

Dear Parent and/or Guardian:

Last fall I wrote to you about Minnesota's request for a waiver from the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. We sought this waiver because it was clear after more than a decade that while the goals of NCLB were worthy, the law's strict emphasis on single test scores had not significantly helped move achievement for students, and had in fact, mislabeled too many schools as failing, while not recognizing those having tremendous success.

Well the good news is – we got our waiver! So today, I'd like to talk with you about what this means for your child's school, our state's efforts to ensure all students are performing at their full potential, and our plans to work together with schools to help make that happen.

One of the first things we've done is to set new accountability targets. Our highest priority – and my personal commitment – is to ensure all children, not just some children, are doing well. To help us do that, we set an aggressive goal of closing achievement gaps by 50 percent over the next 6 years, and developed new measures that will monitor our progress in closing those gaps. We know the goal is ambitious, but we also believe it is reachable.

Second, we will begin using a new tool called the Multiple Measurement Rating (MMR) to gauge school performance in four areas:

1. Did the school meet its performance target?
2. Did individual students meet their growth target? Put more simply, are students making expected progress?
3. Did the school make progress closing its overall achievement gaps?
4. In the case of high schools, did the school increase its graduation rate?

Finally, rather than simply designating all schools as either "failing" or "not failing," we'll begin using new designations to identify only those schools that receive federal Title I funding. These designations, based upon the MMR, are:

- Reward Schools - The 15 percent of highest-performing Title I schools in the state. These schools will be recognized annually.
- Focus Schools - The 10 percent of Title I schools showing the largest achievement gaps in the state for one or more groups of students
- Priority Schools – The bottom 5 percent of Title I schools on the MMR – our most persistently low-performing schools

For those schools designated as Priority and Focus schools, please know that the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) will be working closely with your school leaders on their school improvement plans. Our goal is not to label a school and leave, but rather to stand beside and work with schools most in need of support, and to applaud and recognize their efforts as they begin to show results. By the same token, schools designated Reward schools will be celebrated for the great work they're doing, even as we work to learn from and replicate their success.

As I said last fall, no single factor should be used as the sole indicator of a school's performance. In addition to the MMR, I would encourage you to look at your child's test scores and other class work, and to visit with your teachers and principal to learn more about their efforts to meet student's needs. I also suggest you visit the data center at the Minnesota Department of Education website <http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp> , where you will find a wealth of information about all of Minnesota's schools.

Every Minnesota child deserves a high quality education, no matter where they live or their socio-economic background. We believe our new accountability system will help make that goal a reality by providing a more accurate look at how our schools are doing and providing resources and support to the schools that need it most.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dr. Brenda Cassellius". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Brenda Cassellius
Commissioner