and the educators at SPFT were able to connect the dots for their community.



# MEETING LOCAL NEEDS: BRINGING THE PRINCIPALS ACADEMY TO GRAND RAPIDS

## Lesson 1: Each community has specific needs.

The first lesson of community-driven education reform seems self-evident, but deserves to be drawn out in detail. Each community has its own needs, both in and outside of its schools. These needs can take many different forms, and the appropriate response to similar needs may still vary by community.

Still, state-provided support systems available to local communities can be a good way to help communities meet their specific needs without requiring a top-down mandate or rules-based policy.

The work done to bring the University of Minnesota's Principals Academy program to the Grand Rapids area in northeastern Minnesota illustrates many of these points.



**Each community has its own needs, both in and outside of its schools.**

### Human Capital in Greater Minnesota

Much of the top-down, choice-and-accountability model of education reform reflects a set of assumptions that often apply in urban areas but cause difficulties in smaller communities. One of the major reasons for this is the difference in the pool of professionals available in an urban region like the Twin Cities metropolitan area and the pool available in greater Minnesota.

Because there are fewer professionals to draw from (and a lower concentration of students), many school choice policies don't make much sense in greater Minnesota. Communities often lack the staff and the students to sustain multiple competing schools. Similarly, accountability policies that focus on closing schools or removing staff—whether teachers or principals—can cause difficulties in more rural communities, which often don't have access to a ready supply of potential replacements.

This increases the importance of developing the skills of professionals already present in these communities and fostering a mindset of continuous learning. Providing the tools to help teachers, principals, and other school staff improve, and giving them the time and support to sustain that improvement, must be a key part of school improvement strategies in many greater Minnesota communities.

### The Situation in Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids and many of its surrounding communities are good examples of this need. Being the principal of a school in these communities is usually a long-term commitment, and a principal's mindset and approach can have a major impact on the professional development of their teachers.

As has been well documented, teachers and school leaders are the most significant in-school factors affecting students' achievement, and finding ways to encourage their development is an ongoing area of interest for district and community leaders.



Another major player with an enduring interest in education in the Grand Rapids area is the Blandin Foundation, a community foundation with a mission to “strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area.” As such, it was natural that the Blandin Foundation would join local district and community leaders in seeking out opportunities to develop school leaders.

Additionally, Grand Rapids falls within the area supported by the Applied Learning Institute (ALI), a collection of school districts and colleges in northeastern Minnesota. ALI’s focus is primarily on technical skills education and aligning education with the needs of local businesses and industries. It, too, has an interest in school leaders who are able to effectively craft and execute a vision that prepares students for future success in the community.

## Principals Academy

As community leaders were looking for ways to develop school leaders, the University of Minnesota was developing its Principals Academy program. Based on the National Center on Education and the Economy’s National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), the Principals Academy aims to fill the gaps too many principals experience in getting ongoing professional development.

Originally developed within the University of Minnesota’s College Readiness Consortium, the Principals Academy program is now housed within the University’s College of Education and Human Development under the Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development program.

One of the key facets of the Principals Academy program is that it is sustained over a prolonged period of time (in Grand Rapids, two summers and a school year). Longer term professional development programs, ideally allowing the same cohort to work together, have been demonstrated to be more effective than short term development opportunities, especially one-off lecture “sit-and-get” approaches. Additionally, the program’s curriculum applies research-backed practices documented and used by NISL.



**By encouraging a mindset of continuous professional growth, the program can be seen as planting seeds for ongoing professional development above and beyond its own timeframe.**

Major elements of the curriculum include:

- Motivating a team of leaders in the school to create and commit to a vision that can secure wide-ranging buy-in from all staff.
- Ensuring teachers can and do effectively create standards-based curricula
- Bringing principals and teachers up to date on the most effective ways to use assessments in school to guide and confirm student learning
- Evaluating teachers in a way that supports healthy professional development

For veteran principals who are years out of their original licensure and credentialing process, this provides an informed, supportive space for updating their practice. For newer principals, the program can create a way to get support not just from trainers but from other experienced professionals.

By encouraging a mindset of continuous professional growth, trying new things, learning from mistakes, and always seeking new opportunities for improving education, the program can be seen as planting seeds for ongoing professional development above and beyond its own timeframe.

## Footing the Bill

For all the potential advantages the Principals Academy program offers, it is not cheap. Despite the agreed-upon need for principal development shared by many district leaders in the region, putting together the resources to bring the program to the area (a prerequisite for ensuring an adequate enrollment) would be difficult.

Fortunately, the Blandin Foundation and ALI saw alignment between community needs and the Principals Academy program. They were able to put together tens of thousands of dollars, which were supplemented with other funds contributed or raised by the districts. Once the money for the program was put together and an agreement reached with the University of Minnesota, a cohort of 20 principals and other leaders was able to regularly convene in Hibbing for over a year to complete the program.

