

What happened to Minnesota's education system?

Traditionally, Minnesota has been considered one of the top states in which to get a K-12 public education. The latest numbers regarding reading and math proficiency from the state's Department of Education, though, serve as a warning that not all is well in the land of 10,000 lakes.

Below is a chart using data from the Minnesota Department of Education that gives a high-level perspective of how students are doing in the state:



As you can see, when it comes to all students in all grades, only 59.4% are reading at grade level while 60% are at grade level for math. By the time students get to high school, the numbers get even worse. 10th grade is the last time that students are tested for their reading abilities and in 2015 the state found that only 57% of 10th graders read at a 10th grade reading level. 11th grade is the last year that students will be tested for math proficiency, and based on state testing in 2015 only 49% of juniors are at grade level for math. Yet, despite those numbers Minnesota has an 81% graduation rate.

How real is the problem? Kim Dallas, an 11th grade English teacher at Rosemount High School in Rosemount, Minnesota, which is a suburb of the Twin Cities with a median household income of \$85,000, explains in a 2014 *Star Tribune* [letter to the editor](#):

“I teach high school English, and I am begging you to please read to your children. Read everything. Read baby

books when they are babies. Read picture books when they are older. Ask your middle-schoolers to read street signs, billboards and marquees during every car ride. Ask your teenagers to read your water bills, junk mail, newspapers, magazines, recipes and catalog descriptions. Read everything like your life depends on it.

Why? Because your children can't read.

We are in the midst of one of the greatest literacy crises ever encountered, and we are fighting an uphill battle. Every day I experience firsthand what it means to be illiterate in a high school classroom. At best it means sleeping away a unit; at worst it means depression or aggression. Average students with average abilities can fervently text away, but they cannot read.

Recently, I gave a unit test where students could use all their notes and their short story on the test (not my standard practice). The results: abysmal. I didn't think the test was too difficult until I started doing some investigating and made a shocking discovery. They couldn't even read the test. Don't think it's your child? Ask your high school teenager to define the following: superior, ridicule, flippant or mundane. Now imagine your child taking the ACT or SAT. Now what?

Looking at the numbers, often the first response is to argue that we don't spend enough on education. But Minnesota ranks high in spending per student compared to other states in the union. Based on Minnesota Department of Education information, the average spent per student across the state is \$14,361.48. That's quite a bit of money. For a class of 25 kids, that would be a total average investment of \$360,000. Given that most teachers in the state only make around \$60,000, with total compensation at \$75,000 or \$80,000, there is anywhere from \$280,000 to \$300,000 still on the table. We can hardly believe that we don't spend enough on education.

Something has happened in the education system and it seems no longer capable of doing its job. As for the causes, there are likely many: a monopolistic education system, too much centralization, family breakdown, poor teacher training, ideology gone amuck, inability to adapt due to red tape and union rules, etc.

Whatever the causes, it's time to rethink how we're doing things. The current system is clearly not up to the task.