

STUDENTS IN FLIGHT ([HTTP://WWW.STARTRIBUNE.COM/STUDENTS-IN-FLIGHT-PREVIEW-SCHOOL-CHOICE-IN-MINNESOTA/436740613/?PREVIEW=1](http://www.startribune.com/students-in-flight-preview-school-choice-in-minnesota/436740613/?preview=1))

Students at Mastery School, a Harvest Network charter school in Minneapolis, got off the school bus. Photo by Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

Minneapolis' black families lead the way in fleeing to other schools

A major reason: the wide achievement gap between white and black students.

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Once it was the biggest school district in the state. Now Minneapolis Public Schools is the biggest loser in Minnesota's robust school-choice environment, surrendering more kids to charter schools and other public school options than any other district.

And unlike most other school districts in the state, most of the defections in Minneapolis are occurring among black families. The 9,000 departing black students make up more than half of the districtwide total, according to a Star Tribune analysis of state enrollment data.

Families cite a variety of reasons for leaving the city's school system, ranging from safety concerns to a belief that academics elsewhere are better than in Minneapolis, which has struggled for years to close the more than 50-percentage-point gap between white and black student achievement.

Minneapolis schools officials say they're confident they can reverse the trend and boost academic achievement so high that families will once again choose the city's schools.

But some parents can't wait for promised change. Jessica Rogers, a south Minneapolis mom who used to work for the district's nonprofit arm, sent her son to a Robbinsdale-run elementary school and has picked Minnehaha Academy for middle school.

"He needs nurturing," Rogers said. "That's not going to happen at Minneapolis Public Schools."

Lynda Nwonye is a downtown Minneapolis mom whose son is a fifth-grader at Best Academy, a charter school on the North Side. She moved him there because of her grievances over communication and other things with Minneapolis Public Schools, and said she won't come back.

"The thing that I really like about his school is they give you an overabundance of information," she said.

Having choices empowers parents, particularly black families, said Eric Mahmoud, founder and CEO of one of the most successful North Side charter school systems.

But choice comes with more parent responsibility, he said, like making sure kids do homework and get sleep.

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“It’s good for our parents to have choice,” he said. “I also am concerned that parents feeling that just switching a school addresses the needs of the child. It’s not that easy.”

When students leave

The flight of black families can be seen across the Minneapolis district, but nowhere more starkly than in north Minneapolis — the neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of black families.

North Side schools will be just over half-full this fall, according to district projections.

With state funding following the students out, the district has had multimillion-dollar budget deficits in most of the past 10 years, causing layoffs and program cuts. More of the same is on the horizon.

Along with the financial and enrollment slide, academics are lagging. Though graduation rates have increased, test scores have not. The gap between math performance of kids in North Side schools compared with kids in the rest of the city has gotten worse in the past few years.

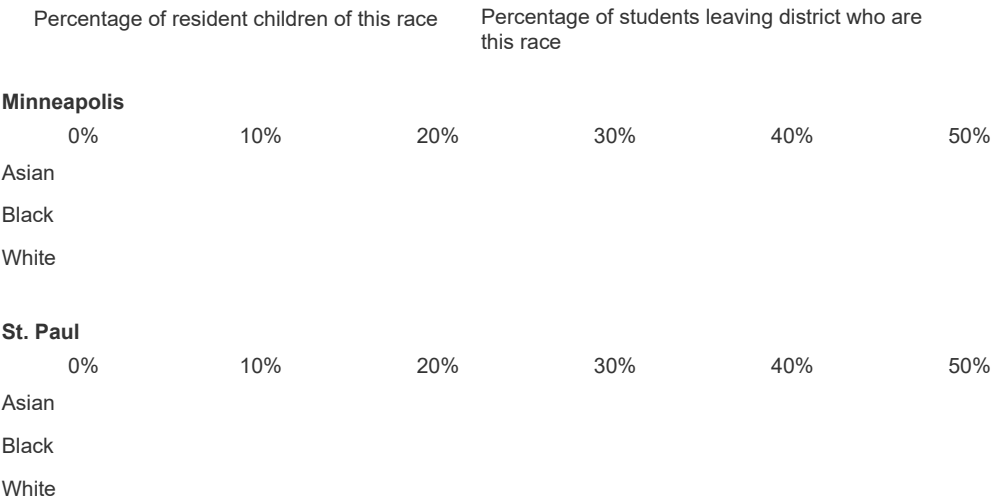
Education advocates say sweeping changes are needed.

“This is a time for Minneapolis Public Schools to do something transformational,” said Al Fan, executive director of Minnesota Comeback, a coalition of foundations and donors dedicated to improving public schools. “The urgency has been building for years, and there is very growing impatience at the pace of change in the district.”

