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Unfinished Business: Addressing Unequal Opportunities in Education
As schools retool to prepare students for an economy in which critical thinking and collaboration are paramount, will all students share the benefits? Peter W. Cookson Jr.

The Promise of Policy: Holding Us Accountable for Helping All Kids Achieve
Debates about reauthorizing No Child Left Behind and student testing risk obscuring the law’s central purpose: to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities for K-12 learning. Sonja Brookins Santelises

Leaping the College-Ready Gap: What Can Be Learned from Schools That Focus on Deeper Learning
Eight schools from around the country demonstrate how to close the gaps for Latino and black students in beginning and finishing college degrees. Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath

Arkansas’s Fight for Real Equity
Arkansas made notable, measurable progress in providing students an adequate and equitable education. What will it take to close remaining gaps? Jay Barth

Attracting the Best Teachers to Schools That Need Them Most
Some high-needs schools are doing what it takes to recruit well-trained teachers and keep them. Kate Walsh, Hannah Putman, and Autumn Lewis

How Black Boys with Disabilities End Up in Honors Classes While Others without Disabilities End Up in Special Education
Nowhere is the gap more acute than in the educational experiences of male black students, who are also more likely to face exclusionary discipline, school-based arrest, and be placed in special education. Ivory A. Toldson and Kimberly D. Charis

Can State Policy Deliver Equitable and Adequate Funding?
If a state gets serious about funding schools equitably and adequately, will it see results? Pennsylvania provides a case in point. Rand Quinn and Matthew P. Steinberg

Early Learning: Unintended Consequences of the Push to Close the Gap by Increasing Quality
Despite bold moves to increase access to quality early learning, gaps persist. Phil Sirinides

Mind the Gap: Just Be Sure It’s the Right One
The achievement gaps that matter most to students reflect the spectrum of educational opportunity, not just differences in test scores. Ace Parsi
Gaps in educational achievement have persisted in the United States since its founding. Significant attempts to measure and explain all the reasons for these gaps, particularly those by race and income, date to the first National Assessment of Educational Progress in the early 1970s. Across the decades, the gaps have sometimes narrowed and sometimes widened.

And though there is no consensus on the degree to which any particular factor is to blame or credit for the changes, education policy experts point to many differences in educational opportunity that play important roles. Among them are things that schools and state education policymakers control—teacher distribution, funding, access to early education, for example—as well as things they do not, such as unsafe neighborhoods and single-parent homes. Whether the gaps highlight inequities for students of color, or those living in poverty, or those who are English language learners, there is more than one policy lever to explore, and education policy remains key.

Each author of this Standard offers a piece of the puzzle that states must fit together. In his overview, Peter Cookson issues the call to arms, pointing out that public education remains our society’s most fruitful avenue for upward mobility, and yet too few students at the lowest end of the income distribution are equipped to participate fully in the economy of the 21st century.

Sonja Brookins Santelises urges policymakers to hold fast to the guiding purpose of No Child Left Behind—equality of opportunity for all students—even as it fixes its flaws. She calls annual testing “the canary in the coal mine,” ensuring that no one can easily ignore disparities across schools and in student performance. Achievement gaps are apparent before children begin school, which underscores the importance of access to high-quality early education. Phil Sirinides looks at the unintended consequences of recent state and federal efforts in this area. On distribution of the best teachers, Kate Walsh and her colleagues say that it is hard but not impossible to train, recruit, and keep good teachers in high-needs schools.

Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath examine the gap in college readiness for students of color and prescribe a steady diet of deeper learning experiences during these students’ K-12 years. Ivory Toldson and Kimberly Charis share an intriguing exploration of the achievement gap through the lens of African American young men. And Ace Parsi revisits his own experience as an English language learner and free and reduced-price lunch recipient.

Two states are showcased: Rand Quinn and Matthew Steinberg look at Pennsylvania, which simultaneously topped a recent US Department of Education list on funding disparity and presents researchers a unique opportunity to assess the impact of fiscal policy changes. Jay Barth looks at Arkansas’s efforts to close the achievement gap in his state.

The problem of inequities of educational opportunity and achievement gaps is multifaceted and difficult, as the authors attest. Yet it is ignored at our peril. Undoubtedly, closing the gap is a job for state boards of education and state education agencies across the land.
News & Notes

In most state legislatures, legislation was introduced in early 2015 on student data privacy. This wave produced 175 bills, and 10 became law in four states (Arkansas, North Dakota, Utah, and Virginia). The best of them balance the need to protect students with the need to use education data to improve instruction, according to a NASBE Policy Update by Amelia Vance:


The federal government is also weighing in. In January 2015, President Obama advocated a new federal law that better protects student data. One bipartisan bill had been introduced at press time, though the discussion draft of a second was released mid-April. The former, introduced by Representatives Polis (D-CO) and Messer (R-IN), would give the Federal Trade Commission greater authority to regulate education service providers like Microsoft, Pearson, Google, and Khan Academy. The discussion draft, released by Representatives Kline (R-MN) and Scott (D-VA), would rewrite the main federal education data privacy law, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and thereby update the 1974 law for the digital age. The bill directs the US Department of Education to regulate those providers. Both bills have provisions that risk undermining the important balance between protecting students’ data and leveraging technology to help students succeed.

Senators Alexander (R-TN) and Murray (D-WA) succeeded in their quest to draft bipartisan legislation reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Their draft, approved unanimously by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee on April 16, gives states significant new authority, including greater leadership over accountability, assessment, and intervention, along with certainty about the policy landscape over the next four years. During committee consideration, the panel approved nearly 30 amendments, including language on early learning, reducing assessments, and building education and leader capacity. While it is not clear at press time what the bill’s prospects are in a floor vote, or whether any legislation will survive negotiations with the House, it appears clear that the requirement for annual testing and reporting results by subgroups will remain in the bill. It also appears there are not the votes to add a provision for Title I funding to follow low-income students to other schools. We expect the full Senate to consider the bill as early as the week of May 18, but Senate leaders are also considering a mid-June debate.

In a report released this spring, NASBE’s Study Group on Student Engagement argued that other investments states make in education are likely to be wasted unless they also take on the challenge of students’ lack of engagement in the classroom. The report, A State of Engagement, urges state boards of education to review policies in five areas: measurement strategies, educator preparation, school climate guidelines, personalized learning, and collaboration with community leaders.

Under the Federal Communication Commission’s E-Rate Modernization order, adopted in July 2014, at least $1 billion annually will be directed to qualifying schools and libraries to increase Wi-Fi and broadband connectivity. Three out of five US schools lack Wi-Fi wiring, and at least half of all schools cannot carry data at broadband speeds. A recent FCC report finds that a significant digital divide remains between rural and urban areas, with more than half of all rural Americans lacking access to 25 Mbps/3 Mbps service. Under the FCC program, schools and school districts decide what services they want and conduct competitive bidding. A district pays a percentage of the purchase price, based on the percentage of its students who live in poverty. Each state has an e-rate coordinator responsible for helping schools with the application process. The FCC estimates that more than 10 million students could benefit from the program nationwide over the next five years, particularly in rural areas, though not every state benefits equally (see map).
An interesting study came across my desk not long ago and made a small splash in the education policymaking world. In this report from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), the authors detailed how Twitter has shaped the Common Core debate—specifically, what sort of impact #CommonCore has had. After analyzing nearly 200,000 tweets, the authors of #CommonCore: How Social Media Is Changing the Politics of Education draw a few conclusions:

- On Twitter, the debate over Common Core is less about the standards themselves and more about broader political disagreements over education policy.
- There are two distinct ways Common Core is discussed: Supporters talk about the standards using rational, logical “policyspeak,” while opponents tend to appeal to peoples’ emotional side using “politicalspeak,” grouping their disdain for Common Core with other soapbox issues.
- Common Core is frequently explained through catchy metaphors. These tweets get widely retweeted and often not accurately or in the spirit in which they were intended. This is one way misinformation spreads, say the authors.

These findings have garnered praise and criticism. “Just how does one tell whether 140 characters are ‘political’ or ‘policy’?” asked the American Enterprise Institute’s Frederick Hess in his review of the study. He also took issue with the overall methodology, which he felt was rather imprecise. But whether you agree with the study or not, one thing is clear: Social media are making it easier than ever before for individuals to bring attention to the issues they care about most and over which they have an influence. Report co-author Miguel del Fresno has a name for this phenomenon: “we, the new media.” And he’s right. We now have the tools to broadcast messages ourselves anytime, anywhere.

Taking this argument a tad further, not only is it easier to be a megaphone, it is also a necessity. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of full-time reporters covering state legislatures for daily newspapers has declined by 35 percent. The same can be said for a shrinking education beat. No longer can members of the education policymaking community depend solely on outreach to traditional mass media to help deliver its messages. To have an impact, they must take matters into their own hands and be more creative in their efforts to communicate. That is where NASBE and this column will come in handy. In this space, I'll cover the how-tos: from tactical questions such as how to craft an effective tweet or set up a Facebook page to more strategic questions of how to communicate about the important work state boards of education do through storytelling, op-ed writing, social media networking, and more.

With so much happening in education at the state level, amplifying the national voice of state boards of education has never been more important, and it has never been easier to attain. The key is knowing how to use social media effectively.

We, the Media

Renée Rybak Lang
Communications Director
Every major education law is a reaction to achievement gaps. From the “inherently unequal” racial segregation struck down in Brown v. Board of Education, to statutes enacted as part of the War on Poverty, through statutes addressing discrimination based on sex and disability, and to current efforts to make schools safe for all children and ensure educational stability for children in foster care, the law consistently responds to differences in educational opportunity and outcomes.

Even the titles of statutes show the law’s unbreakable link to achievement gaps: the name “No Child Left Behind” identified intolerable achievement gaps and served as a call to collective action. Even the debate about internationally benchmarked standards shows that achievement gaps do not stop at national borders.

The law declares what “ought to be.” State boards of education are indispensable to transforming “ought to be” into “is.” Because discussions about achievement gaps and about the law are bound together, boards that understand legal change will be positioned to foster meaningful educational change. One useful framework comes from Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat: “naming,” “blaming,” and “claiming.”

Naming—The Existence and Extent of a Problem. It is undeniable there are gaps in achievement and outcomes based on race, gender, income, disability, abuse and neglect, and other types of differences. The national cost is staggering, and the individual costs are incalculable. A poor education burdens the economy and shortens life spans. The collective horror and outrage about achievement gaps reflect an instinctive concern for basic decency and human dignity. State boards may lead by spotlighting the existence and harm of achievement gaps.

Blaming—The Cause of the Problem. While achievement gaps are a social problem as much as an educational problem, many of the causes are public education’s to own, including failure to provide one or more of the following: rigorous standards, an evidence-based curriculum, appropriate instruction, meaningful assessment, alignment between these essential components, faithful implementation of things that work, and a student-protective school climate. A child’s family life may be dangerous and chaotic, but low standards only make that child’s prospects worse. A child may experience lifelong discrimination due to race, but poor instruction only makes that child’s prospects worse. State boards may lead by searching for and identifying causes within public education’s control.

Claiming—The Problem’s Remedy. If some of a gap’s causes are in the control of public education, so are its solutions. For example, if failure to implement evidence-based instruction causes an achievement gap, closing the gap is a matter of implementing instruction with fidelity. State boards may lead by providing support for evidence-based solutions to achievement gap causes, including spotlighting schools that have successfully narrowed or closed gaps and providing resources to match causes with solutions.

State boards have a responsibility to address achievement gaps. This is beyond dispute. School law can be a catalyst, and school lawyers are willing to help!

