Compare the overall test scores or graduation rates of students in the Midwest to the rest of the nation, and you'll see that these states generally perform quite well. That certainly is the case for Minnesota, a high-performing state on traditional measures of student achievement.

But as Greg Keith, director of school support for the Minnesota Department of Education, notes, that level of achievement is far from uniform among different groups of students. "We could look at our overall scores and say, 'We're in the top five in the nation, so we're doing it right,'" he says. "It takes a whole lot more to understand what we have to do for our underserved kids."

Closing the achievement gap — between white and minority students or low-income and higher-income students, for example — is a top priority right now of Minnesota legislators and school administrators alike.

At the start of the 2013 legislative session, Rep. Paul Marquart called that gap "the No. 1 threat to our future economic success and vitality." Part of the state's strategy has been to invest more in early-childhood education and to provide new incentives for schools to implement "achievement and integration plans" that focus on closing achievement gaps. Also, under its No Child Left Behind Act waiver with the federal government, Minnesota has set a goal of cutting its achievement gap in half by 2017.

To meet this objective, the state has established Regional Centers of Excellence to work with schools where overall student achievement is low or where achievement gaps are especially high. State-trained staff from these centers work with each school in developing leadership teams (administrators, teachers and others) and school improvement plans (focused mostly on enhancing instructional practices). Once these teams and plans are in place, a regional center and the school itself use data to track whether student achievement is improving.

"What's successful in one school might not be successful in another school," Keith says, noting the importance of customizing plans.

Thus far, the Regional Centers of Excellence appear to be making a difference. According to data released by the state in October, gaps have closed in most of the schools where the Regional Centers have worked. Overall student achievement has improved in most of these schools as well.

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Attachment

Stateline Midwest ~ November 2014

1.13 MB

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