## Reaping the Benefits

Participants in the Principals Academy program have gone on to use their newly acquired and refined skills in their schools. For example, Jim Smokrovich, principal at Grand Rapids High Schools, has reframed his staff's approach to curriculum planning and professional development. He has encouraged the creation of standards-based curriculum across the school, with formative and summative assessments aligned to that curriculum.

He has also taken steps to promote effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), a professional development model that works best when teachers take the lead in their own development. As one teacher, Brielle Carlson, put it, "We continue...developing our PLCs and working the 'kinks,' but all in all, we love this time to actually have face to face conversations about education. Jim has been doing an excellent job keeping our staff up to date with educational changes and challenges, as well as always encouraging progressive change."

Another participant, Brenda Vathauer, was not a principal at the time she went through the program, but has gone on to become a principal in the Duluth school district. She maintains a long-distance professional community of her own, keeping in touch with other principals about best practices and new ideas. Additionally, she is getting certified herself by the National Institute for School Leadership so that she can facilitate training and development for other principals.

The work done with the Principals Academy program, then, has paid off for Grand Rapids, Hibbing, and the other nearby communities. In addition to increasing the effectiveness of their principals, it has also created seeds for sustaining future development of school leaders. As the years continue to pass, the area will see continued benefits in building the strength of its human capital.

# CAMO AND THE CLASSROOM: BEYOND THE YELLOW RIBBON IN ROCHESTER

## Lesson 2: Community-driven reform changes the classroom.

It has been ten years since the United States invaded Iraq, and twelve since it invaded Afghanistan. Roughly 2.5 million U.S. military service members have been deployed to those conflicts. This includes thousands of Minnesotans, many of whom have children. Most of those children are in Minnesota's public schools, and there's no question that having a deployed parent affects a child in many ways, some of which show up in school.

Better serving the children of deployed and returned soldiers is a critical need in Minnesota's schools. A network of community leaders in Rochester recognized this need and have started taking steps to make a difference.

### Military Deployment and Student Needs

The effects of military deployment on families and children are increasingly well-documented. For children and adolescents, the stresses of having a deployed parent, sibling, or relative manifest differently based on the child's age and development. They can include temper tantrums, anxiety (especially separation anxiety), dramatic changes in mood, and lower academic performance.

One survey suggests that approximately one in five deployed service members' spouses reported increases in behavior problems from their children during a deployment. These behavioral problems can carry over into school as well. What's more, research indicates that these challenges persist even after the deployment has ended.

This can also be illustrated through this story. A young child started acting out in school following his father's deployment overseas. No one at the school was made aware of the deployment or of the father's status as a service member, and so the staff had little context to understand or respond appropriately.



**Better serving the children of deployed and returned soldiers is a critical need in Minnesota's schools.**

The behavior continued, and started to escalate, causing significant disruptions to learning. With few options or solutions, the principal was considering asking the mother to remove the child from the school, since his behavior was leading to concerns about student and staff safety.

The child's grandmother was understandably anxious. She was sharing her concerns with a friend, when the friend asked if the school knew the child's father was deployed. The grandmother asked the child's mother, who went to the school to explain the situation. Given that context, the school's counselor was able to work with both the mother and the child to get at the root of the problems.

Over several months of hard work, the child was able to put words to his feelings and start working on coping strategies. The behavior problems decreased, and the child's academic future got back on track.

Had the family and the school not put the pieces together about the effects of deployment on the child, it is easy to imagine that child being sent from school to school for years. Without understanding the true source of the problems, a disruptive elementary school student could turn into a troubled preteen, and from there into a teenager more likely to drop out, commit crimes, or otherwise see a successful future grow less and less likely.

## The Start of a Beautiful Friendship

As stories like the one above started to be seen in more schools in the Rochester area, concerned leaders in the community started to consider schools' potential as a way of meeting the needs of deployed servicemembers' children.

One group already grappling with the many effects of military deployment was Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, a network of community and business volunteers, started in Minnesota with the goal of better serving the families of deployed military personnel, both during and after deployments.

In Rochester, Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Southeast Minnesota (BTYRSEM) has provided a variety of supports and services to military families since 2009. One of the co-founders and steering committee members of that group is Olmsted County Commissioner Sheila Kiscaden. Kiscaden approached Dr. Kit Hawkins, president of the Rochester Education Association (the local teachers' union), as a natural and well-connected partner for community work. Hawkins's commitment turned out to be more than just professional, however, as she is the parent of two veterans, including a daughter who served in the most recent Iraq conflict.

With both professional and personal understanding of the issues, Hawkins was more than willing to assist BTYRSEM in making arrangements for teacher training. The team's first effort was to sponsor a seminar offered by the national Military Child Education Coalition. While the training was excellent and offered without charge, it required multiple days out of the classroom, which severely limited how many educators could participate and created expenses for school districts.



