

DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR SERIES

Equity and Excellence Now

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About the Author



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Equity without excellence is a code word for low expectations. Excellence without equity is a codeword for exclusion. As we near the end of the global pandemic, schools remain closed and children have been struck with staggering learning losses (Manno, 2020), with estimates of student performance in reading and math declining by one-third of a year to a full year. It's not as bad as all that — it's worse. Before COVID-19 struck and schools closed, many students were already behind, meaning that in the fall of 2021, teachers are faced with students who may be 2 or 3 years behind. These learning losses have a particularly large impact on students of color and students from low-income families (Aucejo et al., 2020). Although the challenges for educational recovery can seem overwhelming, this article suggests specific actions educators, policymakers, and leaders can take to achieve both equity and excellence in schools. We first consider the false dichotomy between equity and excellence. Then we review five areas in which schools are challenged to deliver equity and excellence: college level classes, gifted and talented programs, discipline, homework, and grading.

The False Dichotomy

Equity is a primary goal for schools, yet the term remains poorly defined and implemented. Equity is, as author and consultant Ken Williams describes it, providing students what

they need, when they need it, with a sense of urgency (personal communication, January 15, 2021). Too often, equity training becomes a focus on feelings rather than action. A better approach is to focus on practices and policies that undermine equity, with the understanding that improvements in attitudes and beliefs occur after practices and policies change. This sequence is strikingly different from the claim that leaders must first achieve buy-in from faculty and staff before implementing change. A focus on buy-in before practice is a formula for delay and failure (Reeves, 2021). As the case studies in the next section suggest, the path toward equity and excellence is fraught with opposition. If we are committed to equity in action, the path does not start with tear-filled workshops and futile attempts to change feelings, but rather with implementation of effective practices and policies well before feelings change. We now consider five case studies in equity and excellence, each of which are certain to engender opposition, but nevertheless call for action by educational leaders

At the heart of creating schools committed to the twin goals of equity and excellence is effective literacy instruction, including both evidence-based reading instruction and a heavy dose of nonfiction writing at all ages. The most recent data on national reading achievement, collected before the COVID-related school closures, showed that two-thirds of elementary

and middle school students were not proficient in reading (Green & Goldstein, 2019). During school closures, instructional time declined and, for many students, evaporated entirely. As schools resume in the 2021–2022 school year, it will be interesting to observe how many schools revert to their previous schedules and continue the pattern of inadequate reading achievement, and how many will drastically reform schedules at every level to include reading instruction in all grades, from kindergarten through high school. As

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this paper is written in the spring of 2021, there are few signs that school schedules will change. One of the greatest tragedies of the pandemic will be if educational leaders collectively say, “Thank goodness that’s over – now we can go back to what we were doing before.” The lessons of COVID-19 have been purchased at the cost of half a million lives in the United States alone. It is up to educators, leaders, and policymakers to ensure that the lessons we learn and apply are worthy of the cost.

Advanced Placement Classes

The path to college credit classes, such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate, and other college-level classes offered in high schools, begins in elementary school. Students who struggle with reading in the primary grades rarely have the opportunity to recover in higher grades. Consider the schedule in elementary grades, where typically 90 to 180 minutes are devoted to literacy instruction in the primary grades, and as students proceed to intermediate grades, middle school, and high school, time allocated to reading instruction declines and ultimately disappears. Why should we be surprised that reading proficiency declines in intermediate and middle grades when teachers are given fewer minutes for that instruction?

Inequities in advanced classes are pervasive and appalling. While children of color make up almost half the school-age student population, only 8.8% of AP exam takers were students of color and only 4.3% achieved scores of 3 or higher in 2018, the threshold at which colleges might accept the test for college credit (Jaschick, 2019). The ability to earn college credit in high school has both financial and psychological impacts on students. The financial impact is clear and quantifiable. I have seen school districts that create large 8-foot wide “checks” that read “Pay to the order of the Parents of...” and insert the cost per credit hour in the state multiplied by the number of credits earned by the student. The psychological impact is also significant, as students think of themselves as college students with a bright future.

