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Editorial: Pay attention to state's racial equity

Report gives Pawlenty, Legislature a D for 2007

Elected officials are so accustomed to interest groups picking apart their voting records to develop loyalty scores or report cards that few attract much notice.

Here's one that should be an exception: the Minnesota Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity, released Tuesday. It gave both the Legislature and Gov. Tim Pawlenty a D for their actions in 2007, up from an F in 2006.

That's the attention-grabber for a 60-page, detailed examination of how state government is and isn't responding to one of this era's most important leadership imperatives: helping Minnesota make a peaceful and prosperous transition from the relative homogeneity of the 20th century to a multi-cultural society in the 21st.

The report is the work of the Organizing Apprenticeship Project, which trains community organizers. It documents that in Minnesota, as elsewhere, as the population has become more racially diverse, growth in public spending on education, health care and economic development has slowed.

Those two trends are working against efforts to close Minnesota's wide income and educational attainment gaps between its white and nonwhite populations. The OAP report reaches the same conclusion a Brookings Institution study did in 2005: Underachievement among Minnesota's people of color puts the whole state's long-term prosperity at risk.

The OAP report identified 21 bills in the 2007 Legislature that, if enacted, would have helped reduce racial disparities. Thirteen of them became law. Prominent items on the report's unfinished agenda include these:

- The Dream Act, which would allow any graduate of a Minnesota high school who attended that high school for at least three years to qualify for resident tuition at public colleges and universities, regardless of a parent's immigration status.
- Removal of the five-year time limit on additional per-pupil funding for English language learners.
- Automatic voter registration with the application or renewal of a driver's license or state identification card.

Perhaps more important than the report's call for action on specific legislation is its plea for greater attention to the racial impact of everything state government does. That's a message those who care about the state Minnesota is becoming should heed.

MULTI-RACIAL STATE

"We are a multi-racial state. The face of Minnesota is changing rapidly, but a racial fault line remains. Whether or not public policy explicitly focuses on race, the impact on communities of color has to be considered to ensure equitable outcomes."

Minnesota Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity, at www.oaproject.org.

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