

The Business of Improving Schools in Saint Paul

By Marlene Ibsen

With a school system serving more than 38,000 students in more than 60 schools, reform is quite a large feat. In the case of Saint Paul's school district, the many problems we face include 70 percent of all students living in poverty; fewer than half of high school students meeting College Readiness Benchmarks in reading, math and science; and fewer than 40 percent of minority students leaving high school with a diploma.

Clearly, the business of improving schools in Saint Paul is critically important. Throughout our schools, programs are already in place that are making a difference. However, what is needed now is to encourage the growth of these many reform efforts through the active support of parents, educators, communities – and businesses.

Businesses have a vital stake in our schools. Students are the workforce of tomorrow, as well as the consumers who will make our economy healthy and the citizens who will make our communities vibrant. The health of our community and our businesses depends on their academic success and their readiness to take on productive careers that contribute to society. Schools should not be left on their own to struggle with the challenges they face. Businesses, with both expertise and resources that can benefit schools and their students, are proving to be effective partners in addressing these challenges.

At Travelers we develop products and services that mitigate risk. That's why we decided to invest up to \$1.4 million in programs that will increase academic and career success for underrepresented students attending the Saint Paul Public Schools. With our refined focus on closing the achievement gap, we intend to mitigate a grave risk to our community: more generations of children denied future opportunities because of that gap. Travelers views this as an opportunity to contribute as a funder and collaborator on one of the most important issues related to our community's future ability to thrive.

Specifically, we are supporting an expansion of Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a national program that has proven effective in increasing the number of students who go to college and succeed there. In addition, Travelers will provide financial support for principal leadership development programs. As school site leaders, principals are a critical link for the strategic planning and education leadership that leads to improved student achievement. Enhancing the skills they bring to their important role will strengthen the ability of the Saint Paul schools to address the challenges of educating a diverse student population.

While we have worked closely with, and have much respect for, Superintendent Meria Carstarphen to support the progress she has made and the long-term plan she developed for Saint Paul Public Schools, we know that school improvement is not a process that relies on one person, one company, or one singular program. Our goal is to help build a sustainable system that will ensure a quality education for future generations.

While we are proud at Travelers to talk about our own education initiatives and contributions, we are even more pleased to point to the active involvement in education by many corporations. In 2007, 155 leading companies contributed more than \$11.6 billion to their communities, according to the Committee Encouraging Corporate Philanthropy. Of that amount, approximately 15 percent went to K-12 schools, with another 13 percent dedicated to higher education. We applaud those community organizations and corporations who have already come to the table in support of this important work, particularly those local companies who have been investing in a better future for the students of Saint Paul.

We believe now is the time for an even broader base of leaders — from all sectors — to join us in our efforts. Nothing is more critical to our future as a country than the education of the next generations.

At Travelers, we believe in the potential of the students in this city and we believe that this collaborative approach will produce meaningful change. The solutions to problems in Saint Paul's schools lie within our reach if we work together, leverage our resources and skills, and follow through with our commitments to make a difference in the lives of our youth. Together, we can create the educational system the students of Saint Paul deserve.

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