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Poor Minneapolis students bused to suburbs do better in school

Students participating in Choice is Yours post three times the gains of students who stay, but many drop out of the program.

Steve Brandt, Star Tribune

Low-income Minneapolis students who are bused to the suburbs for school are making three times the academic progress of a comparable group of students who stay in city schools, a new evaluation reports today.

But many students participating in the five-year-old Choice is Yours program don't stick with it long enough to benefit. The report indicated that half of the students who enroll in nine participating suburban districts withdraw from those schools before the year is out. Another third drop out over the summer.

The latest evaluation is the first to measure the academic impacts of the state-backed program. The program originated from the 2000 settlement of a lawsuit by the Minneapolis NAACP alleging that Minneapolis students were being denied an opportunity for an adequate education.

One analyst said the academic results are consistent with other studies nationally showing low-income students benefit when exposed to suburban schools.

"It means that kids are exposed to a much stronger peer group and expectations," said Myron Orfield, director of the Institute on Race and Poverty at the University of Minnesota. That peer group fosters the expectation of finishing high school, going to college and getting a job, which are often missing in economically segregated schools, Orfield said.

Choice is Yours currently enrolls 1,620 students in nine participating suburban districts. A participating student must live in Minneapolis and come from a family with low enough income to qualify for free or cut-rate school lunch. One key feature of the program is that it pays for transporting students to their suburban school, unlike traditional open enrollment across school lines. It also provides academic support.

The study measured student progress with Northwest achievement tests, which are designed to determine where a student made more or less than a typical year's growth. Program students in third through seventh grades made better than three times the progress in both reading and math as eligible students whose families didn't choose to participate. The two groups were matched on demographic characteristics.

The suburban benefit also carried over to students who initially scored below average. They progressed at better than twice the rate of comparable students who remained in city schools.

Orfield, who has advocated increased economic integration of Twin Cities-area housing, said the difference doesn't mean that suburban schools are better. Rather, peer influence is second only to family influence in determining future economic success, so studying in a higher-striving class rubs off on participating students, he said.

Interim Minneapolis Superintendent Bill Green said he's struggling to determine what lessons the district can take from the findings, given that the district is predominately minority and lower income and has fewer opportunities to integrate internally.

The study didn't break down the academic results by suburban district. But they vary considerably in terms of how well they hang on to participating Minneapolis students. In general, retention of participants worsens the more a suburban school is like Minneapolis in terms of poverty, Orfield said. So Richfield and Columbia Heights retain fewer than three-fifths of their participants each fall, while Edina keeps four-fifths and Wayzata and Hopkins keep three-quarters of their students.

Wayzata's retention is particularly striking since parents generally prefer to keep their students in schools as close as possible.

Although the nine districts have contributed 2,500 slots in their classrooms to date, just 1,620 of them are currently used, according to a January count by the Minneapolis district. The district contributes 43 percent of those enrolling students; almost as many were previously enrolled in other school districts before moving to Minneapolis. About 17 percent of those who drop out of the program go back to Minneapolis schools.

The settlement also offers students a chance to attend better-integrated Minneapolis magnet schools, but the report found the few students took advantage of that opportunity because of the program.

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