**One group already grappling with the many effects of military deployment was Beyond the Yellow Ribbon.**

Recognizing that schools' and teachers' needs didn't mesh as well as they could with the existing training opportunities, Kiscaden, Hawkins, and other committed volunteers worked to convince the National Guard and the Military Child Education Commission to trim the training down to a one-day offering. This gave 40 teachers the chance to get introduced to the key concepts behind identifying the effects of military deployment in students' behaviors, responding appropriately, and bringing in other resources for help.

It was a good start, but the team of educators and the local Beyond the Yellow Ribbon leaders wanted to do more and see more educators get benefit from the training.



## Building a Curriculum

Through a series of conversations, the community team decided that teachers needed a more accessible curriculum to provide them this basic understanding. The initial multidisciplinary team included psychologists, teachers, union leaders, and a faculty member from the University of Minnesota in Rochester and Winona State University, as well as BTYRSEM volunteers. It quickly became apparent that the magnitude of the task was more than the team could accomplish on its own with volunteered time.

This led to the inclusion of the final critical partner, the Center for Business and Workforce Education at Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC). Paid by a grant from the Rochester Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, RCTC faculty have developed an online course, free to teachers and easier to schedule than a full-day, out-of-classroom training, and with the goal of developing future courses. The first, two hour online course included the introductory essentials: identification, response, and resources for help. It reflected the understanding that most teachers would benefit from some explicit information and tools to help them better work with students and families.

## From Screen to Classroom

The online course was beta tested by several teachers, all of whom have personal connections to military deployment, and one of whom was deployed himself in the last decade. It has since been sampled by teachers around the state (and one in Illinois). The course represents a new, concrete resource available to educators that will help them meet an emerging need in their communities.

## Looking to the Future

At present, the online course can qualify for 2 Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for teachers. Integrating this locally developed resource with the statewide professional development system provides validation for the community work done in Rochester. It serves as an opportunity for other communities to benefit from this work and participate in the ongoing refinement of the courses, as well as adding new course. It also creates a foundation on which future development opportunities can be built.

The story is not yet done, however. The community team that started this process hopes to see the development of future online courses recognized by the state Board of Teaching not just as general CEUs, but as a way of meeting the state's requirement for CEUs in mental health. At present, only one training module is recognized as meeting the mental health requirement, and consequently many teachers have taken that same module multiple times.

Recognizing that the new course is also focused on students' mental health and allowing future courses to count as meeting the mental health requirement would provide more opportunity for educators and increase the dissemination of this important information.

The story illustrates several key aspects of community-driven reform: responding to emerging local needs, capitalizing on relevant experience in the community (including in this case the experiences of Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Southeast Minnesota representatives, local teachers, and community college faculty and staff), integrating with existing state structures, and creating opportunities for other communities to benefit. It's also tightly focused on building teachers' skill capacity by giving them the knowledge and tools they require to meet some very important student needs.

# THE HARD WORK OF EQUITY: FIGHTING BULLYING IN ANOKA-HENNEPIN

## Lesson 3: Local ideas start with local diversity.

The Anoka-Hennepin school district has more students than any other district in the state. Spanning several suburbs and exurbs north of the Twin Cities, it contains communities facing a wide range of needs. Considering the amount of variation that comes with that kind of size, it's perhaps unsurprising that the district occasionally struggles to meet all of the needs of its students and families.

Perhaps the best publicized example of this was the nearly two-year struggle over the district's policy toward bullying and sexual orientation.

### The General Need

Students who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender) are frequent targets of bullying. While support for issues such as marriage equality has been growing in recent years, anti-LGBT bullying is still all-too common in many schools.

How to address that bullying constructively is thus an urgent question for many districts, and Anoka-Hennepin is no exception. District policies governing how staff are expected to respond to bullying, as well as discuss (or not discuss) matters of sexual orientation, are critical to ensuring all students feel safe in school.

This is not always a straightforward decision, as significant political pressures work against these necessary policies. Many families, churches, and organizations remain uncomfortable with deviations from heterosexuality and cisgender identification. Sometimes, this discomfort turns into dislike or active discrimination. School

board members, ever-sensitive to the demands of their constituents, can struggle to take the steps needed to keep students safe. In Anoka-Hennepin's case, it would take several incidents coming together to drive the needed change.

### Bullying, Suicides, and a Lawsuit

Over roughly a year and a half, seven Anoka-Hennepin students committed suicide. Not all of them identified as LGBT, and it remains unclear how many suicides were caused by anti-LGBT bullying. However, some of the students openly identified as LGBT and were subjected to bullying that included anti-LGBT components. The string of suicides shocked the community.



