

Education Finance and Policy Testimony – Wednesday, February 24, 2021

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Good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in front of the committee today. My name is Dr Milind Sohoni and I am a resident of Plymouth. Today, I want to share my thoughts on the proposed senate bill SF 446 for an act relating to education; strengthening the Increase Teachers of Color Act; seeking to increase the percentage of teachers of color and American Indian teachers in Minnesota.

According to the data available from the Minnesota Report card, a huge disparity exists in the percentage of white teachers and staff in relation to the percentage of students of color in all school districts in MN. It is my belief, therefore, that this bill is timely and appropriate. There is no doubt that it will play a huge role in improving equity in our education system. I would also venture to add a line in the bill about increasing the percentage of staff of color and American Indians as staff plays an important part in the students' performance in schools.

I am here today to also say that the bill does not go far enough. To minimize the inequity, we need to address other issues which contribute to it. The current version of the bill addresses one piece of Institutional racism – the Inequitable hiring practices that leads to bias. There is also Structural Racism – one example of which is School Funding - that relies on property and state taxes, which plays a role in creating inequity. The latter is not addressed in this bill.

Jeff Raikes, former CEO of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation describes the effect of structural racism in detail in a 2019 edition of Forbes. Tax base of school district determines school funding. Nationally, school districts attended predominantly by students of color receive \$23 bn less in funding. This amounts to \$2,200 less per student per year for students of color. These school districts require more, not less, in resources. School funding is similar to redlining. When this discriminatory model is corrected, the impact is significant. CT, MA, NJ, NC and CA have shown results with adjustments.

I am a first generation immigrant who came to the U.S. in pursuit of a doctorate, from India. Although I have not experienced K-12 education in this country, my children, both of who were born in the U.S., grew up in the Wayzata School district, eventually graduating from Wayzata High School. The Wayzata School District funding is supported by a very strong tax base with high priced homes and high median family incomes. My children availed of the best educational resources, and never had to worry about where to get the money for their developmental activities.

Upon graduating from college, both my children started teaching in Minneapolis in schools where students of color and those from low income families were the vast majority. These schools lacked the funding that my children were lucky to have during their school days. My daughter was able to go to camp Wolfridge in middle school without worrying about how and who was going to pay for it. Her students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the Green Central Elementary school in the Powder Horn neighborhood did not have access to the same resources because of systemic barriers. The teachers had to spend several hours to raise money via baked goods sales and other activities so that their students could attend the camp. Time, which they could have spent more effectively in the class rooms. My son taught in a High School which had no Advanced Placement classes – which my son was able to take in Wayzata High School. AP classes have been shown to improve High School graduation rates. The school also had the cafeteria and the gym in one room. Wayzata High School has them in different rooms. Lack of facilities are known to affect morale and performance. There are several other examples to show how the tax base affects performance.

The bill will require school boards to adopt a comprehensive, long-term strategic plan to support and improve teaching and learning that is aligned with creating the world's best workforce. SF 446, albeit a very very important step, which I support unequivocally for building equity, falls a little short when it comes to providing some other very necessary elements in the pursuit of equity.

Today, I am proposing that the committee consider amending the bill to include wording wherein the state's budget for education be reapportioned to reflect the needs of these students, thereby providing the same tools to students across the state giving them the opportunity to compete on a level playing field. I am available to help in any way possible in the pursuit of this bill. I thank you for the opportunity to speak, and your time.