Some of the limits to AP and other college-level classes are self-imposed at the high school level, with admission often conditioned on teacher recommendations and performance in previous classes in the same subject. The problem with this process is the pathway to advanced classes is narrowed not to the most capable students, but to those who earned high grades in earlier years. As we shall see later in this article, those grades are often related more to homework completion and parental encouragement than to individual proficiency. Thus, every time elementary and middle school teachers send the message “you are just not college material” to their students, the indelible message remains imprinted on them well into high school. In order to achieve equity at the high school level, two decisions are required. First, high schools must open the gates to advanced classes to all students, even if those students will need additional support to succeed in those classes. Second, elementary and middle schools must prepare students for the rigors of advanced classes at an early age. It is imperative that “rigor” is not used as an excuse for exclusion and failure, but rather is a bar to which all students are expected to rise. This may require changes in elementary and middle school schedules so that both students and teachers have the time they need to gain entry to advanced classes. This also means explicit literacy support for students well after the primary grades, so that the opportunities for advanced study are available for every student.

To put a fine point on this issue, students in expensive independent and international schools are routinely expected to take and pass

AP examinations. Some of those students struggle in reading and math, but they are rarely excluded from advanced classes. Instead, the schools assume that all students are entitled to advanced coursework. This entitlement is not a reflection of their cognitive ability, but rather of the societal norm that rich students deserve advanced classes. The question, therefore, that every educator and school leader must ask is, “What would we do if our students were rich?” If the answer is that they would receive every opportunity for success in advanced classes, then that is what we must provide them.

Gifted and Talented Education

Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) is a mainstay of many educational systems as they seek to provide support services for academically advanced students. But admission to these programs may or may not be related to academic potential. One study of more than 10,000 students revealed that students of color are dramatically under-represented in GATE classes (Wynn, 2016). Specifically, researchers reported the odds of Black and Hispanic children being referred to gifted programs are respectively 66 and 47 percent lower than those of White students.

In some cities, such as Boston, the admission to elite public schools such as the Boston Latin School, the oldest public school in the nation, is based on a single test. Even if one accepts the dubious premise that a test can identify the best and brightest students, even the most strident supporter of testing would have to acknowledge the following. A well-constructed test administered

to 1,000 students competing for 500 slots in an elite school may be able to distinguish the top 100 from the bottom 100. But it is statistically indefensible to suppose that the test can distinguish between #500, who is admitted, and #501, who is denied admission. This is a distinction without a difference. In statistical terms, it means that the difference between these two students—#500 and #501—is more likely due to random variation than to a meaningful difference between the two students.

There are two opportunities for responding to the inequitable and inaccurate way in which students are selected for or denied admission to GATE programs. The first is simply to provide the hallmarks of gifted education to all students. The National Association for Gifted Education suggests that gifted students receive the following:

1. Good curriculum and instruction.
2. Good teaching based on the needs of the individual student.
3. Providing lessons at a higher degree of difficulty where appropriate.
4. A willingness to take supported risks that extend learning beyond merely earning a high grade. (Tomlinson, 1997)

Despite my deep respect and admiration for the author of this article, I must ask the question every parent asks: Isn't this just good education for all students? Shouldn't every teacher follow these four guidelines?

Second, even if there is to be a separate program for GATE students, schools must cast a wider net than

a single test. Some schools find that peer nomination will help to identify students who solve problems quickly, come up with innovative solutions, and synthesize different ideas effectively. There is also a case to be made for random assignment of students to GATE classes. There is a natural experiment that validates random selection, as Boston Latin inadvertently admitted dozens of the “wrong” students to its prestigious school. Once admitted, however, the “wrong” students seemed to do just fine. After all, they qualified

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for Boston Latin, didn't they? If there are limited slots for GATE programs, and, as in the example above, there are 1,000 applicants for 500 slots, schools can logically make the argument for perhaps admitting the top 100 and selecting the rest of the students at random from the other applicants. This eliminates the illusion of precision, which parents, teachers, and students assume that educational system can scientifically differentiate between the 500th applicant and the student who ranked 501st.

Discipline and Suspensions

It's not just that we deny academic opportunities to students of color; we beat them more often as well. To our national disgrace, 19 states still allow corporal punishment, and more than 600 students are beaten in public schools every day in the name of discipline and good order (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). Black boys are more than twice as likely as White boys to receive corporal punishment, and Black girls are three times as likely to receive corporal punishments as their White peers. Every school has less drastic disciplinary actions, such as office referrals and suspensions. But the impact of these disciplinary practices falls disproportionately on Black children, and those "lighter" punishments nevertheless lead to lifetime consequences that influence higher education and employment opportunities (Richeson, 2019). The most casual inquiry into the cause of office referrals shows that "disrespect" and "failure to complete work" are among the more common causes of referrals. In some school districts, there is a cascading impact of disciplinary actions, in which three office referrals automatically lead to a suspension, and multiple suspensions lead to expulsion.