**The policy was seen by many as discouraging the kind of necessary interventions by teachers and other staff that could reduce this dangerous bullying.**

Tammy Aaberg, whose son Justin was one of the seven students, became a particularly vocal critic of the district's response to the needs of LGBT students. She demanded that the district change its "neutrality policy," which required staff to stay officially neutral on matters related to sexual orientation. The policy was seen by many as discouraging the kind of necessary interventions by teachers and other staff that could reduce this dangerous bullying.

Matters escalated further when students brought a lawsuit against the district, charging that the “neutrality” policy was censoring staff and encouraging them to minimize the bullying that was hurting many students. They were joined in their efforts to change the district’s policy by the Southern Poverty Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, among other national groups.

## The Local Coalition Forms

Another local group that organized in support of change was the Gay Equity Team, a grassroots group of community members who formed after allegations of harassment were brought against two Anoka-Hennepin teachers. The Gay Equity Team would come to be at the forefront of the fight to change district policy to better support students and fight anti-LGBT bullying.

They entered into a coalition with the Anoka-Hennepin teachers’ union (Anoka-Hennepin Education Minnesota, or AHEM), working particularly closely with union members like Jefferson Fietek and Peter Gokey, as well as union president Julie Blaha. What began with a tense situation—the union’s first interaction with many Gay Equity Team members revolved around the two teachers accused of bullying—pivoted into a partnership focused on the district’s issues.

Coming from the other side of the issue was the Parents Action League, a conservative group organized with help from the Minnesota Family Council to resist the proposed changes to the district’s policy. Especially at the beginning of the debate, the Parents Action League was seen by many as having better access to local elected officials. This would be the political pressure the pro-equity coalition would have to overcome.

## The Strengths and Challenges of a Coalition

The relationship between the Gay Equity Team and the union was not always an easy one. Blaha’s responsibility as a union president was to represent her members as well as protect the needs of students. She and other leaders within the union worked to convince the general membership that this was a fight worth having. While any group of 3,000 people is bound to have some dissenters, the union membership as a whole took up the cause.



**What began with a tense situation pivoted into a partnership focused on the district’s issues.**

The union’s role was in many ways to be a subtle source of strength. It fielded a large membership and appreciable resources, but both Blaha and the Gay Equity Team were invested in making sure the Gay Equity Team got much of the spotlight. This required building the organizing and activist skills of its initial members and ensuring that the focus stayed on students’ needs rather than distracting debates about the union.

The Gay Equity Team also served as the conscience of the coalition, ensuring that the group’s attention and efforts were getting the job done.

In return, the union worked to ensure members who joined the effort were protected from punishment or retaliation. While due process protections (often described as “tenure”) are often derided these days, they were critical for defending the AHEM members advocating for their students. “Especially in areas with extreme perspectives and where the educator voice is not welcome,” said Blaha, “due process protections matter.”

Along with its members’ enthusiasm and activism, the union was also able to leverage its media contacts to bring more attention to the issue. Having brought the attention, the focus was then on handing off the leadership role to the Gay Equity Team to speak with passion and detail about the issue. This was a delicate balance, and required regular communication (and patience) on the part of the coalition members.

By combining the Gay Equity Team’s independent activism with the union’s resources and media contacts, the fight in Anoka-Hennepin became a nationally noticed debate. As the students’ lawsuit worked its way through the federal courts, the pro-equity coalition was doing the twofold work of securing community support and giving elected officials the rationale they needed for changing the policy.

When the lawsuit finally settled in 2012, the district signed a consent decree enacting several sweeping changes. While some members of the pro-equity coalition feel the changes didn’t go far enough, and all members acknowledge there’s much work still to be done, the consent decree is generally seen as a good starting point for much-needed positive change.

## The Situation Today

Roughly a year after the district rolled out its changes, a *Pioneer Press* story described the signs of hope that have begun to show themselves in Anoka-Hennepin. Many students report a modest decrease in bullying around anti-LGBT issues, and staff are reported to be swifter and stronger in addressing bullying that does happen.

These are early results, and it will take the full five years specified in the consent decree to get a better feel for how well the culture of the school district has changed to meet student needs. As those needs arise, however, Anoka-Hennepin now has a stronger set of community members ready to take on the necessary fights.

While the district’s needs are similar to others across the country, the local solution required local leaders coming together to change the rules and culture of the schools. This demonstrates clearly the importance of community members familiar with local diversity in meeting local needs.



# ANCHORS AFTER THE STORM: NORTH MINNEAPOLIS GRIEVES AND REBUILDS

## Lesson 4: Schools respond to true crises in the community.

On May 22, 2011, tornadoes devastated the north side of Minneapolis. Already under-resourced, the neighborhood community now needed to deal with the immediate aftermath of the crisis and the longer term recovery efforts. During that immediate period of grief and disaster response, the public schools in the area served as anchor points for many members of the community.