In October 2014, the US Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights issued a clarion call to school districts and states to review their policies and practices in order to ensure they are equitably providing educational resources to their schools. In a Dear Colleague letter, Assistant Secretary Catherine E. Lhamon decried the persistent unequal access to educational resources, outlined the legal framework for enforcing civil rights in education, and specified where discrimination is most prevalent.

She cited systematic discrimination in the academic rigor and quantity of courses offered, the quality of curricula, the number of extracurricular activities available to students, the quality of teaching and leadership, the adequacy and condition of school facilities, and the availability of sophisticated technology and instructional materials. The letter echoes the 2013 report of the Equity and Excellence Commission:

Our educational system, legally desegregated more than a half century ago, is ever more segregated by wealth and income, and often again by race. Ten million students in America’s poorest communities—and millions more African American, Latino, Asian American, Pacific Islander, American Indian and Alaska Native students who are not poor—are having their lives unjustly and irredeemably blighted by a system that consigns them to the lowest-performing teachers, the most run-down facilities, and academic expectations and opportunities considerably lower than what we expect of other students. These vestiges of segregation, discrimination and inequality are the unfinished business for our Nation.¹

Much of Americans’ faith in the social contract is based on the belief that America is the “land of opportunity.” According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, however, people who have no or few family resources find it incredibly difficult to climb the economic ladder: In a 2012 study, Pew found that 43 percent of those raised at the bottom of the income distribution remained there a generation later, 70 percent never reached the middle, and only 4 percent made it all the way to the top.²

A number of factors influence mobility: geographic location (state, town or
city, and neighborhood), the amount of savings a family has accumulated, and whether or not a household has a working mother. Today, four out of ten children are born to unwed mothers; working for these women is essential for their family’s well-being.

But education plays an outsized role in upward mobility. The Pew study also found that young people raised at the bottom of the economic pyramid who earn college degrees are five times more likely to leave the bottom income levels as adults when compared with their peers who do not have bachelor’s degrees. A young person who drops out of high school is lucky to make $12 an hour, while a young person with an advanced degree is likely to earn $33 an hour.1

By 2020, 65 percent of jobs will require at least some college education or training beyond high school.4 If the warnings of the Equity and Excellence Commission are not heeded, we could well see a nation divided not only by class and race but also education. The Great Equalizer could become a permanent Great Unequalizer.

This dire possibility coincides with the biggest explosion of knowledge in human history. Today, we can see the edge of eternity, map genetic codes, build computers that calculate many millions of instructions per millisecond, communicate instantly with people around the world, and soon will be able to create learning avatars that can act as our intellectual guardian angels.5 Young people who cannot participate in mastery and creation of knowledge will be shut out of the economy and from full participation in society. There is evidence that each generation is smarter than previous generations,6 but will this growth in cognitive capacity be widely shared? The knowledge explosion and the persistence of educational inequities call for a new learning paradigm that prepares all children to strive and thrive.

School Improvement from the Inside Out

School quality significantly affects students’ ability to learn and their capacity for lifelong learning, but what is inside the black box that separates a highly effective school from a low-performing school? Thirty-six years ago, Ronald Edwards conducted research in inner-city elementary schools where students from economically impoverished backgrounds were equaling or surpassing the national average.7 Edmonds outlined six characteristics essential for effective schooling:

- strong administrative leadership;
- high expectations;
- an orderly atmosphere;
- basic skills acquisition as the school’s primary purpose;
- capacity to divert school energy and resources from other activities to advance the school’s basic purpose;
- frequent monitoring of pupil progress.

In 1983 the US Department of Education published A Nation at Risk, which famously said, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Education was no longer a policy afterthought; it became a topic of national conversation and at times acrimonious disagreement. But through it all, some basic truths held: The quality of classroom instruction and the quality of the organizational systems supporting instruction were the keys to equal education.

Recently, Howard University’s A. Wade Boykin identified six school-based factors that are highly correlated to student engagement and achievement:

- positive teacher-student relationship quality, marked by caring, support, and high expectations;
- collaborative learning, marked by intellectual exchanges among group members;
- mastery of classroom goal structures, focused on student understanding, effort, and improvement;
- meaningful learning, marked by a focus on personal relevance and links to prior knowledge and experiences;
- cultural significance, marked by links to family socialization and traditions, fundamental core values, and popular culture;
- promotion of effectiveness and efficiency of information processing skills, such as problem-solving strategies and critical thinking.8
Boykin and other researchers have put flesh on the bones of the effective schools literature; trust, dignity, and affirmation are essential for learning. When educators build social-emotional learning into the daily life of a school, they create a positive learning environment. There is strong evidence that positive school climates and cultures are highly correlated with high graduation rates, college and career readiness, and a sense of competence among students.9 In my own research on the socialization effects of high schools on students’ self-perceptions and aspirations, I was impressed by how profoundly the cultures of high schools influence the educational trajectories of students.10

Social-emotional learning and trusting school climates are not “soft” concepts. Hamre and Pianta, for example, found that when high emotional and instructional support was consistently present in classrooms, students who were behaviorally and academically at risk performed at a higher level academically than students who did not have those supports.11 This high emotional support includes a teacher’s 1) sensitivity to student needs, 2) reluctance to impose an agenda onto a child and 3) creation of a positive classroom climate.

These findings have policy implications. Not that many years ago, Finland did not do well in international comparisons of mathematics and reading. Beginning in the 1980s, educators and the public came to terms with the fact that they were going to be shut out of the global marketplace unless they overhauled their public education system. Finland adopted a grassroots school improvement approach. Policymakers and educators emphasized inclusion and creativity, well-prepared teachers who were themselves lifelong learners, the wide use of special education pedagogical strategies, teacher-developed curriculum, and an emphasis on social cohesion.12

Today, Finland is among the top scorers in international testing, while the United States continues to flounder in the middle of the pack. Of course, Finland and the United States differ in many ways, but these differences should not obscure the finding that certain policy approaches are more effective than others in creating a high-functioning education system of public schools.

**Education for Tomorrow’s Jobs**

Students today are digital natives; they have grown up in an age of networked intelligence enhanced by instant communication, artificial intelligence, and social media. This networked intelligence includes not only an expanded definition of intelligence but also a far greater emphasis on collective and distributed intelligence and the emergence of a cognitive fluency that allows students to think across and past old categories of thought and knowledge and stretch their thinking in new directions and deeper dimensions. While there are many ways to describe cognitive fluidity, four qualities are essential:

- **Critical reflection.** The ability to distinguish fact from factoid, reality from fiction, and truth from lies is essential to shaping the mind of the mature thinker.

- **Empirical reasoning.** Logic and the ability to manipulate large data sets become more important with each passing year. Those without this skill will not be able to compete for any job except the most low paying and unsatisfying.

- **Collective intelligence.** No one learns in isolation: We not only learn from each other, we learn with each other. Teamwork, sharing ideas, and using gaming, simulations, and complex ways of communicating are how work will be accomplished in the coming decades.

- **Metacognition.** Thinking about thinking is no longer the preserve of the privileged; it is a basic skill. The 21st century mind is not an attic where all sorts of unrelated ideas and beliefs are stored with no organizing principle. Complex metacognition is both fluid and structured.13

Albert Einstein once said that imagination is more important than intelligence; I would argue that the qualities of mind mentioned above are far more important than traditional approaches to learning in a world experiencing exponential economic and intellectual growth. Children born today are likely to be living and perhaps even working in the 22nd century, and the job market will require more of them. According to Carnevale, Hanson, and Gulish:

The workforce of the 21st century will look quite different from the workforce of the 20th century. While adapting institutions to the new
age workforce constitutes a challenge, it also reflects a unique opportunity to develop the most dynamic, skilled workforce in the world. The occupational shift from blue-collar jobs in the manufacturing industry to sales, office, and service jobs across industries now allows a greater share of the population to participate productively in the workforce and contribute to the economy, provided they have the requisite skills.14

What was sufficient for the development of human capital even two decades ago is no longer adequate. University of California economist Enrico Moretti refers to the 21st century as the “human capital century.”15 Will the school system be further stratified between schools that are dedicated to providing an enriched curriculum based on inquiry, discovery, and metacognition to middle and upper middle students, while poor, near poor, and working class students continue to be educated for the 19th and 20th centuries?

Recent work by Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane makes it clear that the dynamics of income inequalities will, if left unattended, transform the “land of opportunity” into a land of deep divisions and economic immobility.16 In the words of a recent report released by the Hamilton Project, “Our educational system needs to foster talent at all levels.”17

Who Has a Place in the Knowledge Economy?

Educational equity in this context takes on new meaning: It can be defined as including participation and leadership in the knowledge economy. Defining equity this way requires rethinking what education means, how it is delivered, and how results are measured. For poor, near poor, and working class students, the stakes could not be higher; if schools produce graduates who are destined to reproduce the current social arrangements, the chances of upward mobility for disadvantaged young people are low. But if learning environments become more inclusive, rigorous, and forward thinking, students who do not come from privileged backgrounds have more than a reasonable chance of succeeding.

In The Great Disruption, Francis Fukuyama wrote, “One of the greatest challenges modern information age democracies face today is whether they can maintain social order in the face of technological and economic change.” Looking at equal education in this light, the unfinished business of the nation is to ensure that efforts to ensure access to quality education for all students maps onto a future markedly different from the past.18

13“Cookson, “The 4th Wave.”
14Carnevale et al., Failure to Launch, 46.
For decades, our country has struggled to make good on its commitment to prepare all its young people, not just some, for the opportunities and responsibilities that await them after high school. We have worked to define what kids need to know and be able to do to maximize their options. We have wrestled with how to create collective responsibility for getting all students to these shared learning goals. We have debated the role of equitable financial and human resources in achieving equitable outcomes for historically underserved young people. And we have invested enormous energy in getting ever clearer about what practices are most effective in accelerating achievement for those students who are furthest behind.

For people like me—first and foremost, an educator and a parent—these questions play out in the daily routines and relationships in schools, classrooms, and communities. Inevitably, it is ground-level practitioners—school leaders, teachers, and students—who will implement the practices that move all students to high levels of performance. However, policy has the power to either galvanize or impede this process. Federal and state education policy can create and protect the conditions that ensure we will not turn our backs on the collective responsibility for educational equity. Or it can undermine those conditions.

It is within this very important frame that we should understand current debates about the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and its most recent iteration, No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Thirteen years after NCLB became law, it is tempting to focus solely on its current challenges. NCLB has suffered its share of the inevitable disconnects that arise when well-intentioned federal policy hits the reality of ground-level implementation in districts and schools. The original law focused only on student proficiency rates, without consideration of student growth, and it paints an incomplete picture of improvement, particularly in high-poverty schools. Treating schools that fall far below expectations for all students the same as schools that are off target with one subgroup of students fails to sufficiently distinguish challenges, needs, and consequences.

To be sure, those who have lived through this misalignment are right to point out the need for changes. These adjustments,
scores of popular, high-performing communities and examine student group performance, which often tells a very different story of success based on race and class.

With the bipartisan support and adoption of NCLB in 2001, the country gained annual, disaggregated measures to begin to examine whether or not there was movement toward equity. Of course, test results cannot be the only indicator of the progress or quality of a school. However, when trying to gauge the progress of the nation’s children across all 50 states and in every community, annual standardized testing can be the “canary in the coal mine.” It helps signal those performance areas at which we need to take a deeper look. Further, it helps the federal government defend the right to quality educational opportunities for traditionally underserved communities whose needs often go ignored or deprioritized in the face of local pressures and competing needs.

