

NEWS > EDUCATION

Changes to MN school accountability plan would place 'well-rounded education' alongside math, reading

By **JOSH VERGES** | jverges@pioneerpress.com | Pioneer Press

PUBLISHED: February 2, 2022 at 4:20 p.m. | UPDATED: February 3, 2022 at 11:01 a.m.

Minnesota schools that spend less time on math and reading would be rewarded under a proposed accountability plan that embraces the concept of a "well-rounded education."

The state education department is taking public comment through Thursday on changes to its North Star system, which it's used since 2018 to recognize high-achieving schools and identify persistent low-achievers that need state support.

Under North Star, schools have been evaluated based on graduation rates, consistent attendance and performance on math, reading and English-language proficiency tests. Now, the state is looking to add more indicators of school quality.

One major change is a "well-rounded education" indicator. For elementary and middle schools, the state would "calculate the share of time spent outside of tested subject areas to promote a well-rounded education experience," according to a draft of the changes; high schools would get a similar indicator.



Assistant education commissioner Stephanie Graff said the proposal is a response to what Minnesotans say they want from their schools.

"There's a lot of interest in expanding the types of measures we look at when we consider school success," she said.

The department has not explained exactly how the new formulas would work, but Graff said a well-rounded education would be weighted less heavily than test performance and graduation rates.

It will be important for the state to get the formula right, said Andrea Roethke, managing director of strategy and operations for EdAllies, a nonprofit advocate for historically underserved students.

"These systems create incentives," she said. "Just as we don't want a narrowed curriculum, we also don't want to downplay the importance of literacy and numeracy. It's about hitting the right balance."

Education Minnesota President Denise Specht said the teachers union generally approves of the department's plan but wants to see details on the well-rounded indicator. The union also objects to using test scores to evaluate schools, but that's required by federal law.

"Until a more useful and accurate accountability program is developed, we appreciate the department's recognition of the importance of a well-rounded education by encouraging access and opportunity to lessons outside tested subject areas," Specht said.

HIGH SCHOOLS

High schools would see the greatest changes under the state's plan.

Besides the well-rounded indicator, the state wants to incorporate ninth-grade course completion rates and participation in courses that can earn students credit for college, including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate but also career and technical classes.

Graff said studies have found ninth-grade pass rates to be a "very strong predictor of students graduating on-time."



"There are huge gaps in who has access, and it's something that parents deserve to know," she said.

CREDIT RECOVERY

The state also is tweaking its formulas to differentiate between traditional high schools and those that serve students who are behind on credits.

When the state identified schools for support in 2018, just over half the high schools it named were alternative and credit-recovery schools.

Going forward, credit-recovery and similar schools would be judged on their seven-year graduation rate instead of four. The state also would start identifying traditional high schools that offload lots of their students onto credit recovery schools.

Sherry Carlstrom, Title I director for St. Paul Public Schools, welcomes those changes.

"The whole reason those students are (at alternative schools) is because they need more time," she said of the seven-year graduation rate metric.

Carlstrom said there's a perception that "some high schools were encouraging students to go to alternative schools" in order to prop up their own graduation rates.

That change in the North Star system recognizes that "students have to be successful, and we have to be accountable, wherever they are," she said.

ST. PAUL SCHOOLS

The state also wants to provide only targeted, not comprehensive, support for high schools where a single student group has a graduation rate below 67 percent. The idea is to enable the state to focus its attention on schools that really need it.

In 2018, six of the St. Paul district's high schools – Central, Como Park, Harding, Highland Park, Humboldt and Johnson – made the list for comprehensive support solely because of low graduation rates among special-education



Carlstrom said the district gets \$1.75 million each year to help those schools and the others on the state's list, which include [nine low-income elementary schools](#). St. Paul has spent that money on "learning leads" at several schools, Carlstrom said.

While Minneapolis and St. Paul take state money to pay their own people, other districts rely on the state's school improvement staffers.

TIMELINE

The state is supposed to identify schools for state support every three years. But, because of disruptions related to the coronavirus pandemic, the federal government approved a waiver last year allowing Minnesota to wait till this summer to pick new schools.

The newest school quality indicators – well-rounded education, ninth-grade course completion and career- and college-readiness coursework – won't be ready in time for this year's list, Graff said.

But, pending federal approval, they should start appearing on the state's public school report cards next year and factor into school identification in 2025.

Another planned change would add an eight category for race and ethnicity by separating American Indians from indigenous people from tribes outside of North America.

PANDEMIC CHANGES

Meanwhile, the state is proposing one-time changes to this year's identification process.

Because of the pandemic, Minnesota students did not take state standardized tests in spring 2020, and the 2021 test results were not used for accountability purposes.

This summer, the state does plan to use the spring 2022 tests to identify schools that need support, but they'll be weighted half as heavily as the 2019 tests.

In addition, the state wants to throw out the consistent attendance indicator for



In its place, the state wants to use an “enrollment maintenance indicator,” which measures student retention from spring 2021 to fall 2022. Schools will perform well on the metric if a high percentage of their K-4 students from last school year returned for grades 1-5 this year, relative to that school’s average retention from the previous three years.

TO COMMENT

As of Wednesday afternoon, the education department had received one formal comment on the plan. To comment, email MDE.ESSA@state.mn.us.

Tags: [Education](#), [St. Paul Public Schools](#)



Author Josh Verges | Education reporter

Josh has written about St. Paul public schools and higher education for the Pioneer Press since 2014, 11 years after the paper first published his byline as a University of Minnesota intern. He did a two-year stint on city government and crime in Austin, Minn., and spent seven years in Sioux Falls, S.D. covering crime and education, as well as editing. Josh was good at baseball once. Now he plays tennis against old men.

jverges@pioneerpress.com

[f Follow Josh Verges](#) <https://www.facebook.com/joshverges> [Follow Josh Verges](#) [@ua14](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

Farm to Bowl, This Pet Food Company's Process Makes All the Difference

By Canidae