### The Schools and Community of North Minneapolis

North Minneapolis has a reputation as one of the more troubled neighborhoods in the city. Many of its residents come from low-income backgrounds and are people of color. At the same time, the community has built a network of social ties that turned out to be even stronger than people knew.

The schools in the neighborhood have also endured struggles. North High School was scheduled for closure, with the intention it be replaced by a charter school. Members of the community rallied around the school in the “Save North High” campaign, and -- after some internal restructuring -- “New North” remains open.

While the schools of north Minneapolis have a reputation for struggling academically, they remain central points for the community. For as often as education in north Minneapolis is described as being “in crisis,” however, people still turned to the schools for support in the wake of the immediate crisis caused by the tornadoes.

### A Day of Terror

In many ways, the tornadoes that struck on May 22, 2011, were not a sudden shock. The weather had been threatening for two days beforehand, and the storm system that moved through the metro area was slow in its progress. The damage spread far beyond north Minneapolis, encompassing suburbs as well as other parts of the city. Still, it was north Minneapolis that suffered tornado strikes.

The power went out in much of the area, and many homes and other buildings took damage. One person was killed in the storms, and roughly 30 were injured. The smell of natural gas drove some people into the streets, and many sought shelter in locations around the community. Felled trees caused traffic problems throughout the area.



**While the schools of north Minneapolis have a reputation for struggling academically, they remain central points for the community.**

It was unquestionably a time of chaos and worry. As school board member Rebecca Gagnon described it, “Initially, from folks on the ground, there was a lot of shock and anxiety because of the intensity of the storm, the massive destruction and because many folks couldn’t reach friends, family and neighbors to know they were safe and sound.”

## The Response: Community Members

At the core of the community’s response were the community members themselves. It should be made clear that the things that worked well during the relief did so first and foremost because of the leadership of community members. From coordinating donations and services in the immediate aftermath to holding landlords accountable for repairs in the weeks and months that followed, community members’ needs and actions drove the response. The roles played by schools and others was to support this response.

There are too many people to name who stepped up during and after the storm. For example, Louis King played a key role in forming the Northside Community Response Team, which brought together many other leaders from a variety of professional and personal backgrounds.

Neighborhoods Organizing for Change and other community groups handed out needed supplies, and went door to door distributing information about resources. Community members launched a Facebook page that coordinated recovery volunteer efforts and donations, and the staff at community radio station KMOJ dedicated the airwaves to disaster response.

Collectively, the community worked hard to deliver needed support and resources immediately after the storms, and also worked with the city and county in the months after the storm to develop a plan for strengthening north Minneapolis in the future.

## The Response: The Schools

Because of the disaster’s weekend timing and the breadth of its devastation, schools were officially closed during the first stages of the recovery. However, the school district worked with its staff and teachers to open some of the buildings as relief centers. North High, for example, was one of the locations that had power shortly after the storms. North High, according to Gagnon, “became a community hub to recharge phones, get a meal, drop off donations, and share stories. People came to get updates because electricity was out and so many were without TV or phone [access].”



**Public schools became one of the social nexus points for the community.**

In other words, public schools became one of the social nexus points for the community. As safe places offering needed services, they also helped the people of the community come together to make sense of what had happened. What sociologists call “weak ties” — the informal social ties outside of immediate family and friend networks — could be activated, strengthened, and created.

Because these institutions were familiar to many residents, they were a natural point of community while dealing with the crisis. Schools were by no means the only places that served this purpose, but they were still critical for many.

The school system was also important to long-term recovery efforts, since many families continued to be displaced outside the area for months after the storms. The district deployed many of its staff to identify and help families whose students did not return to school. The disruptions caused by the storm also affected many older students close to graduation, and the district worked with many of those students to ensure they could graduate on time.

## Public Schools Matter

The core lesson of this case study is that public schools mattered when a life-and-death crisis hit the community. Public schools are a key part of civic infrastructure, and ensuring they are safe and trusted places in the community generates major benefits to that community. While schools are not the only source of this support, they can and should be a significant source of anchor points for their communities in both good and bad times.

Public schools provide an adaptable layer of support for social networks in a community. This is especially true when a lack of power disrupts digital networks, but even as residents regained power and access, the schools were there to help them with their new needs. The services a school can provide during a crisis are many and varied, which is one more reason to provide schools with the material capacity they need to meet any of a wide range of possible crises.



# NO TWICE AND YES ONCE: TAKING THE BROAD VIEW IN SAINT PAUL

## Lesson 5: State issues are local issues.

The election of 2012 was an important one for Minnesota in several respects. In addition to the races for president, U.S. Senate, and the state legislature, two state-level constitutional amendments were on the ballot, and many communities were also considering renewing or expanding their local school levies. In Saint Paul, many of these issues came together in the “Vote No Twice and Yes Once” campaign, spearheaded by the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers.<sup>1</sup>

### A Critical Moment

In the late spring of 2012, the Minnesota state legislature approved two amendments to the Minnesota state constitution.

