

September 1, 2011

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Lori Swanson  
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Dear Ms Swanson,

We are health professionals living in Saint Paul. When we moved to the metro area from Duluth 22 years ago we specifically chose to live in the city, in a neighborhood that had many different kinds of families living in it as opposed to the more homogenous suburbs.

When we had children and were looking at school options for them there was never any question that they would be in a diverse school environment since we strongly believe in supporting the public school system and we live in a diverse district. It was a matter of choosing one Saint Paul school over another until we visited Tri-District (now Harambee) Community Cultures and Environmental Sciences School. We were primarily impressed by the passion and dedication we saw exhibited by every staff member we interacted with. There was definitely something special going on in that school.

Our 13 year old daughter is a confident, academically and musically gifted student. She attended Tri-District/Harambee from K-5 and is now thriving at Crosswinds, entering the 8th grade. In addition to the International Baccalaureate program, she has fully seized the arts opportunities presented by EMID. She picked up a violin for the first time in fall quarter 2009 and progressed to the advanced orchestra by winter 2011, no small task considering the excellence of this group. She travelled to New York with the orchestra over spring break 2011 where they won the orchestra competition AND the grand prize at the Big Apple high school music festival (over the band and choral champions) despite being the only middle school in the competition. She also decided to try theater and was chosen as one of the principals in the musical The Wiz which has been the other highlight of her school years. I overheard several patrons attending the performances remark that the production was far beyond what they expected from middle school theater. This ambitious endeavor recouped all of its production costs from ticket sales, concessions, and donations. And our theater teacher only started in January. This year they're planning to undertake "Hairspray," and I guarantee the number of kids who try out will double.

If you were fortunate enough to attend a concert of the orchestra, the band, or a performance of "The Wiz," you would have seen students of many races, backgrounds, and abilities/disabilities working together and sharing the utter joy of being a part of something wonderful. They are truly friends, not just kids who attend the same school. Most of these students would never have had these opportunities in their home district. I know my daughter would never have played the violin.

Our son is on the other end of the bell curve. A rare seizure disorder has left him with a profound receptive and expressive speech disorder and severe processing delay. He is now entering 3rd grade at Harambee and receives special education services in addition to being part of the regular classroom group. He is the happiest boy imaginable, loves his school friends and teachers, and is achieving much more than many others with his disability due to another notable success of EMID, its work with special needs students. The happiest day of 2011 was when we were told he no longer qualified for help with intersession tuition because he was no longer significantly below average on his test scores! Last fall was the first time we ever cried at a parent-teacher-student conference, and it was because we were so grateful for his teachers and proud of our son. In the last three years we have come to know that Harambee's staff includes a compassionate, caring special ed team that advocates for each of "their kids" to make sure they are the most successful student they can be, making the most of the gifts with which they have been blessed. The year round calendar also gives added stability to these students.

These are some reasons that these two schools are so important to us and our family, but why should they be important to YOU and the students in YOUR home district? Why should the collaborative districts continue to fund the EMID schools? Why, if your district is already "integrated", should you be looking to us for guidance toward integration?

Because integration is WORKING at EMID schools! Other schools may be desegregated, but are they truly integrated? If you define integration success solely by closure of the achievement gap in schools with X% children of color, you are missing much of the point. Is it totally accurate to say EMID schools' test scores are not different enough from other schools with similar demographics to define success? Consider that, because of the year round calendar, our students are tested with almost two months less classroom time than schools with traditional school calendars. Compare discipline statistics at EMID compared to other district's schools. Consider EMID's attendance numbers for all 9 subgroups evaluated for determining the achievement gap. Why do these children make it to school more regularly than their peers in the home districts in spite of greater distance travelled? Could it be the intentional, consistent message that all children are important in the eyes of their school and

their peers? This message is also felt by families. Differences are celebrated. Expression is valued and differing opinions are considered. One outgoing student stated that "I know of several students who may be alive today because of this school."

Perhaps many of the reasons that no school district has adequately closed the achievement gap have more to do with factors independent of schools and more related to social inequities in our society that disproportionately affect children of color, such as income status, health care accessibility, parental education, and instability of residence and family structure.

EMID schools were founded to try out and either reject or implement innovations in integration and cultural understanding to be modeled for the other districts. If some feel that the money spent to break this ground has not been worth the investment, why not? Why have these innovations that are clearly working not been implemented in the other districts? Have they been kept a secret? Has the Office of Equity and Integration not adequately shared the success information and how to implement it? Has implementation of these ideas even been attempted? Is there a strategy in place to take this funding and break new ground to achieve better outcomes than those realized in EMID schools? Most importantly, how much difference is the additional per pupil funding for 850 students, "repurposed" among over 100,000 east metro students going to make without a concrete plan for its use? How many EMID students will even return to their home district, or will parents seek charter or private schools to find the services they need for their unique students?

Please take a second look, slow down, and consider what you could lose by closing these stellar schools without a better plan. Consider the cost to current and future east metro students when programs offered by EMID are gone with perhaps no perceptible benefit. Consider the EMID student, parent and teacher community, an incredibly talented group, and what could be gained by involving them in planning for the future instead of avoiding their input and experience with the integration process. Consider that integration funding and its future will not be finally determined until 2012, and that some of this funding may be retained, even if not in its present form, and alternative funding can be creatively determined.

There are many options other than a rush to close the schools and "take the money and run." We pray you will consider all of them thoughtfully for the future of all east metro students and, selfishly, for our two east metro students.

Sincerely,

Laurel and Fred LeBlanc