Testing in Perspective

Much of the opposition to annual standardized testing has conveniently circumvented the core issues of transparency that undergird any discussion of educational equity. Even when teachers and leaders earnestly strive to help all students achieve at high levels, their efforts sometimes land flat. As an educator working in Brooklyn, I wanted to believe that my work was making a difference in students’ lives. I certainly did not need a test score to tell me if a child was comfortable learning an intimidating topic or was engaged. But test results did help me see whether students were closer to mastering the essential academic knowledge their wealthier peers had. If these data showed my students had not progressed, then I was compelled to look more closely at my practice and make adjustments.

To be sure, filling instructional hours with voluminous practice tests and mindless drilling is the equivalent of professional malpractice. District and school leaders should rightly be charged with reducing and eliminating these activities. Every knowledgeable educator understands that the best preparation for standards-based assessment is teaching an aligned curriculum in an engaging manner. Children in low-income communities need stimulating, rigorous, and content-rich learning experiences;
without them, closing learning opportunity gaps will not be possible. In fact, many believe that new, more rigorous assessments hurt poor children and children of color the most. Early results in some states and districts show significantly more of these students performing at low levels on assessments that measure deeper knowledge and critical thinking. The ensuing outcry essentially blames the tests. As a parent and educator of color, however, I believe that the ire should be focused elsewhere—the fact that these assessments are more likely signaling an overreliance on teaching rudimentary skills and a content-weak curriculum that fails to engage students.

Revisiting Accountability

As important as transparency is in aiding parents and teachers and in monitoring national progress toward equity, transparency alone is insufficient. What the framers of NCLB recognized is that knowledge of inequity means nothing without corresponding action to rectify results that fall short: Adults and institutions must accept accountability for the achievement of all students.

Certainly, the details of the accountability requirements in federal law—and in state accountability systems—must change. As states have adopted more rigorous college- and career-ready standards, teachers and leaders need time and support to learn the standards and adjust their practice accordingly. We will need to reset achievement targets so that they are both ambitious and achievable, given the transition to new standards. We need to measure growth, as well as proficiency. And we ought to reduce the obsessive focus on test results by including other measures of college and career readiness—such as the percentage of students who are completing a full college- and career-ready curriculum, the percentage taking Advance Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, for example—and, on a limited basis, other measures of school quality, like climate or student and parent surveys.

But the core commitment at the heart of current law must endure—schools must both communicate to parents how their children are progressing toward state standards and take action to ensure their students are successful. This commitment is to the nation’s parents and taxpayers more broadly: They deserve to know that district and state leaders will plan, support, and intervene when schools are struggling to meet learners’ needs.

Accountability should extend well beyond the chronic low performers that have been many states’ focus since ESEA waivers were instituted. One of the popular misconceptions about school performance is that only about 5 to 10 percent of schools are facing serious achievement challenges or are seeing large differences between groups of students. And given that the average results of higher performing schools and school districts show a trajectory of high performance, some claim that such schools and districts should be exempt from annual assessment of every child in their charge.

Yet there are significant numbers of students with disabilities, young people of color, and children from low-income families who continue to underperform. In fact, an Education Trust analysis of states who received waivers from subgroup accountability provisions in NCLB showed that many schools with top ratings actually experienced a widening of achievement gaps between groups of students during the waiver period. This analysis sounds a clear warning bell: When we cease to hold every school accountable for the achievement of all its students, we will regress in the movement toward educational equity. True commitment to equity requires district and state leaders to attend to low-income kids in every school.

Effective Teaching

Achieving true educational equity takes more than declarations of goals and consequences. Distribution of resources and supports are also essential. While financial resources are certainly critical, one of the most overlooked yet most important in-school resources to close gaps in student performance is quality teaching.

Families from every neighborhood know instinctively that a teacher can greatly influence their child’s disposition toward learning, interest in content, and ultimately mastery of academic subjects. In many higher income communities and schools, lobbying for particular teachers and class placements begins on playgrounds and advances to the principal’s office. Educational leaders and scholars also know that a critical mass of well-supported, effective teachers

Many schools with top ratings actually experienced a widening of achievement gaps between groups of students during the waiver period.
crucially affects student performance. Yet districts across the country continue to fall short in ensuring all kids access to quality teaching.

Low-income students and students of color are still much more likely than their peers to be in classrooms with first- and second-year teachers or those teaching out of field. These students are also more likely to be in a school that experiences regular staff turnover. Such churn translates into a transient flow of teachers that undermines staff cohesion, team effectiveness, and meaningful relationships between the school and families. Too many states have sidestepped the deep work necessary to ameliorate this condition.

State and local education leaders should prioritize district leaders’ regular collection and review of data on teacher inexperience, turnover, absenteeism, and content area licensure. None of these measures individually guarantees either the presence or absence of high-quality teaching. Together, however, they reveal patterns that signal the conditions where there is more likely to be a dearth or abundance of quality teachers. For example, a school staffed with over 55 percent first- or second-year teachers that annually replaces 35 to 50 percent of its staff and habitually hires once school has officially opened is probably not a place where most families would confidently expect their child to have the benefit of experienced teachers. Too few districts and states are systematically reviewing this information, and even fewer are doing so with an eye to the impact on low-income students and schools. As states adjust to more rigorous student assessments, state leaders should take the opportunity to determine how they will be able to use teacher evaluation data to further ensure that more highly effective teachers are matched with young people who need them most.

Using Policy to Move Equity Forward

In every major production, whether it is developing the latest advances in medical technology or assembling an award-winning play, each team member has roles and responsibilities. Social movements in general, and educational equity in particular, are no exceptions. Teachers, principals, and other school-based educators are at the front lines. They orchestrate and implement the day-to-day actions that have the potential to build cultures and practices that support high academic achievement for all kids. District-level leaders and educators are charged with deeply knowing schools so that they can provide accurate supports and eliminate obstacles to high achievement. They are also accountable for building systems that surface and address ineffective practice and chronic low performance.

While these actors are closest to the core work of teaching and learning, federal and state policymakers play many important roles as well: They should continue to call for transparency and accountability in how we are progressing or lagging in the overall goal of equity. State policymakers, as mentioned earlier, can specifically insist on reviewing data on the distribution of experienced, high-quality teachers in their states. State policymakers should also ensure that they have comparable annual data with which to compare the performance of students across their respective states. They should regularly review the data for low-income students and students of color across all schools, not just the bottom 5 to 10 percent of low performers. In addition, state policymakers should review their school accountability systems to ensure they take into account a full complement of disaggregated measures of effectiveness and the extent to which opportunities are extended to all kids, such as the number of Advanced Placement classes offered. State leaders should be sure that resources to support additional supports and opportunities for the neediest students are directed in the most effective ways.

And while the federal government should not enter into the business of the day-to-day management of schools or directing detailed practices, it does serve a vital function as the national canary in the coal mine. Policy has the potential to hold everyone accountable for achieving true results for all kids and making good on the nation’s promise to educate all of them to high levels.

The roots of the United States’ entrenched gap in educational attainment run deep. Latino and black students have lower academic performance, high school graduation rates, and fewer opportunities to participate in courses that prepare them for college than white and Asian students. As a result, Latino and black students have lower college-going and completion rates, especially among those who enroll in four-year higher education institutions. This disparity manifests itself in an education attainment gap, with only 13 percent of young adult Latinos and 21 percent of blacks earning a bachelor’s degree compared with 39 percent of whites.¹

A large proportion of Latino and black students consistently score below the basic achievement level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and math in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades than white and Asian students. For instance, over one-half of black fourth graders and about one-half of Hispanic fourth graders scored below the basic achievement level in 2007. A small proportion of Latino and black students score at or above the proficient level on the NAEP. At the eighth-grade level, 13 percent of black students and 15 percent of Hispanic students scored at or above proficient.

The ongoing achievement gap has a cumulative effect on education attainment. As Latino and black students fall behind academically, some drop out, feeling it is impossible to catch up. As a result, a higher proportion of black and Latino students do not graduate from high school. For the school year 2011–12, 76 percent of Hispanics and 68 percent of blacks graduated from all public high school students, while 93 percent of Asians/Pacific Islanders and 85 percent whites graduated.²

Leaping the College-Ready Gap:
What Can Be Learned from Schools That Focus on Deeper Learning

Learners of all types can see achievement gains when schools remake themselves as centers of deeper learning. Eight schools may be pointing the way to how the nation can finally close the gaps for Latino and black students in beginning and finishing college degrees.

by Monica Martinez and Dennis McGrath
High school students need access to the kind of courses that will enable them to qualify and be successful in postsecondary education. Yet a significant proportion of black and Latino youth do not have access to these kinds of courses. Latinos are consistently underrepresented in prerequisite math courses for college, including Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and/or do not perform at the necessary level. For instance, among 2005 high school graduates, a lower percentage of Hispanic students completed courses in geometry, algebra II, and statistics than white, black, or Asian/Pacific Islander students. And only 6 percent of black and Latino high school graduates completed a calculus course, compared with 30 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and 15 percent of white graduates. While the total number of black and Hispanic students taking an AP exam more than tripled from 1999 to 2008—from 94,000 to 318,000 students—the percentage of Latino and black test takers are still lower than white and Asian students. Nonetheless, Latinos and blacks have the lowest mean scores on the exams: an average 2.42 for Latino and 1.91 for black students. The College Board considers a student to have been “successful” on an exam if he or she receives a 3 or higher.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that there are significant college completion gaps between white students and students of color. Nationwide, 60 percent of whites but just 40 percent of African Americans and 49 percent of Latinos who start college earn bachelor’s degrees six years later. In an address before a joint session of Congress in 2009, President Obama set this goal: “By 2020, the US will once again lead the world in terms of college graduates.” Given the changing US demographics, it will be impossible to achieve this goal without improving the college success rates of black and Latino students.

Deeper Learning for All Students

What does instruction that prepares all students for postsecondary success look like? Certainly, it looks different from the traditional model of education that still underpins much of public school life today. As many have pointed out before, US schools were designed for mass education and efficiency, focused on transmitting information and assigning letter grades to certify learning, and not on developing students as active participants and directors of their own learning.

This system does not prepare students well for the present-day challenges of college, career, and life, in which they must not only master content knowledge but know how, when, and why to apply it. Instead, college and careers increasingly require students to develop what The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation calls deeper learning, a set of competencies that include mastery of core academic content, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, effective communication, self-directed learning, and an academic mind-set. These competencies align with four keys to college and career readiness developed by David T. Conley based on a decade or more of research: cognitive strategies, content knowledge, learning skills and techniques, and transition knowledge and skills.

In Deeper Learning: How Eight Innovative Public Schools Are Transforming Education in the 21st Century, we identify strategies to ensure that students are college ready. Some activities focus on creating a college-going culture, developing an academic mind-set, and teachers knowing students in order to customize learning to meet students’ individual educational needs and aspirations. However, the key strategy that prepares students for college is contextualized learning. Such learning must incorporate relevant, meaningful activities to engage students emotionally and connect what they already know with other subjects.