Amendment 1, passed in late May, would strengthen the illegality of same-sex marriage in Minnesota (same-sex marriage at the time already being unrecognized by state statute and prohibited by the Minnesota state supreme court). Amendment 2 actually passed out of the legislature earlier than Amendment 1, gaining legislative approval in April. Amendment 2 required that all voters in Minnesota be required to show a government-issued ID to be able to vote.

Before either amendment could be put into the state constitution, it needed to receive majority approval from Minnesota’s voters in a statewide election. It was suggested by many that the marriage amendment was aimed at driving up conservative voter turnout.

The voting amendment, though rationalized in terms of vote fraud prevention, was seen in some circles as a way of creating more barriers to voting for certain progressive-leaning constituencies. In any case, both amendments came with their own political, as well as policy, considerations.

Many communities, including Saint Paul, were also considering local school levy referenda in addition to the statewide amendment referenda. These school levy votes were critical in many communities, since most districts saw state funding decrease during the Pawlenty years. Local property tax levies, while more regressive than the income-tax-funded support from the state, had been forced to become a bigger share of communities’ school funding.

While the first post-Pawlenty legislature had approved a small increase in per-pupil funding, its purpose was largely to make up some of the difference from funding shifts the state government took to balance the budget. Saint Paul was one of many districts trying to climb out of a hole dug by defunding during the Pawlenty administration.

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<sup>1</sup> The author was an employee or SPFT, but after the events described here.

## Connecting Three Dots

SPFT was one of the very first organizations to formally denounce the marriage amendment, doing so within 48 hours of the amendment's weekend passage out of the legislature. In the words of SPFT president Mary Cathryn Ricker, "We saw 'No' on the marriage amendment as a natural extension of the anti-bullying work we were trying to do, and as adults, knowing that what we do often teaches students a lot more than what we say, showing our students that we believed in inclusivity and equity for their families or their personal situation was incredibly important to us."

As for the voting amendment, Ricker said, "Unions' actions have always been about expanding enfranchisement. Fighting disenfranchisement is a very natural part of the union movement. Specific to the voting disenfranchisement amendment, our local union had worked very hard to add citizenship language to our contract language for example, to assist people who were looking to becoming voters." The amendment was seen as a very specific effort to disenfranchise many students' families (as well as some voting age students) who faced significant barriers to getting the required ID.

Both state amendments were seen as specifically targeting particular communities within Saint Paul (as well as in the rest of the state). SPFT organizer Paul Rohlfing argued for the importance of teachers as a first line of defense against such targeting, saying of the voting amendment, "We know that if the people who work in schools with kids in poverty don't fight for them, we don't see where that will happen anywhere else in society."

However, arguing for a straight "Vote No" ticket risked endangering the needed local levy referendum for the Saint Paul Public Schools. Teachers' unions and school districts often collaborate in working to pass such referenda, and the 2012 Saint Paul referendum was no different.

In an effort to send the simplest effective message possible, SPFT grouped its efforts on all three referenda together into one unified campaign: "Vote No Twice and Yes Once." This message referred to the placement of the different referenda on local ballots. Residents who voted "No" on the first two referenda on the ballot would be voting against the two amendments, while voting "Yes" on the next referendum would approve the local school levy.

## The Campaign

In addition to its collaboration with other groups, SPFT brought on two additional organizers to help with the final months of the campaign. Mitra Jalali Nelson and Jason Kniss joined SPFT in late August, taking on the final persuasion stages of the campaign and the get-out-the-vote effort at election time.

Much of this effort was spent organizing and mobilizing SPFT members. Primed by the earlier internal efforts, many educators were ready to get the message out. The significance of member enthusiasm was not lost on the organizers. Jalali Nelson put it like this: "Despite the everyday demands on teachers for their much-needed time and energy — which I vividly recall from my own time as a teacher of three years — Saint Paul Public Schools educators stepped up time and time again for critical volunteering and direct voter conversations that ultimately helped make the difference for the two amendments' outcomes."



Teachers and organizers met at school during teachers' off-time and time allocated for union meetings. In the evening, the organizers would make calls, often for five hours a night. Large-scale relationship building is long and difficult work. It was necessary for the organizers, however, who relied on those relationships when encouraging teachers to take the message to others in the community. "It was great for our members to already be committed to vote no on both amendments," said Jalali Nelson, "but we also worked to help them see how they could expand their impact to 10, 20, 30 more votes alongside their own if they would be willing to volunteer."