The lust for punishment, whether physical or psychological, appears to be ingrained in our educational system, and these punishments, however benign they may seem to the teacher, have a disproportionate impact on students of color. The answer is not to have classrooms that are dangerous and devoid of effective teaching, but rather to equip teachers with the tools necessary to manage classrooms well and impose appropriate consequences,

including positive consequences, so that students learn classroom norms.

Homework

If you ask teachers why they assign homework, the nearly universal answer is that students need practice. Indeed they do, and therefore the question is what constitutes effective practice. Observe a great athletic practice and one can see quickly the characteristics of effective practice: coaching, feedback, reactions to feedback, and immediate improvement. For example, if students are learning to serve in volleyball, they might miss 15 serves in a row. Fortunately, they will have a coach who provides explicit guidance on the proper form for a serve. Imagine that, based on the student's response to this coaching, they successfully complete 15 serves. To review: The student misses 15, receives coaching, and makes 15. That is, by any measure, a great practice. But when the same student turns in homework with 15 correct and 15 incorrect answers, it will be marked with a 50% and solid F. In sum, we know what good practice is — coaching, feedback, and application of that feedback immediately for improved results. That never happens at home. In a synthesis of 37 different studies on the subject (Neason, 2017), the impact of homework in the elementary grades is zero, and the impact in secondary grades is negligible. Teachers routinely report that homework does not reflect the work of students but that of sources ranging from parents and siblings to a variety of helpful Internet sites that provide answers without the bother of students engaging in meaningful practice. Indeed, when teachers stop relying on homework as practice and instead insist that the work be done

in class, they report not only significantly higher achievement by students but also more honest conversations about what the students know and do not know (Reeves, 2019).

Some homes are organized to support homework, with helpful parents, great Internet connectivity, and quiet spaces for academic work. Other homes, perhaps with multiple families living in a cramped space, are less conducive to homework. When homework is graded, especially as a significant part of a student's final mark, it is worth asking whether we are grading the student or their home environment. Students do need practice, but homework almost never provides the essential components of practice, with coaching and feedback from the teacher and an immediate opportunity for the student to apply that feedback and improve performance.

Grading: Getting Rid of the Average

It is not necessary to overhaul grading systems in order to make small changes that have a disproportionate impact on student success. I have elsewhere (Reeves, 2020) described the many failings of grading systems, so in this article I will confine my comments to a single source of inaccuracy and unfairness in grading: the use of the average to determine the final grade. If education means anything, it is a commitment by student and teacher to learn continuously. At the heart of this commitment is resilience and perseverance — bouncing back from failure and frustration. Every state in the U.S. and many other jurisdictions have a multi-decade commitment to academic standards in which students are to be

evaluated based on their proficiency as measured against a standard. That is the way we evaluate drivers, pilots, and brain surgeons — not based on an average of their past errors, but on their proficiency. Despite this multi-decade commitment to standards, schools routinely rely upon computerized grading systems that use the average to calculate final grades, and therefore punish students at the end of a term for mistakes that they made 4 months earlier. In these systems, the rhetoric of resilience gives way to the inevitable implication of the average. It doesn't make any difference how resilient you are, how much you persevere, and how successful you are in meeting standards, we will punish you for your past mistakes. As this article is submitted, I once again saw cases of students earning Bs and As at the end of a semester in which they will receive a grade of F due to missing work or lack of participation in class. These cases are not outliers. Every year there are students in Advanced Placement classes who demonstrate the ability to do college-level work by earning 4s or 5s on the AP exam, but who nevertheless receive D and F grades due to missing work. It is clear that whatever they were missing was not relevant to their success on the AP exam. Nevertheless, toxic and inaccurate grading systems persist, and administrators steadfastly refuse to challenge them.

Conclusion

Equity and excellence need not be elusive goals. Schools have a moral and professional obligation to pursue both. The first step is to acknowledge gaping inequities that pervade education in everything from the

gifted and talented selections in the primary grades through the college-level opportunities in high school. Inequities affect discipline, including the barbarous practice of corporal punishment, and academic performance. Workshops on equity that focus on feelings but fail to address these essential practices are diversions of time and resources from the essential challenges at hand. For change to happen, we don't need to wait for attitudes and beliefs to change. We need courageous action now.

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