We identified eight schools that seek to create curious, passionate learners, critical thinkers and problem solvers, effective communicators, and productive collaborators (see box 1). Most of the eight had a high number of low-income and minority students. All were inspiring examples of rich learning environments, community involvement, and students engaged in deeper learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>City, State</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>King Middle School</strong></td>
<td>Portland, Maine</td>
<td>Serves 537 students in grades six through eight. Total minority enrollment is 39 percent, and 54 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Students at King speak 28 languages and come from 32 countries. Fifteen percent of the students are classified as special education and 30 percent as English language learners. It is one of three public middle schools in the Portland Public School District. In 1988 it adopted the Expeditionary Learning model.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MC² STEM High School</strong></td>
<td>Cleveland, Ohio</td>
<td>Founded in 2008 as a public-private partnership. It is a subset of Cleveland Metropolitan School District’s New and Innovative Schools Program. It has 289 students in grades nine through twelve, who attend classes at campuses embedded in business and school sites around the city. Total minority enrollment is 88 percent; 100 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches. About 12 percent are designated as special education, and 1 percent are English language learners. School is in session year-round, with students working for ten weeks and taking three-week breaks.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rochester High School</strong></td>
<td>Rochester, Indiana</td>
<td>Serves 565 students in grades nine through twelve. It is the only public high school. Ninety-two percent of the students are Caucasian, 44 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and 15.2 percent are classified as special education. In 2007, Rochester High School adopted the New Tech Network’s model.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Science Leadership Academy</strong></td>
<td>Philadelphia, Pennsylvania</td>
<td>A magnet STEM high school that opened in September 2006. A partnership between the School District of Philadelphia and The Franklin Institute, the school enrolls 484 students in grades nine through twelve. Total minority enrollment is 68 percent, and 49 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Eight percent are classified as special education and 1 percent as English language learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Avalon School</strong></td>
<td>St. Paul, Minnesota</td>
<td>A charter that opened in 2001 and serves 185 students in grades six through twelve. Total minority enrollment is 30 percent, and 30 percent of all students are on free or reduced-price lunches. Thirty-two percent of the students are classified as special education, and 5 percent are classified as English language learners. The school operates on a teacher-owner governance model, has no principal or director, and uses the Envisions model.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Casco Bay High School</strong></td>
<td>Portland, Maine</td>
<td>Serves 335 students in grades nine through twelve. Total minority enrollment is 31 percent. Fifteen percent are classified as special education, 21 percent are English language learners, and 45 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The school is one of four public high schools in the Portland Public School District. Founded in 2005, CBHS is a school of choice and uses the Expeditionary Learning model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact Academy of Arts &amp; Technology</strong></td>
<td>San Francisco-Oakland area, California</td>
<td>A college preparatory charter school founded in 2007 and operated by Envision Schools. Impact Academy operates within the Hayward Unified School District in the San Francisco-Oakland area. The school serves 460 students in grades nine through twelve. Total minority enrollment is 82 percent, and 66 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Eight percent are classified as special education, and 17 percent are English language learners.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Tech High</strong></td>
<td>San Diego, California</td>
<td>A college preparatory charter high school that serves 562 students in grades nine through twelve. Total minority enrollment is 66 percent, and 37 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Ten percent are classified as special education and 4 percent as English language learners.</td>
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</table>

in self-directed learning. We hope other schools can emulate them, and state policymakers can learn from their example.

**Casco Bay High School**

Learning becomes more meaningful when material is personally relevant and contextualized. At the eight schools we studied, subjects are not taught in isolation; instead, learning is connected to larger themes and concepts across multiple subjects, and students apply their learning to real-world issues and problems. As Susan McCray, an English teacher from Casco Bay High School (CBHS) in Portland, Maine, states, “Everything is related. Everything matters, and we are all working all the time to help them [students] see the connections.”

Perhaps the most innovative CBHS strategy is an intense, weeklong fieldwork experience in West Virginia called Junior Journey. This integrated curricula unit knits English, history, and chemistry and calls upon the teachers to work closely together and draw upon the expertise of partner institutions, and it requires students to learn and apply sophisticated content knowledge and skills.

CBHS teachers have developed integrated projects that explain the role that coal mining has played in rural West Virginia and introduce students to regional music and literature. High school juniors first study a thematic curriculum that focuses on two guiding questions: “How do we resolve our dependence on fossil fuels?” and “How does a community sustain itself in the face of resource degradation and economic adversity?” Chemistry teacher Brooke Teller leads the students through the science of the carbon cycle and the role of coal in providing energy. Students research current and alternative sources of energy and then use what they have learned to develop policy proposals in the humanities course, where they identify regulations, costs, and incentives for different energy sources. The project concludes with a symposium in which the juniors present their proposals and respond to questions from local energy and environmental experts.

In the next trimester, students learn about the history, economy, and culture of the region. McCray uses classic texts, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Native Son*, to give students a broad sense of how literature can reveal the nature of community life. The history teacher uses *Grapes of Wrath* to help students understand how economic conditions affect families and communities. Staff from the 317 Main Street Music Community Center co-teach sessions on Appalachian music.

To help students develop the skills they will need once the Junior Journey begins, McCray partners with the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies to co-teach sessions on interviewing and photography. The final project involves teams of students creating a multimedia documentary that captures the life stories of West Virginians they interview. As Susan McCray puts it, “Students go from geeking out and developing their research skills to being able to tell powerful stories.”

Once in West Virginia, students work at a Habitat for Humanity worksite in the morning and conduct interviews in the afternoon that the Habitat staff arranged with individuals who are waiting for homes. Some members of the student teams are interviewers, some audiotape, some take pictures, and some observe. As one describes, “We got our own training, so everyone had their own skills, but we were really dependent on each other. We had to learn how to work together as a group in a totally new situation.”

After dinner, students look at photographs they shot and review their interviews. The teachers prod them with questions such as: “What is the thread of the story so far, and what will you ask next?”

Once the students return home, each writes an oral history of the West Virginian her group interviewed. Working as a team, the group creates one joint narrative: They compare notes and revise drafts. They then create a three-minute video set to music.

The teachers see this phase of the project as critical. Not only are students engaged in meaningful learning, but teachers provide regular, sustained opportunities for the deliberate practice of deeper learning. This sustained engagement at CBHS dovetails with research that shows expertise is gained over a long period of deliberate effort to improve performance in a specific domain.

At an evening event in Portland at the close of the project, students play bluegrass music and show their videos. Students repeat this performance for the Habitat Volunteer...
Center in West Virginia and other community members via Skype. Because students have to show their work to an authentic audience, they strive to create high-quality work that shows concept and skill mastery.

Evidence That Deeper Learning Works

The American Institutes for Research have substantiated the effectiveness of deeper learning practices on student performance in a series of studies. One surveyed 1,762 students from 22 schools in New York and California serving low-income students and students of color and associated with deeper learning networks. The study demonstrated that attending these schools benefited students, regardless of their background or whether they lived in an urban or suburban district:

- Regardless of their prior level of academic achievement, students attained higher standardized test scores on both state assessments and the OECD PISA-based test. Both assessments measure core content knowledge and problem-solving skills.
- Students are more likely to graduate from high school on time than students in comparison schools.
- Graduates are more likely to enroll in four-year colleges and enroll in more selective institutions.
- Students reported higher levels of collaborative skills, academic engagement, and motivation to learn compared with their peers in schools that were not part of the deeper learning network.

A recent SCOPE study also found that specific high school practices, including instructional relevance, contribute to students’ success in college. Similarly, another study conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond found that a rigorous, coherent instructional program enables all students to overcome barriers often associated with race, poverty, language, or initially low academic skill. All such programs establish high expectations, link performance assessments to clear standards, and teach intellectual and research skills through rigorous coursework that has been made relevant with the application to real-world problems. Further, the study says, “The schools connect students to their communities and their futures through community service, internships, and partnerships with community groups and local colleges. Authentic learning experiences connect to the world outside school.”

Policy Implications

State boards of education can support deeper learning and the necessary instructional shifts through policies that support the following: a continued focus on college- and career-ready standards, professional learning for both teachers and leaders, revamping educator preparation, creating a system of assessments, and reconsidering how time is used for student learning, including expanding the school day.

High standards communicate expectations to educators, parents, and students. Standards like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Next Generation Science Standards can eliminate academic tracks, where only some students are prepared for postsecondary education. The high rate of adoption and implementation of high-quality standards not only helps prepare all students for college; it also aids the transition from rote memorization to inquiry and understanding, critical thinking, problem solving, and construction of viable arguments.

Much of the struggle over implementing the CCSS flows from the fact that support, particularly for professional learning, has been uncoordinated and limited. States should require districts and schools to set aside a percentage of the school year to school-based, teacher-directed professional development or collaborative planning after the creation of a professional development plan based on teachers’ needs. States can access their federal Title II funds to support or help implement these policy recommendations. Professional development should focus on instructional strategies that develop deeper learning, specifically the design, use, and analysis of performance-based formative and summative assessments.

Most important, state policies should encourage schools to create schedules that provide time for teachers to work together to design curricula, create common assessments, and analyze student data and to improve instruction through observing other
classes, providing feedback to one another, and meeting with instructional coaches.

A task force of the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) articulated a vision for the knowledge and skills teachers and principals will need that are consistent with the knowledge and skills we saw displayed in the eight schools we profiled. CCSSO recommends states push for greater alignment of K-12 and teacher preparation offered in higher education and licensure requirements for teachers and principals. States also should advocate rigorous program approval standards to ensure that educator preparation programs recruit candidates based on supply and demand data; have highly selective admissions and exit criteria, including mastery of content; provide high-quality clinical practice throughout a candidate's preparation that includes responsibilities from beginning to end of a school year; and produce quality candidates that can boost student achievement. Additionally, states should provide the resources necessary to support and retain teachers, for example, by investing in residency models and mentoring programs. Ultimately, states should invest in the continuum of the education profession: teacher induction, professional growth, and teacher leadership.

The use of assessment to measure student learning has been criticized since standards-based reform was introduced in the 1980s but has picked up speed with the transition to CCSS. Many states are reconsidering their assessment strategies and asking whether existing assessments are adequate to support the new demands on students. To address gaps in existing assessments, many states should consider using performance assessments, which require students to construct answers, produce products, or perform activities rather than merely selecting from a list of multiple-choice answers. Such assessments will require that states and districts develop an assessment bank of exemplary performance tasks that evaluate standards and deeper learning outcomes.

In addition, schools need the flexibility to reconsider their use of time by restructuring their schedule appropriately and extending the school day. Inquiry-based learning requires longer instructional blocks and opportunities to extend student learning outside school in field-based experiences and in public presentations of classwork. Expanding the school day can provide additional support to students who are struggling in developing their academic proficiency and deeper learning outcomes. Finally, there has to be time for teachers to work together, review student work, plan or integrate curriculum as a team, and participate in other professional learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Minimizing both the achievement gap and education gap for all students, but particularly for black and Latino students, is critical to preserving the country's economic future and strengthening its democracy. A key part of closing these gaps is ensuring that all students have an opportunity to pursue postsecondary success. Providing students with deep, meaningful learning experiences is an essential ingredient toward realizing this vision. Students from all walks of life that can master content knowledge, think critically and solve problems, communicate effectively, collaborate productively, and develop a strong academic mind-set will be well on their way toward success in college and careers.

2http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp. These graduation rates were derived from Department of Education figures using the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR), which represents the number of high school diplomas expressed as a percentage of the estimated freshman class four years earlier.
6Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Matthias Faeth, Mind, Brain, and Education: Neuroscience Implications for the Classroom (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press, 2010).
Arkansas’s Fight for Real Equity

Even as states made educational advances in recent years, they have often struggled to close achievement gaps between white students and students of color and between wealthier and poorer students. Arkansas is a state that has unquestionably made great strides in overall educational adequacy since the Arkansas Supreme Court made a stream of decisions known as the Lake View cases starting in 2002. By some measures, and particularly in the earliest grades, Arkansas’s strategies have helped to close the achievement gap more than other states’ efforts have. Still, major gaps remain. Arkansas’s efforts to produce true educational equity in recent years is a story in which success produced by promising strategies mixes with frustrating inaction in key areas. Moving forward, new political forces have complicated the fight for educational equity in Arkansas, as the lessons of the Lake View era feel “back in the day” for a new generation of state policymakers.