This work didn't happen in isolation, as SPFT kept its organizing efforts integrated with those of its coalition partners. This often meant finding ways to make use of teachers' particular perspectives and expertise. "Because our unique volunteer group was teachers, and some of the main concerns undecided voters had about the marriage amendment related to whether and how it would affect youth, we were able to call voters as teachers and share about how important it was to us personally to support our students who identify as LGBT or who might not be out yet," explained Jalali Nelson.

## The Results

On election night, SPFT went three for three. Both amendments went down to defeat, and the balance of votes in Saint Paul helped that happen. Voters took the "No Twice, Yes Once" message to heart, approving the new school funding levy.

While the amendment votes were supported by a statewide progressive wave, one reason that wave came to be in Saint Paul was the support of the many different groups working together to fight the amendments. The election results represent work from a cross-section of the progressive movement, including civil rights organizations, labor groups, and community organizers.



**while the defeat of the voting restriction amendment was a stand against disenfranchisement, it was not enough.**

## How It Mattered

As with all the case studies in this report, the election night success was just the beginning. SPFT recognizes that the momentum from defeating the marriage amendment (and the subsequent passage of marriage equality by the Minnesota state government) needs to be sustained in more immediate ways in classrooms and school hallways. Fighting what amounted to large-scale bullying was a major reason for SPFT's opposition, and that struggle continues on a smaller scale in the schools.

Similarly, while the defeat of the voting restriction amendment was a stand against disenfranchisement, it was not enough. SPFT continues to work with the Second Chance coalition to fight other forms of disenfranchisement. During the 2013 legislative session, the coalition worked on the passage of clean record and “ban the box” legislation aimed at returning the franchise to former felons who have served their time and are looking to integrate back into society.

And of course the struggle for financial security for schools continues. Local levies have grown larger and more common as districts worked

to overcome the reductions in state education funding during the Pawlenty years. SPFT is also working to make sure that the money raised in the most recent levy is spent well.

Nonetheless, the community saw SPFT stand up for students and families in three separate ways. It is an excellent example of how local educators can engage productively on many issues that affect their communities. It also demonstrates that, even when a problem is seen as a statewide issue, progressive victory depends on local strength.





## CONCLUSION

So what does this all mean? Community-driven education reform is a powerful tool for improving our schools and better educating our students. It meets a variety of state and local needs, responds to local diversity with local ideas, and strengthens institutions vital to community resiliency. It is often long and difficult, but the payoffs are often powerful. It's not a cure-all, and it doesn't exist in a vacuum. Communities need to actively nurture it, and the state can facilitate it in some key ways.

### What Communities Can Do

What at first glance appears to be pure serendipity is often the result of long-standing interests and relationships. None of the case studies in this report happened purely by chance. Instead, they came about because people who were in a position to effect change were brought together, either by circumstance or someone actively seeking to connect these leaders. So what can a community looking to foster more frequent and more effective community-driven education reform do?

#### **Encourage community organizations in the public sphere.**

None of the cases profiled here were the result simply of school districts and employees. The Blandin Foundation in Grand Rapids, the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Project in Rochester, the Gay Equity Team in Anoka-Hennepin, the many community leaders in north Minneapolis, and statewide organizations like Minnesotans United and Take Action Minnesota in Saint Paul, among many others, were crucial to the success of these efforts. These organizations provide perspectives and resources distinct from those in school districts. They are also key to securing additional supporters and community-wide investment in reform efforts. Policymakers, foundations, and interested citizens are all in a position to encourage (or lead) a variety of community organizations into productive engagement with local schools.

#### **Seek diverse community partners.**

It is not enough merely to have one or two regular community partners in collaboration. Districts, policymakers, and unions all have an interest in bringing in a diversity of partners that reflects the diversity of the community. Sometimes, as with the teachers' union in Anoka-Hennepin, the role of education system members is to give other partners space and support to grow into effective community actors. Other times, as with the decision in Rochester to bring in the Rochester Community and Technical College, it's about recognizing the expertise of others who can help advance one's goals.

Diversity in community engagement is important not just for its own sake, then, but because it strengthens partnerships in the long run. It can be uncomfortable to invite a wide array of perspectives into the conversation, and it is certainly difficult to keep diverse coalitions together, but the rewards from doing so include stronger community support, a better chance of developing truly effective solutions, and a greater likelihood of seeing those ideas come to fruition successfully.

### Focus on results.

Community-driven education reform is a process, not an outcome in its own right. Effective community-driven education reform must keep the interests of students and families at the core of its efforts, and it must be about more than public relations or branding. Each of the cases studied here was grounded in responding to student needs, and the ultimate test of their success will be measured in how effectively the schools have adapted to better serve their students.

This does not mean that the only results that matter are student outcomes. Student outcomes are the end success that results from an effective change in how schools or teachers operate. Student success depends on the details of implementation and the intermediate results between program approval and student learning. In Rochester, for example, one important intermediate result is making sure enough teachers participate in the online course to have an impact in many schools. While technically an “adult-centered” result, it is still an important middle step on the way to better serving students.