(<http://www.startribune.com/tell-us-your-school-choice-story/443995433/>)

Overview: Surging choice movement reshapes Minnesota’s public schools
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Black students leave Minneapolis district at unusually high rate



Source: Star Tribune analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data • Created with Datawrapper

Back in the '80s, when Gov. Rudy Perpich pushed public school choice options, there was fear that smaller districts would suffer more than big ones as kids found more attractive programs elsewhere, said Dan Loritz, Perpich's deputy chief of staff.

But now one-third of Minneapolis' school-age children go to charter schools or public schools in other districts, a trend that raises long-term questions about the district's financial future. Black student flight accounts for more than half of all kids leaving the district, out of proportion with the 43 percent of the school age population they represent. In St. Paul, which loses slightly less than a third of its school-age population to school choice programs, most of the departing students are white and Asian.

At a recent gathering of Minneapolis schools officials, district finance chief Ibrahima Diop showed his worry. He said the district is still thinking of itself as a 50,000-student system, but it can't afford to do that with current enrollment at 36,000.

District Superintendent Ed Graff has called the enrollment numbers "flat to partial decline."

Does that trouble him?

“When the students are in our schools, we’re going to make sure they get the most positive experience possible,” he said. “And I think from there, that will build.”

Charter schools bulk up

About 70 percent of the kids leaving the district are headed to charter schools. Many of these independent public schools have established themselves in north Minneapolis, catering to black parents concerned about academic achievement, discipline and safety in the district schools.

Harvest Network has three schools and plans to grow. It aims to educate 3,800 of the kids on the North Side by 2025. That would cut MPS’ North Side enrollment by 40 percent.

In south Minneapolis, Hiawatha Academies, a network of schools that attracts most of the Minneapolis defectors — about 1,200, who are mostly Latino — is planning to break ground on a new high school this fall.

On average, math scores for black students are 10 percentage points higher in the schools that Minneapolis black students are leaving for, than for black students staying in the district.

But test scores vary wildly. About a dozen of the 70 charter schools and school districts competing with Minneapolis have math proficiency rates for black students that are well above 50 percent, while about 20 are at or below the Minneapolis proficiency rate of 18 percent.

Math proficiency at top destinations for Minneapolis black students

At least 200 black students living in Minneapolis attend these districts. Rates are for all black students enrolled.

Twin Cities International Elementary	63%
Prodeo Academy	52%
Hennepin Elementary Charter	51%
Higher Ground Academy	50%
Ubah Medical Academy	49%
Harvest Prep Academy	41%
Hopkins	35%
Minnesota International Middle	34%
St. Louis Park	32%
Best Academy	24%
Columbia Heights	23%
Robbinsdale	19%
Minneapolis	18%
Minnesota Transitions	16%
Sojourner Truth Academy	7%
Metro Schools Charter	7%

Source: Star Tribune analysis of Minnesota Department of Education data • [Created with Datawrapper](#)

Test scores aren't the only reason parents look elsewhere. North Side mother Akisha Everett said she had heard stories of fights and behavior issues at neighborhood schools, which is partly why her older son is at a district middle school outside her neighborhood and her youngest is at Best Academy, in the Harvest network.

"That's the message we're receiving, I believe, as professionals: You don't want to send your kids over there with those kids, because then your kids will turn out like those kids," Everett said.

North Side mother Princess Titus chose Southside Family Charter School for her daughter in part because of its small size and staff support.

“I think I bought into the stereotype myself that my neighborhood wasn’t good enough for me,” she said.

Winning students back

Even though the school district’s own projections show the enrollment losses continuing, Graff and his team think they can stem the exodus.


If they double down on academics and student needs, families will stay. For the academics, new literacy programs are beginning this fall, and the district will focus on “social-emotional learning” to address the student needs angle.

“We have to focus internally, both at the district office as well as schools, to make sure that we’re providing the highest quality of education possible,” said district accountability, innovation and research chief Eric Moore. “We believe that that will retain our families and that will attract additional families.”



(http://stmedia.stimg.co/ows_150567049157605.jpg?w=2000)

ELIZABETH FLORES – STAR TRIBUNE

 Gallery: Brian Brinkley, a student at Mastery School, a Harvest Network charter school in Minneapolis, wrote in his journal after breakfast at his desk, Friday, August 18, 2017.

There's external energy at work, too, even on the embattled North Side. Parents like Omar and Mari Gomez have joined a campaign to help their kids' school, Loring Elementary. Former school board candidate Kimberly Caprini is part of a group working to strengthen the link between Patrick Henry High School and the schools that feed into it: Olson Middle, Jenny Lind Elementary, Hmong International Academy and Loring.

Efforts range from lobbying for school upgrades to volunteering in the schools.

"We've got skin in the game," Mari Gomez said.

Henry High graduate Nate Streeter is putting his kids in the same schools he attended on the North Side.

He sees his neighbors volunteering in other ways in the community, but not when it comes to doing the thing that would improve the neighborhood schools — enrolling their kids and engaging. He understands, but it's frustrating.

"How do you think change happens?" he said.

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