

LOCAL

Minnesota school integration proposals draw fire

Charter school supporters fight having to integrate like public schools.

By **Alejandra Matos** (<http://www.startribune.com/alejandra-matos/169409976/>) Star Tribune |

JANUARY 6, 2016 — 9:06PM

Dozens of community members, educators and state officials voiced concerns Wednesday about proposed changes to a state program intended to end racial segregation in schools.

For the first time, the Minnesota Department of Education would require charter schools with significant populations of students of color to create integration plans. The changes also would allow school districts to use state integration money to address the achievement gap between white and minority students, rather than solely to move students to achieve racial balance.

The department would also change the criteria for which districts are eligible to receive the integration money, which means some districts could see dramatic shifts in aid.

Those changes drew strong criticism at a hearing Wednesday that continues Thursday with public comments.

Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, said the department's proposal is not what he envisioned when he helped sponsor the law that forced the department to rethink the program in 2013.

"The effort has shifted significantly to closing the achievement gap, with only lip service on meaningful integration efforts," said Yusef Mgeni, with the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP.

The integration program has been in place since the mid-1970s, and the rules have not been rewritten since 1999. After years of debate and criticism by the Legislature, the department is rewriting the requirements. They do not apply to districts with a student population that is more than 80 percent white.

A recent Star Tribune analysis showed elementary students in Minneapolis and St. Paul attend schools that are more racially segregated than they have been in a generation. More than half the elementary schools in the two districts now have 80 percent or more minority students.

A majority of charters in the Twin Cities enroll heavy concentrations of students of color, while others lean toward mostly white student bodies. Only 16 of the metro area's 72 elementary-level charter schools are integrated with what education researchers consider a healthy mix of white and minority students.

A lawsuit filed against the state last year blames charter schools for perpetuating segregation in Minneapolis and St. Paul schools.

Although charters are public schools, they have not been required to meet state integration requirements. The education department's proposed rule would change that.

At the hearing, several charter schoolteachers and supporters said the department is ignoring that parents choose to put their children in charter schools.

"I find it offensive and insulting to compare parents of color making choices to sending kids to schools that are better addressing their academic needs with segregation," said former Minneapolis school board member Alberto Monserrate.

Nekima Levy-Pounds, president of the Minneapolis chapter of the NAACP, said she sent her daughter to a charter school because her neighborhood public school failed to meet her daughter's educational and cultural needs. "I can't imagine that she would be as successful if she had not attended a culturally specific charter school," she said.

A state Department of Education spokesman declined to comment.

An administrative law judge will issue an opinion on the proposal within 60 days.

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