The Lake View Era

In November 2002, the Arkansas Supreme Court affirmed most of the lower trial court ruling on the adequacy and equity of the state’s school-funding scheme in the case of Lake View School District No. 25 of Phillips County, Arkansas, et al. v. Governor Mike Huckabee, et al. Obviously frustrated by ongoing state foot-dragging on the issue in the aftermath of previous court directives, the court clearly stated that the state had failed to live up to the equal-protection provisions of the state constitution, as well as its requirement that the state provide a “general, suitable, and efficient system of free public schools.” As the court said in its conclusion, “No longer can the State operate on a ‘hands-off’ basis regarding how state money is spent in local school districts and what the effect of that spending is.”

More than four years of legal and political hot potato ensued among two governors, the General Assembly, the Supreme Court, and special court masters appointed to evaluate the state’s progress in ensuring educational adequacy and equity. Nonetheless, major reforms occurred during this period: the prioritizing of educational spending over all other components of the state budget, significant funding increases, stronger targeting of state funds to high-needs schools including those schools with large percentages of students eligible for the National School Lunch Act (NSLA) program, and mandatory closure of all school districts with fewer than 350 students. At moments when the General Assembly wavered in its commitment, the Supreme Court stepped in and retook control of the case.

Following the 2007 regular session of the General Assembly—during which base funding increased beyond the amount deemed necessary for an adequate educate and $456 million was appropriated to meet schools’ facility needs—the Supreme Court declared the case complete in late May 2007: “[W]e are now able to direct the issuance of the mandate in this case due to the hard work of the Masters, the General Assembly, and the executive branch. This court, the people of Arkansas, and the generations to come are indebted to them for their commitment to education.”

During the Lake View era, Arkansas took significant strides to improve the rigor of its curricular standards, improve teacher quality, and provide high-quality early childhood education (even though this last component was not mandated by the Lake View case). The US Department of Education recognized Arkansas for its leadership in implementing rigorous curricular standards, including requiring four years of math for high school students. Arkansas’s teacher pay rose to as high as 32nd in the nation though it has since fallen to 44th (not taking cost of living into account) in the most recent data. Still, Arkansas’s teacher pay rose more than that of all but 17 states between the start of the century and
2012, according to the National Education Association.\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Education Week} applauded Arkansas for its policies to promote teacher quality. Finally, Arkansas invested in the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program—a distinctly high-quality program in the eyes of analysts of early childhood education that provides pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds and is free to those from families with incomes under 200 percent of poverty.

The benefits of this increased attention and investment have clearly manifested themselves. Overall, from 2003 to 2013, Arkansas students dramatically improved their performance on the Nation's Report Card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Arkansas Benchmark Exam, and the ACT. Most impressive, Arkansas students moved from 26 percent proficient/advanced to 39 percent proficient/advanced on the NAEP fourth grade math assessment, nearing the national average of 42 percent. Arkansas has consistently improved its performance on NAEP since the Lake View era. Additionally, the average ACT score for Arkansas students grew from 17 in 2001 to 20.4 in the most recent data; moreover, 93 percent of Arkansas students take the ACT compared with 57 percent nationally, meaning that less self-selection is present in the Arkansas ACT data.

Moving from Adequacy to Equity

Thus, on both the input and output sides of the equation, the Lake View era helped Arkansas achieve an adequate public school system. However, as shown in a report by Keith Nitta and me in 2008, Arkansas lagged in addressing its racial and income achievement gaps.\textsuperscript{2} Indeed, even as achievement gaps in other states closed, Arkansas's persisted. Our report identified a handful of strategies that research suggested as showing the greatest promise to narrow what remained large gaps:

- expanded investment in early childhood education;\textsuperscript{3}
- ongoing commitment to improved facilities,\textsuperscript{4} challenging standards, and teacher quality;\textsuperscript{5}
- new investments in high-quality out-of-school experiences,\textsuperscript{6} class-size reduction (CSR) programs in the earliest grades,\textsuperscript{7} school health clinics,\textsuperscript{8} and genuine parental engagement;\textsuperscript{9} and
- prioritization of those charter schools employing proven strategies for closing the achievement gap.\textsuperscript{10}

Partly as a result of investment in a handful of the strategies discussed in that report, achievement gaps in Arkansas have been reduced across the board at the fourth grade level during the seven years since that report was published (table 1). The closing of achievement gaps at the youngest grades are even more pronounced when examining the 2013 Arkansas state benchmark exam: While 84.5 percent of white third graders could read proficiently, 77 percent of Latino students and 68 percent of African-American third graders could. This represents both a significant overall increase in performance in third-grade reading proficiency in recent years and a reduction of the achievement gaps by race and ethnicity.

At the eighth grade level, the changes are decidedly more mixed, with the race and poverty gaps actually expanding in mathematics. This suggests that, while the investments in pre-K and other programs that disproportionately affect younger children continue to show themselves to be a good investment, Arkansas must focus its energies on interventions that can limit the reemergence of achievement gaps in the middle school years and beyond, particularly in STEM-related fields.

Unfortunately, those focused on closing the achievement gap in Arkansas are deciding more mixed, with the race and poverty gaps actually expanding in mathematics. This suggests that, while the investments in pre-K and other programs that disproportionately affect younger children continue to show themselves to be a good investment, Arkansas must focus its energies on interventions that can limit the reemergence of achievement gaps in the middle school years and beyond, particularly in STEM-related fields.

Unfortunately, those focused on closing the achievement gap in Arkansas are spending a good deal of energy defending successful programs rather than implementing additional programs that have proven successful in closing the gap. (The exception is the education system's commitment to high-quality standards: Despite some grassroots opposition, Arkansas has remained committed to the Common Core and is moving forward on the Next Generation Science Standards.)

Most important, despite a series of longitudinal studies showing an array of cognitive and social benefits to participants in the program,\textsuperscript{11} ABC funding for early education has been flat since reaching $111 million per year in 2008. ABC serves about 38 percent of eligible children in the state. (When combined with the Head Start program, about 56 percent of eligible three- and four-year-olds receive high-quality pre-K in Arkansas.) The flat funding is beginning to affect providers, with closures of private
local expenditures, school-based health clinics have begun to emerge in significant numbers. However, they are disproportionately in schools with smaller numbers of at-risk students, with only a handful found in the poorer southern and eastern parts of the state.

Finally, disparities in property tax values in the state mean that gaps in teacher pay and school facilities are reemerging. First, while overall (and starting) teacher salaries have increased in the state over the last decade, districts with wealthier tax bases are investing increasing amounts of their funds in teacher pay and are advantaged in the race for high-quality teachers. The state Bureau of Legislative Research reports that 95 out of 239 districts had difficulty in recruiting high-quality teachers due to their scarcity; often these districts were left to rely on programs such as Teach for America and in using waivers to allow teachers to teach out of area. While teacher recruitment programs are being piloted in challenged districts, Arkansas has yet to find the key to pulling teachers to disproportionately high-needs areas. Second, while Arkansas made a major investment in school facilities during the Lake View era, those monies are beginning to run short, leaving districts with limited tax bases sharply disadvantaged when it comes to building and repair of physical facilities and, increasingly, when it comes to meeting emerging technology needs. In recent months, school broadband access has become a particularly intense political fight between those advocating for providing schools access to the state high-speed network (ARE-ON) and those arguing that a private provider model makes the most sense for the state.

facilities beginning to rise. President Obama’s new federal pre-K initiative will result in new pre-K funding in the state, but it must be used to reach new students rather than boosting the $4,860 per student now available through ABC. The state’s categorical National School Lunch Act (NSLA) program was created during the Lake View era as a way to help high-poverty districts reduce the achievement gap. Indeed, the program’s funds may appropriately be spent by districts on a variety of interventions grounded in research: additional pre-K programming, class-size reduction, out-of-school programs, support for especially challenged students, and school-based health clinics. Over time, however, the list of appropriate uses of NSLA dollars has grown to include areas of expenditure that lack such a clear connection to closing the achievement gap (e.g., new technology). While a variety of legislative bodies, state consultants, and research groups have noted the problematic “lack of focus” with NSLA funds, no action has been taken to enhance the program’s efficacy.

The scattershot uses of NSLA dollars mean that Arkansas lacks ongoing state funding for afterschool and summer school programs, class-size reduction strategies, or school-based health clinics. In 2011, the Positive Youth Development Act created the first state program for the operation of community-based, high-quality out-of-school programs. Unfortunately, the program—while ready to go—remains unfunded. While some class-size reduction strategies (including the engagement of paraprofessionals in classrooms) have been put in place through the NSLA program, no state program targets the lowest performing schools, as has been shown to work in other states. Through grant funding and

Table 1. NAEP Test Score Gaps (in test score points), White versus African American and by Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4th Grade Reading Income Gap</th>
<th>4th Grade Reading Racial Gap</th>
<th>4th Grade Math Income Gap</th>
<th>4th Grade Math Racial Gap</th>
<th>8th Grade Reading Income Gap</th>
<th>8th Grade Reading Racial Gap</th>
<th>8th Grade Math Income Gap</th>
<th>8th Grade Math Racial Gap</th>
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<td>2007 Arkansas</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>2013 Arkansas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in gap out of 300 points</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</table>
While this story smacks of missed opportunities in terms of expanding and targeting those programs shown to have success in promoting educational equity, it is important to note that Arkansas has shown renewed dedication—in both its Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) waiver and in state academic distress rules—to holding districts and schools accountable for leaving subgroups of students behind. When schools are declared as needing improvement (under the ESEA waiver) or in academic distress (under state law), the state has responded by ratcheting up engagement in schools through the ongoing presence of state school improvement specialists and, in more dire situations, through state direction from the newly created Office of Intensive Support. In recent years, the state board of education, in addition to stiffening its definition of “academic distress,” has taken over several districts—large and small, urban and rural—that are not performing for significant portions of their students.

The Lake View era is clearly over in Arkansas. The governors who led it were retired by term limits. Because of legislative term limits, only a handful of legislators from the era remain policymakers, and the state supreme court itself has been reconfigured. Thus, while the court precedent remains the law of Arkansas and key statutory elements remain in place, a new generation of decision makers lacks a personal link to the era. Especially when it comes to the challenging work of promoting educational equity, it is therefore crucial that educational advocates in the state spend time educating these new leaders on both the constitutional requirement and the clear benefit of strategic investments in programs and strategies that promise to close achievement gaps. For when a healthy majority of a state’s public school students are from groups that have traditionally been left behind, separating educational adequacy and equity becomes truly impossible.

