May 15, 2020

Commissioner Mary Cathryn Ricker
Minnesota Department of Education
1500 Highway 36 West
Roseville MN 55113

Dear Commissioner Ricker,

In light of COVID-19, Asian Minnesotans gathered virtually to discuss how this pandemic has been impacting our communities. Through CAAL’s Network and Education Work Groups, we spoke in depth about the challenges our communities have been facing and posited potential solutions. While we covered a wide range of topics, the ones that weighed heaviest on the minds of community members were the rise of anti-Asian racism and xenophobia, distance learning, the digital divide, and diversifying forms of communication.

We know that teachers are doing their best to provide a quality education to Minnesotan students, but there are barriers that can hinder or prohibit a child from receiving the education they deserve. We worry that immigrant families and Emerging Multilingual Learners (EML) don’t have the resources necessary to implement distance learning. This lack of resources can be families and students not understanding how to implement distance learning due to lack of adult supervision, translational materials, a lack of tech literacy, or the complete lack of the technology or WiFi that distance learning so heavily relies on. All of the reasons listed, as well as reasons outside of these, feed into the digital divide. Inequity surrounds us, it is embedded into the systems in which we live in, and distance learning has further highlighted these inequities. We fear that students who lack the technological resources and support will fall behind in their education, further feeding into the cyclical nature of poverty and exacerbating Minnesota’s deep racial disparities.

We need thorough planning for distance-learning with strategies centered on students with the most needs. Distance-learning is problematic due to hidden costs, and parents lack access to learning resources and tools, which oftentimes leaves students with the burden of figuring it out for themselves. Please watch this recording of a recent meeting we had with youth about distance learning.

We also discussed the lack of diversity in translated materials. From information regarding distance learning, to information about the virus itself, we saw a complete lack of translated
material to different ethnic communities. We heard stories of community members having to translate bulky, technical materials into media that could be distributed and consumed within their communities. And while the work they are doing is wonderful, they often are doing it for free. Despite their best efforts, the work they are doing is unsustainable without some sort of support. Without any translated materials, we heard of instances where people received information via word of mouth. This being the case, we run the risk of people getting incorrect information that could harm rather than help them.

With all this in mind, we at CAAL request that MDE work with other policy makers and school districts to implement the following recommendations:

1. Asian Minnesotans are often an invisible community in good times and are often marginalized or targeted in times of crisis. In addition to Governor Walz’s statements to denounce anti-Asian sentiment, we ask MDE to make strong public statements to condemn acts of racism against Asian communities, especially in this time of crisis. Additionally, we ask that:
   - MDE and all school districts continue to commit resources to educate its employees and commit resources to ensure that it's curriculum and future DEI training are inclusive of Asia/Asian Americans.
   - MDE commit to investing resources to reach Asian parents, students and community to support and inform them about what exactly school districts are doing to address anti-Asian bias, discrimination, and xenophobia.

2. Lessen the gap of the digital divide by providing access to technology and internet.
   - Distribute iPads, laptops, Chromebooks to all students statewide.
   - Provide free, open, and public internet access for families or communities who are unable to provide their own WiFi.
   - Create tech literacy training for adults, so they can better support their students at home.
   - Create online multilingual learning resources for our EML students.

3. Increase hiring of multilingual staff. Now more than ever, In an era of remote learning, multilingual staff play an important role in supporting remote learning at home for our diverse student population. This is an equity issue that will do irreparable harm contributing to Minnesota’s already alarming education opportunity gap.
   - Diversify the languages that information is translated to, as well as diversify the modes that information can be distributed.
   - Distribute information through audio/video with closed captions, for communities who may not be literate in their language.

This pandemic has shed light on structural inequities that are deeply embedded in our systems and society. The issues brought here have always existed, and have only been exacerbated by this virus. We urge you to listen to community members, advocacy organizations and families and to push policies that will help support our most affected and underserved communities. This
is going to be a hard journey, and harder for some than others. Let us do everything in our power to support and uplift each other through this pandemic and move forward to a more fair and loving future for our children.

Sincerely,

KaYing Yang
Director of Programs and Partnerships

CC:

Dr. Heather Mueller, Deputy Commissioner, MDE
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