This is one area where community-driven education reform has an advantage over the 10,000-foot, top-down reform that has been more popular recently. 10,000-foot reform’s “results” are usually limited to getting a policy approved and then identifying later changes in student outcomes that can be associated with the program. While there are many employees and partners working at and with the Minnesota Department of Education to implement policies, the drive and resources that 10,000-foot reformers pour into legislative campaigns tend to dissipate when it’s time to make the policy work. This jeopardizes many state policies’ ability to have a meaningful impact on students.

Community-driven reform, on the other hand, by its nature depends on people and organizations who are much closer to the actual implementation. That puts them in a position to support it and ensure its fidelity, which is likely to translate into better follow-through on the policies. So long as community leaders stay focused on results, they are in an excellent position to see real improvements for students.





## What Minnesota Can Do

A focus on community-driven education reform does not neglect the importance and potential of the state. Obviously, local schools rely on state dollars to stay open and serve their students. Beyond that, though, the state can provide needed validation for local successes, and it can support many different kinds of local collaboration through a variety of means.

### Validate local successes.

The online course about military deployment and children developed in Rochester lays the groundwork for future courses that will need recognition from the state Board of Teaching. The course's developers will create supplementary courses that provide information to teachers about students' mental health needs and are worthy accompaniments to the one currently accepted course meeting the state's mental health requirement for ongoing professional development. Validating these courses as meeting this requirement would both encourage future local collaborations and encourage teachers who have already completed the current mental health course multiple times to acquire the knowledge and skills from the new courses.

Similarly, the anti-bullying work done in Anoka-Hennepin, while rooted in the community's local diversity, deserves acknowledgment by the state legislature and the Minnesota Department of Education as a template for future work on bullying issues. When local efforts bear fruit that is then validated by the state, communities are encouraged to keep innovating. Additionally, state validation encourages effective local innovations to spread statewide.

On a different note, the state needs to validate not only the successful results of community-driven education reform, but also the processes and conditions that allow for those successes. Preserving due process protections for teachers, for example, helps unions encourage their members to work on a wider range of issues that are important to their students. This was certainly true in Anoka-Hennepin, and also likely true to some extent in Saint Paul. If we want to see teachers' unions engage on the full breadth of issues that matter to their students, we need to support the mechanisms that enable them to do the right thing, even (and especially) when it is controversial.



## Support many kinds of local collaboration.

In addition to after-the-fact validation, the state can provide resources that encourage a variety of local collaboration efforts. A model for this already exists in the state's alternative professional pay system, known as Q-Comp. Q-Comp makes money available to school districts that, in collaboration with their unions, develop new ways of paying teachers that include so-called "performance pay" and experimentation beyond the conventional steps-and-lanes pay schedule based on experience and credentials.

Q-Comp was intended to serve an obvious policy agenda: disrupting conventional pay schedules and encouraging performance pay. That is not particularly helpful for encouraging collaboration across the wide range of possible topics. Nonetheless, many districts that go through the work of collaborating with their teachers in designing these pay systems find the new systems to receive support from the teachers. This suggests that the Q-Comp model does encourage productive collaboration and avoids many of the implementation difficulties that often accompany top-down mandates and systems change.

The Q-Comp model could be adapted by a new, larger fund of money made available to districts, unions, and other local actors for a range of purposes. This innovation fund would reward local actors who can forge meaningful partnerships in their communities and provide reasonable plans for innovation and development. Just as a well-balanced investment portfolio includes a combination of safe, medium-risk, and aggressive components, this innovation fund could be designed to encourage a mixture of "safe" research-backed collaborations, "medium-risk" innovations, and "aggressive" experimentation to develop truly new ways of educating.

## Move from starvation to innovation.

Validation and collaboration-specific funding are not likely to reach their full potential if schools are still working with a starvation mentality. The Pawlenty years resulted in significant reductions in state funding to school districts, and Minnesota has only just started climbing out of that hole. A system that expects schools to run on bare-bones budgets does not encourage the kind of innovative collaboration with the most potential for real gains.

Instead of finding creative ways to cut their budgets, school districts should have the breathing room to find creative ways to build new capacity. This must be seen as a prerequisite if the full benefits of community-driven education reform are to be realized.





## The Time is Now

This is the moment for Minnesota to invest in community-driven education reform. With progressives in much of the state government, we have an opportunity to give our local innovators the validation, resources, and breathing room they need to get the job done. Communities across Minnesota are full of good, smart people ready to build a renewed, refreshed, and equitable public school system. We've seen the wide range of benefits local collaborations can provide, both in those communities and across the state. It is time to build that potential into a state full of public schools working for all Minnesotans, whatever their race, income, religion, or zip code.

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