3See, for example, Kwanghee Jung et al., Longitudinal Effects of the Arkansas Better Chance Program: Findings from the First Grade through the Fourth Grade (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University National Institute for Early Education Research, May 2013), http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Arkansas%20Longitudinal%20Report%20May2013n.pdf
4Both anecdotal evidence (see, e.g., Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities, New York: Crown, 1991) and more systematic analyses (General Accounting Office, School Facilities: America’s Schools Not Designed or Equipped for 21st Century, GAO Report number HEHS-95-95, Washington, DC, 1995) have shown that the school buildings used by lower-income American students have major deficiencies compared with those used by their richer peers. Employing different methods to analyze school “quality,” a number of studies have shown that the overall health of public school facilities relates to the academic performance of students there (e.g., G. J. Earthman and L. Lemasters, “Review of Research on the Relationship Between School Buildings, Student Achievement, and Student Behavior,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International, New York, 1996).
5In the National Commission of Teaching & America’s Future (NCTAF) report What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future (1996), the authors reported that in a study of 1,000 school districts, each additional dollar spent on more highly qualified teachers had a larger impact on student achievement than did any other any other use of school funds.
7The most convincing evidence supporting CSR interventions comes from Tennessee. Researchers used a randomized control trial to evaluate the STAR Program. They concluded that students in small 13–17 student classes outperformed students in regular and regular-with-aide classrooms by approximately .20 of a standard deviation. More important for the achievement gap, the effects were nearly twice as large for racial minorities as for white students. The effects continued beyond the third grade. Graduation rates for students in the smaller classes were 11 percent higher than those assigned to regular classes. The impact was even bigger for low-income students in small classes, whose graduation rates were 18 percent higher than their peers in regular-sized classes (Finn et al., “Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating from High School,” Journal of Educational Psychology 9, 2005).
8Access to health care is a key to reducing chronic absenteeism in schools. For more on chronic absenteeism, see Martha Philbeck Musser, Taking Attendance Seriously: How School Absences Undermine Student and School Performance in New York City (New York: The Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc., 2011).
10The debate over the comparative effectiveness of charter schools is a ferocious one nationally. In Arkansas, charters have had a mixed record. Some, such as KIPP Delta with several locations in the Arkansas Delta, are excellent, but others have been closed because they failed to meet basic performance standards.
12Both anecdotal evidence (see, e.g., Jonathan Kozol, Savage Inequalities, New York: Crown, 1991) and more systematic analyses (General Accounting Office, School Facilities: America’s Schools Not Designed or Equipped for 21st Century, GAO Report number HEHS-95-95, Washington, DC, 1995) have shown that the school buildings used by lower-income American students have major deficiencies compared with those used by their richer peers. Employing different methods to analyze school “quality,” a number of studies have shown that the overall health of public school facilities relates to the academic performance of students there (e.g., G. J. Earthman and L. Lemasters, “Review of Research on the Relationship Between School Buildings, Student Achievement, and Student Behavior,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council of Educational Facility Planners International, New York, 1996).
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Laura Doherty runs four public charter schools in some of Baltimore’s toughest neighborhoods. Every year she and her principals make recruiting a priority. They know students will lose out if they don’t hire effective teachers. Selecting the right teachers fosters the following:

- high expectations, which creates a culture that encourages all students to learn;
- good student behavior, making learning easier and schools safer;
- satisfied parents and steady enrollment, leading to school stability;
- opportunities to collaborate, which attracts other effective teachers, ensuring that students get great teachers year after year; and, most important,

- effective instruction, leading to greater gains in student learning.

Hiring teachers who have the skills to build this environment in schools where so many children are growing up in poverty is extraordinarily challenging. Yet Doherty does not accept that instruction in high-poverty schools should look all that different from teaching in schools with middle- and high-income students. “Instruction should be clear,” says Doherty, president of the Baltimore Curriculum Project, a nonprofit that runs a network of charter schools. “Interactions should be positive and respectful, and all students should be challenged.”

When hiring teachers, Doherty looks for qualities that every principal seeks but that are especially critical when teaching children who are growing up in poverty:

Students in high-needs schools need and deserve the best teachers. These students often have fewer opportunities outside of school to learn, less support at home, and are at a greater risk of not graduating or going to college. Some high-needs schools are doing what it takes to recruit well-trained teachers—and to keep them.

by Kate Walsh, Hannah Putman, and Autumn Lewis
Candidates need to understand how to engage students. They must be able to create routine and structure. Persistence, grit, and organizational skills are critical. And Doherty and her team want evidence that applicants will be sensitive to the obstacles their students face while also being capable of tailoring instruction to help students make big academic gains.

Doherty is vying for these talented, well-trained candidates alongside every other school principal. Applicants with proven track records and new teachers coming out of schools with strong reputations for training teachers have choices about where to teach. Consequently, the least experienced and least effective teachers too often are working in the highest needs schools.

This trend is well documented: Teachers at high-needs schools have fewer years of experience—a difference of almost two years—and have spent almost two fewer years teaching at their current school. Similarly, teachers at high-needs schools are more likely to leave for other jobs. Teacher turnover makes it difficult to create a stable culture in a school, and it can lead to lower student achievement.

This trend can be reversed. Concerted efforts to find well-prepared new teachers and to recruit and retain time-tested teachers can ensure students in high-needs schools have excellent teachers.

**Training That Counts**

Ensuring that high-needs schools get their fair share of effective teachers is no small feat. But this task would be easier if all new teachers were trained to be effective with high-needs students, no matter where they plan to teach. While some aspects of effective teaching are constant across all schools, schools with more low-income students have special challenges. A lesson plan for a class where half of the students are two years behind in reading will look different from one for a class where only a few students struggle to read.

Moreover, while many teacher preparation programs pay tremendous attention to the importance of diversity and teaching for social justice, too often teacher training around this issue consists of only talking about equity issues and employing various course-based exercises such as journal reflections to help teacher candidates overcome prejudices and respect diversity.

Leading teacher educators concede there is a lack of evidence for the efficacy of this approach: "It is very clear that empirical examination of the relationship between teacher preparation for diversity and pupils' learning and other outcomes is largely uncharted territory in the field of research on teacher education." Requiring teacher candidates to write reflections on how to inspire children in poverty is not the same as training them to plan lessons that lead students to master a new concept. Specific skill sets and approaches can reach children who may not have books at home or who have difficulty delaying gratification. Philosophizing about the importance of providing low-income and minority children an excellent education is a poor substitute for mastering the actual skills and techniques that can bridge the achievement gap. An institution's focus on "teaching for social justice" serves only to create teachers who want to help all students succeed, with no guarantee that they know how to do so.

Direct observation and supervised practice in classrooms with teachers who have demonstrated their effectiveness in high-needs settings is essential to prepare teacher candidates for jobs made tougher by the obstacles poverty creates. This training is crucial for reasons other than skill-building. Too many graduates come out of teacher prep programs believing that they cannot hold children living in poverty to high standards. When they learn from teachers who do not use poverty as an excuse for low achievement and whose students are succeeding, they see their role and responsibility differently (box 1).

Ensuring that teacher candidates receive this experience is not so simple. Accreditation bodies identify the ability to teach in diverse settings as an important goal for prospective teachers. For example, both the former National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and its replacement, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), established standards that teacher candidates have experience working in diverse field placements. Yet neither sets clear criteria for what these diverse experiences should look like.

Little information exists about whether preparation programs require practice and experiential learning in successful high-needs schools. The *Teacher Prep Review*, developed by the National Council on Teacher Quality...
Districts then can use this information to work with programs so that more student teachers are placed in high-achieving, high-poverty schools. In addition, districts can and should vet student teachers before placement to ensure they have learned the fundamentals of classroom management and instruction. This screening makes it more likely that student teachers will become successful new teachers, and it also puts pressure on programs to strengthen the preparation they provide candidates prior to student teaching.

Before the Classroom

As central as a candidate’s student teaching experience is, it should not be the first introduction to classroom strategies and skills. For example, too few programs instruct new teachers in how to teach elementary reading and math. As a result, the chance to close the achievement gap in these critical subjects early in a child’s career—before the gulf is overwhelming—is missed.

Similarly, teachers need to learn how to establish clear rules, routines, and positive reinforcement to prevent behaviors that lead to high rates of suspensions, especially among minority students. It is not a big leap to presume that
inadequate teacher preparation in classroom management can lead to troubling levels of exclusionary discipline.9

New teachers regularly report being surprised by students’ behavior. Too often, a novice teacher’s reflex is to be reactive rather than proactive, says Baltimore Curriculum Project’s Doherty, “focusing on punishments and consequences.” Teachers are more successful, Doherty argues, if they start with this perspective: “I’m going to set a tone, set expectations, and teach the behaviors I need.”

Again, preparation programs must explicitly teach these classroom management skills, ask candidates to practice them, and concentrate on them in fieldwork. For example, student teachers could be assigned to count how many times a cooperating teacher praises students versus reprimanding them. The numbers can be telling, illustrating a practice that will memorably inform a new teacher’s instruction.

When making hiring decisions, principals, human resource professionals, and administrators should not take teacher prep programs at their word that they are giving candidates the skills and experience they need to close achievement gaps. Instead, they should ask direct questions about the type of training their teachers have received (box 2).

State school boards can assist this process by providing information on the quality of teacher preparation programs and by requiring that prep programs share this information when it is not readily available. They can provide measures of student growth and achievement linked back to the preparation programs that graduated those students’ teachers. They can also track where different preparation programs send their student teachers. Publishing this information would allow school districts and principals to make informed decisions about how to target their recruitment.

Moreover, many state school boards are empowered to set clear guidelines for what skills and content teacher candidates must learn in their programs.10 When preparation programs
fail to provide that training, state boards can choose not to approve those programs.

**Incentives for the Best Teachers**

Selecting novice teachers from strong preparation programs is critical but not sufficient. Districts must also look at where their most effective teachers are assigned. Are they clustered in some of the lower-needs schools? Are they shying away from the schools with more low-income students? If so, monetary incentives may help (especially in the form of higher salaries as opposed to one-time bonuses). However, teachers are often drawn to other forms of recognition, such as teaching positions specifically designed for more experienced teachers, leadership roles, and opportunities to work with other skilled teachers.

State boards can work with districts to build incentive programs that attract strong teachers into high-needs schools. States should also have some candid conversations with school districts to learn if existing policies are hampering efforts to attract or retain these skilled teachers.

Some districts are doing particularly well in designing programs to attract talented teachers to high-needs schools. Typically, their efforts are multipronged, offering additional professional development, leadership opportunities, and higher pay. Washington, DC’s IMPACT teacher evaluation program offers substantially larger bonuses to highly effective teachers working in high-poverty schools compared with those offered to teachers in low-poverty schools. In Boston, schools with cohorts of teachers recruited and trained through the Turnaround Teacher Teams have seen improved student achievement in English language arts and math.

**Retaining Teachers**

Promoting equity also requires retaining effective teachers once they are hired. High-needs schools often suffer from a reputation as difficult places to work. Many are seen as schools where new teachers “cut their teeth” before moving on to schools with students who face fewer challenges. This perception accurately reflects real workforce trends, and unless administrators help all teachers succeed in high-needs schools, the practice will persist.

Teacher inexperience and turnover can significantly impede student learning. Teachers improve substantially in their first three to five years in the classroom, so students who have novice teachers year after year are repeatedly put at a disadvantage. Research also has linked

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**Box 2. Can Your School Districts Answer These Questions?**

- Which teacher prep programs ensure that student teachers get regular observations and feedback?
- Which programs instruct their candidates in how to teach early reading and elementary math?
- Which programs teach candidates how to manage their classrooms and make sure they practice these skills?
- Which programs give candidates experience working in high-needs, high-performing schools?
- Which programs have a track record of producing effective teachers?
teacher turnover to lower student math and English scores, with the most dramatic effect in schools with more low-performing students. Recruitment and retention indisputably drive the inequitable distribution of the best teachers. A 2014 NCTQ report on the Miami-Dade County School District compared two areas educating the highest concentration of both poor and African-American students with the county’s seven other areas. In one of the high-needs areas, one in every seven teachers is in her first year or two of teaching. In contrast, the area with a tenth as many African-American students and fewer students living in poverty reports that only one teacher out of every fifty is new.

Miami-Dade County students in these two highest-needs areas also experience the highest rates of teacher turnover. Teachers in those districts resign at a higher rate than the rest of Miami-Dade, with 22 percent of all resignations in the county coming from just one of the highest-poverty areas. Overall, teachers in Miami-Dade performed very well on the district’s new teacher effectiveness evaluations, with the vast majority of teachers being rated as effective or highly effective. The two poorest areas, however, had the lowest percentage of highly rated teachers.

Miami-Dade County’s struggle is a familiar one for school districts. For some, this combination of novice teachers and high turnover creates a cycle of poor performance that is hard to break. Novice teachers want to teach where they can learn from effective colleagues, and effective teachers want to teach where they are among other effective teachers. If neither condition is met, recruiting strong teachers and ensuring high student achievement will remain elusive.

Some districts, however, have found ways to break free of this cycle. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC, the Project L.I.F.T. initiative recruits talented principals who bring along staff teams and offers career advancement to teachers while allowing them to stay in the classroom. This recognition for successful teachers who stay in the classroom can be powerfully motivating. Mentoring programs can also increase retention for new teachers. The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP) offers new teachers the opportunity to learn from an effective, experienced mentor and to receive regular feedback. After four years, 92 percent of SCNTP teachers remained in the classroom, compared with 67 percent nationally.

As these models show, recruiting and keeping good teachers is not impossible, but districts do need to be intentional in their efforts:

- Target recruitment to teacher preparation programs that place a high value on the skills needed to teach in high-needs schools.
- Identify schools that are both high-performing and high-needs and encourage these schools to host student teachers; watch the candidates closely and hire the best.
- Hire from teacher prep programs whose candidates spend time student teaching in high-needs schools.
- When interviewing candidates, evaluate whether aspiring teachers have important skills in classroom management. If they do, they’re more likely to stick around.
- Provide financial incentives and leadership opportunities to help keep the best teachers in the classrooms.
- Work with state boards to gather the data needed to make these strategic decisions.

**Getting It Done**

Teaching is a difficult profession in ideal circumstances. But the job requires immense talent and training when students have the overwhelming challenges associated with poverty. Teachers will succeed only if they’re given excellent preparation and valuable fieldwork experience with effective teachers. School boards and leaders can and must insist that teacher prep programs step up to this challenge. If their teachers do not receive the training and support they need, students will continue to be denied the education that will ensure they meet and exceed high expectations.

1Teachers at schools with 75 percent or more students approved for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) have 12.7 years of teaching experience, compared with 14.4 years of experience for teachers at schools with less than 35 percent of students approved for FRL. Teachers at schools with 75 percent of students approved for FRL have spent 6.8 years at their current school versus 8.6 years for teachers at schools with less than 35 percent FRL. R. Goldring et al., Characteristics of Public and Private Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in the United States: Results from the 2011–12 Schools and Staffing Survey, NCES 2013-314, (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), retrieved 11


8The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) finds persistent gaps in reading and mathematics between white and black students (A. Vanneman et al., Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, [NCES 2009-455], National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2009), and between white and Hispanic students (F. C. Hemphill and A. Vanneman, Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NCES 2011-459], National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education. Washington, DC, 2010).

9The US Department of Education reports that “black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 5 percent of white students are suspended compared with 16 percent of black students. American Indian and Native-Alaskan students are also disproportionately suspended and expelled.” US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot (School Discipline), 2014, retrieved February 2015 from http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crcc-discipline-snapshot.pdf?utm_source=JFSF-Newsletter&utm_campaign=06fe101c7e-e-Newsletter_July_2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2ce9971b29-06fe101c7e-195307941

10Fewer than two in five elementary, secondary, and special education teacher preparation programs provide student teachers with feedback on their use of essential classroom management techniques (J. Greenberg et al., 2014 Teacher Prep Review). Only one in five programs address all of the “big five” of classroom management (setting and teaching rules, establishing routines, reinforcing positive behavior, addressing misbehavior, and maintaining student engagement) through course lectures or assignments (J. Greenberg et al., Training Our Future Teachers: Classroom Management, Washington, DC, National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014, retrieved March 2015 from http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/Future_Teachers_Classroom_Management_NCTQ_Report).


19For useful data on this topic, see NCTQ’s analysis at http://www.nctq.org/teacherPrep/review2014/findings/ByTrainingArea/index.jsp.


National Association of State Boards of Education • May 2015

Efforts to close the achievement gap have focused on improving student outcomes without always taking a close look at some of the policies and practices that keep it open. Nowhere is the gap more acute than in the educational experiences of male black students. If black male ninth graders continue to perform at levels documented by the US Department of Education in 2009, about half will not graduate with their current ninth grade class, and about 20 percent will reach the age of 25 without obtaining a high school diploma or GED.

Two other distinctions in the experiences of black males in school deserve scrutiny: According to the Civil Rights Data Collection report for the 2011–12 school year, black boys are suspended almost four times more than white males. Moreover, they are more likely to be placed in special education than any other race or gender and more likely to face exclusionary discipline and school-based arrest.

Research suggests that black boys’ transition to and through the ninth grade shapes their odds of graduating from high school. Approximately 258,047 of the 4.1 million ninth graders in the United States are black males. Among this group of ninth-grade black boys, about 23,000 receive special education services, more than 37,000 are enrolled in honors classes, and for nearly 46,000, a health care professional or school official has told them that they have at least one disability. Black boys are the most likely group to receive special education services and the least likely to be enrolled in honors classes. Across black, white, and Hispanic males and females, 6.5 percent are receiving special education services, 9.7 percent have an individualized education plans (IEPs), and 25.6 percent are in honors classes. For black boys, 9.1 percent are receiving special education services, 14.7 percent have IEPs, and 14.5 percent are enrolled in honors classes (table 1).

Having a specific disability increases the odds that any child will receive special education services. Among black male ninth graders who are currently receiving special education services, 84 percent have a disability and 15.5 percent have never been diagnosed. Among those not receiving special education services, 80 percent have never been indicated for a disability, and 20 percent have. That is to say, black males are no more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than white and Hispanic males (table 2).

Having a disability is related to other negative consequences, particularly for black males. Students of all races and genders with disabilities are at least three times more likely to drop out of school than their counterparts without disabilities. Students with disabilities are more likely to 1) repeat a grade, 2) be suspended or expelled from school, 3) have the school contact the parent about problem behavior, and 4) have the school contact the parent about poor performance. On a scale that includes these four risk factors and adding 5) special education and 6) having an IEP, black boys without disabilities were likely to indicate the presence of at least one factor, and those with disabilities claimed between three and four. Black males without disabilities indicated more risk factors than others without disabilities, and black males with disabilities indicated more risk factors than any other group of students (figure 1).

Nevertheless, the trajectory of black males with disabilities is not uniformly...
For some students, an alternative learning style gives them a competitive edge over more conventional learners. For instance, a visual learner may encode lessons in their memory using pictures or use “concept mapping” to invigorate mundane text. Every disability has a negative and positive offprint. In some instances, children with autism can leverage their repetitive behaviors and extraordinary attention to random objects into the development of mathematic and artistic abilities. While some easy-to-bore ADHD students have an irresistible impulse to create the havoc necessary to stimulate their insatiable nervous systems, others may channel this energy by injecting humor and anecdotes into their lessons or push their teachers to create analogies. And while they process volumes of dense text with difficulty, they may be the best at applying discrete concepts to novel situations. Many studies suggest that, dismal. Those in the ninth grade are more likely to be enrolled in honors classes than to receive special education services. Among the nearly 40,000 black male ninth graders enrolled in honors courses, 15 percent have been told they had a disability by a health professional or the school at least once. Three percent of black males in honors courses have been told they have a learning disability, 3 percent autism, and 6 percent ADD or ADHD.

### How Black Boys with Disabilities End Up in Honors Classes

Having a broad understanding of the nature of disabilities paints a better understanding of how black boys with disabilities end up in honors classes. A disability does not have to be debilitating. For instance, a learning disorder may be more aptly described as an alternative learning style. For some students, an alternative learning style gives them a competitive edge over more conventional learners. For instance, a visual learner may encode lessons in their memory using pictures or use “concept mapping” to invigorate mundane text. Every disability has a negative and positive offprint. In some instances, children with autism can leverage their repetitive behaviors and extraordinary attention to random objects into the development of mathematic and artistic abilities. While some easy-to-bore ADHD students have an irresistible impulse to create the havoc necessary to stimulate their insatiable nervous systems, others may channel this energy by injecting humor and anecdotes into their lessons or push their teachers to create analogies. And while they process volumes of dense text with difficulty, they may be the best at applying discrete concepts to novel situations. Many studies suggest that,
learning disorder might be expected to keep up with other students or be suspended for resisting a learning process incompatible to his own. False positive children may be relegated to learning environments that neither stimulate nor challenge them, which increases the likelihood of disengagement and poor behavior. Black males are more likely than other groups to experience both false negative and false positive diagnoses, due to culturally biased assessments, unique styles of expression, and environmental stressors.7 Acknowledging this disparity in no way denigrates the schools and teachers who provide quality special education services designed to remediate educational challenges and help students reintegrate and fully participate in mainstream classes. Rather, it should focus an appropriate response to the overrepresentation of black males as recipients of those services.

Policy Implications

Policymakers have struggled repeatedly to address the fact that the American education system often fails to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. Getting to the heart of the obstacles these students face requires grappling with the related conundrum: that students of color are at the same time over- and underidentified as having disabilities.8 Black males with and without disabilities can excel in schools that have adequate opportunities for diverse learners and a structure that supports personal and emotional growth and development. Contrarily, schools that view disability and emotional adjustment difficulties as enduring
pathologies that require permanent segregation from “normal” students will stunt academic growth and development for an important segment of their student population. The nearly 6,500 black male ninth graders with a history of disability who are currently enrolled in honors classes likely benefited from patient, diligent parents who instilled a sense of agency within them and a compassionate school that accommodates a diversity of learners. They are also likely to have some protection from adverse environmental conditions, such as community violence, which can compound a disability’s symptoms.

Black males are no more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than Hispanic or white males, yet they are more likely than any other race or gender to be suspended, repeat a grade, or be placed in special education. Having a disability increases these dropout risk factors for all students. However, the tenuous status of black males in schools nationally appears to extend beyond issues of ability.

One important caveat: Some studies suggest that some dropout risk factors do not predict dropout for black males with the precision that it does for white males. For instance, frequency of suspensions has a much stronger association with dropping out and delinquency for white males than it does for black males.9 The larger implication is unsettling: While suspensions are reserved for only the most deviant white male students, they appear to be interwoven into the normal fabric of black males’ school experiences.

Black males tend to bring a cultural experience to the classroom different from that of their white peers. Many see the world through a lens colored not only by self-perception but by how society depicts them. Those who daily experience violence and poverty bring another layer of complexity to their learning experiences.

State and local policymakers can help to close the achievement gap by adopting and supporting policies that foster an education as diverse as the ideas and experiences that each student brings to the classroom. These policies should promote positive school climates, deeper learning, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. All students need safe, nurturing learning environments that emphasize academic and emotional development coupled with high-quality instruction designed to expand their skill sets and interests. Schools that invest resources into these practices prepare not only black males but all students for college, careers, and civic life.

In addition, state boards, state departments of education, and local school districts should review on a regular basis their special education systems to ensure that the students who need special education receive the right services and that all other students are appropriately classified. Finally, cultural competency standards should be an integral part of teacher and administrator preparation and training. School personnel that have access to these types of professional development opportunities can increase their cultural knowledge and help ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

By gaining an understanding of those with the greatest distance to go to bridge the achievement gap, US educators and policymakers can devise better ways to ensure that all students are engaged in the classroom and prepared for postsecondary success. Exploring how black boys with disabilities end up in honors classes while others without disabilities end up in special education may help us gain a better understanding of an enduring achievement gap problem, as well as reveal hidden solutions for improving educational attainment among school-aged black males.

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Sooner or later, talk of closing achievement gaps turns to education finance—specifically, fixing widespread disparities in school funding within individual states. After all, if districts don’t have enough money, and if states don’t distribute it fairly across districts, it hardly seems likely that this deep laceration in the flesh of the nation—one that tends to follow racial and socioeconomic lines—will ever be stitched together.

In policyspeak, committing sufficient resources to educate all students to desired academic levels is referred to as adequacy. The fair distribution of those resources is called equity. More specifically, vertical equity occurs when resources are distributed in a way that accounts for the

Resource disparities have figured prominently in discussions about closing achievement gaps. If a state such as Pennsylvania, whose disparities in per-pupil spending have been the subject of recent news reports, gets serious about funding schools equitably and adequately, will it see the hoped-for results? Its history of changing education budget formulas provides a case in point.

by Rand Quinn and Matthew P. Steinberg

Can State Policy Deliver Equitable and Adequate Funding?

This essay is a condensed version of Matthew P. Steinberg and Rand Quinn, “A Tale of Two Decades: New Evidence on Adequacy and Equity in Pennsylvania,” Journal of Education Finance 40, no. 3 (Winter 2015) and is published here with permission of the Journal of Education Finance.
differential costs of educating all children—regardless of race, ethnicity, English-language learner status, disability, socioeconomic status, and geography. The difference between the resources that a district needs to educate all students and the amount the district actually spends is called an adequacy gap.

We often take for granted that the solution to educational inequity and inadequacy is the right combination of resources and political will. In other words, the assumption is that when policy elites shake loose funding for reform, the reform will actually play out as intended: that there will not only be enough money to adequately educate all students, but it will be distributed equitably across districts serving different student populations in different locations.

There is actually little evidence to support or debunk this assumption. The link between state-level reform and results is unclear, and much of this murkiness is due to the paucity of data. And yet current reports underscore the need for clarity: Pennsylvania is one state where continuing disparities in per-pupil spending have been highlighted.¹

One way to get a clearer picture is to compare different policy climates over time. This is not a situation analysts can create in a laboratory. Fortunately, the span from 1991 to 2011 in Pennsylvania was a real-world petri dish for just such an analysis.

During those two decades, the state saw dramatically different policy climates. From 1991 to 2001, Pennsylvania was decidedly retrograde in its approach to education spending, eradicating its funding formula and essentially flattening education funding despite rising enrollments. In the subsequent decade, the stars aligned in favor of reform: Districts received an infusion of resources, bolstered by policy and legislative climates supportive of improving adequacy and equity across districts. These two decades provide rich data for comparison. From these data, we generated estimates of adequate per-pupil spending for Pennsylvania’s school districts in 2001 and 2011—years that capped very distinct decades in the state’s education policy climate.

In making the comparison, we sought to uncover the extent to which differences across the two decades resulted in changes in adequate per-pupil spending and improvements in how districts that serve different student populations spent their educational resources. But before delving into what we found, let’s travel back in time to the dawning of the first decade of our comparison.

**Decade 1: Pennsylvania Education Funding in Retrograde**

In 1992 the Pennsylvania General Assembly discontinued its use of a fixed formula that accounted for district wealth and enrollment to determine basic education funding.² Although various supplements and subsidies were gradually added over the remainder of the decade, the annual education budget process was conducted without strict guidelines, was based largely on the prior year’s appropriation, and lacked any predictably consistent consideration for student needs.

This led to two important consequences: First, any inequity existing at the start of the decade was largely maintained until its end. And second, any changes in a district’s characteristics (such as an increase in English-language learners) would not be accounted for when allocating state funding. As a result, state funding for schools in the decade following the dissolution of the funding formula was essentially flat: Inflation-adjusted state funding increased by 4.3 percent. During this same period, Pennsylvania’s total student enrollment increased by 8.8 percent, while inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending increased by 4.5 percent.

During this period, equity lawsuits were filed by the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools and on behalf of the city and School District of Philadelphia to ensure a transparent and predictable education appropriation process (*PARSS v. Casey* and *Marrero v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, respectively). Both lawsuits were ultimately unsuccessful at ending the status quo state education funding process, as the court refused to adjudicate the issue. In dismissing *Marrero* in 1999, the State Supreme Court affirmed the lower court’s argument that maintaining a “thorough and efficient system of public schools” was subject to legislative control, and that “it would be impossible to resolve the [petitioners’] claims without making an initial policy determination of a kind which is clearly legislative, and not judicial, discretion.”³
In 2008 the Pennsylvania school code was amended to include language mandating that education funding to districts be based largely on the formula the study offered. In his annual budget address, Governor Rendell pledged to close half of the identified adequacy gap through a state allocation that would be phased in over six years. Starting with the 2008–09 school year, an adequacy target was calculated for each school district that began with a base cost per student and took into account district characteristics, including the number of students in poverty, enrollment over time, number of English-language learners, and location. For districts with an adequacy gap, a state funding target—which amounted to a percentage of the adequacy target—was determined. The poorest districts and highest taxing districts had state funding targets closest to their calculated adequacy shortfalls. Each school district with an adequacy gap received a state share phase-in allocation equal to a percentage of its state funding target based on its tax effort.

The effort did not last. In 2011 the funding formula requirement to account for student and district characteristics was removed from the school code.

Distinct from the preceding decade, state funding to districts from the 2001–02 school year to the 2010–11 school year steadily increased, with inflation-adjusted state funding increasing by 11 percent. During this period, Pennsylvania’s total student enrollment decreased by 1.6 percent, while inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending increased by 22.7 percent. Clearly, education dollars flowed more freely in the second decade. But how did adequacy and equity fare?

The Fate of Adequacy and Equity

To compare adequacy and equity across districts and time, we developed a measure, EQ, which is a ratio of a district’s adequacy gap, as defined by Pennsylvania’s costing-out study, to its actual spending (see box 1). Using this measure, we estimated that during the second decade, districts, on average, improved their level of adequate spending. On average, districts’ adequacy gap per actual spending ratio (EQ), was cut by nearly 14 percentage points (a 45 percent improvement) when accounting for district characteristics likely correlated with differences in adequacy across the two periods.
EQ is a ratio of a district’s per-pupil adequacy gap to its actual per-pupil spending. We developed the measure to assess adequacy and equity in Pennsylvania over a two-decade span, but it could easily be used to gauge the adequacy and equity of funding formulas in other states. Its value lies both in its simplicity and its ability to compare districts within a state (or schools within a district) over time. The EQ measure is represented as follows:

\[
EQ_i = \frac{\text{Adequacy}_i}{\text{Expenditures}_i}
\]

where Adequacy is the estimated per-pupil adequacy gap (surplus) for district i in school year t, and Expenditures is the actual per-pupil spending for district i in year t.

An adequate and equitable system is one in which the EQ ratio is zero for each district in the state—in other words, a system in which no district has an adequacy gap and district spending in every district is equal to the amount necessary to educate all students, given the characteristics of the students a district serves. An adequate but inequitable system would be one in which the EQ ratio is greater than zero for all districts, but the EQ ratio would be different for at least one pair of districts. In such a system, each district has an adequacy surplus, but at least one district has a greater surplus-to-spending ratio than at least one other district. In an equitable but inadequate system, the EQ ratio would be less than zero for all districts (indicating an adequacy gap for each district), but the ratio between a district’s adequacy gap and its per-pupil spending would be equal across all districts. Put another way, while the total amount of education spending would be inadequate to meet the system’s performance goals, the distribution of those funds would be done equitably. We suspect that in no state at no point in time would one find a system that was fully equitable or adequate or both. Rather, in every system, districts will likely have EQ ratios that vary and are greater than zero for some districts (reflecting an adequacy surplus) and less than zero for other districts (reflecting an adequacy gap).

Box 1. Using the EQ Ratio to Calculate Adequacy and Equity for Your State

EQ is a ratio of a district’s per-pupil adequacy gap to its actual per-pupil spending. We developed the measure to assess adequacy and equity in Pennsylvania over a two-decade span, but it could easily be used to gauge the adequacy and equity of funding formulas in other states. Its value lies both in its simplicity and its ability to compare districts within a state (or schools within a district) over time. The EQ measure is represented as follows:

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We determined the adequacy gap for Pennsylvania using the formula from Augenblick, Palaiich, and Associates. Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet Pennsylvania’s Public Education Goals (Denver, 2007). Similar formulas are increasingly mandated by courts and commissioned by legislatures and thus are the basis for determining measures of adequate and equitable resources in many states.

This works out to an average per-pupil adequacy improvement of $1,491. Moreover, the average improvement in the second decade masks differences in the way districts with certain characteristics improved their relative standing. Districts with more low-achieving students, poor students, minority students, and special education students realized improvements compared with their more advantaged counterparts. For example, in 2001, relative to a district’s actual per-pupil expenditures, the highest poverty districts would have needed to spend, on average, 46 percent more to adequately educate all of their students; the lowest poverty districts would have needed to spend 24 percent more, on average, to adequately educate all of their students. By 2011, those numbers shifted to 19 percent for the highest poverty districts and 8 percent for the lowest poverty districts. Rural districts also gained ground on suburban districts.

The situation wasn’t all rosy, however. Inadequacies persisted into the second decade among certain types of districts. For instance, larger school districts did not realize adequacy improvements relative to smaller school districts, nor did urban districts make gains relative to suburban districts.

In short, the system overall improved, but improvements varied based on district type.

Clear Skies Ahead?

The availability and use of educational resources have been shown to be factors that matter in improving outcomes and closing achievement gaps. We sought to determine whether a state environment conducive to producing adequate and equitable funding can actually do so.

The question has taken on added urgency, particularly for Pennsylvania. Recent evidence indicates that within-state spending disparities between districts serving the most and fewest students in poverty is most severe in Pennsylvania.12 Our study of Pennsylvania’s past efforts to grapple with this disparity can inform the current debate in this state and in others. In Pennsylvania, when the stars aligned to produce a favorable policy environment, the state did achieve a more adequate and equitable distribution of resources across districts. It wasn’t a perfect system, and certain inequities persisted. But it was a step in the right direction.

4Authors’ communication with Donna Cooper, former secretary of planning and policy under Pennsylvania Governor Rendell (September 15, 2014).
12Ushomirsky and Williams, Funding Gaps 2015; NCES, “School District Current Expenditures per Pupil.”
Public education in the United States continues to be marked by persistent disparities in test scores, high school completion rates, and college enrollment rates based on factors such as students' household income, race/ethnicity, and gender. These achievement gaps are already in evidence before children begin school. Students that are assessed as not ready for kindergarten are disproportionately from the same groups as those that are at risk of low performance at school. Strong evidence links early literacy, mathematics, and social skills with later school performance.

But there is also good news: A growing body of evidence suggests that children's early learning opportunities can promote later academic achievement. Thus state and federal efforts to close the achievement gap have zeroed in on closing the school readiness gap. Early learning and school readiness have attracted unprecedented national attention as policymakers seek to address the achievement gap by expanding access to high-quality early education (box 1).

Research that points to the value of early learning programs also emphasizes the importance of quality. At-risk children who participate in high-quality childcare and pre-kindergarten can overcome risk factors, make accelerated progress in development, and enter kindergarten ready to learn. Quality of early learning programming has been defined in multiple ways but is consistently understood to improve cognitive development, communication skills, and social-emotional and peer outcomes.

Indicators of quality typically include child-teacher ratios, teacher qualifications and professional development, health and safety practices, evidence-based and standards-aligned curriculum, and family engagement.

Are federal and state efforts to expand access paying off? Unfortunately, early evidence suggests that the public-private market is not expanding access to high-quality child care for students that need it most. While recent policy has focused on increasing the supply of high-quality programs, obstacles to increasing the demand for such programs remain to be addressed. To gain an understanding of why that is, it is necessary to first explore how policy has sought to identify and support quality programs in early childhood education.

The Landscape of Early Learning

American early education is a complex, fractured landscape composed of many
Box 1. National and State Investment in Early Childhood Education

States have made notable efforts to ramp up spending on early childhood education. For example, in 2014 New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and legislative leaders agreed to spend a little over $1.5 billion over five years, or about $340 million a year, on free full-day classes for four-year-olds. The vast majority of fiscal 2015 funding, $300 million, is allocated to New York City. Utah and Hawaii made first-time investments of $3 million each to establish pre-K programs in fiscal 2014–15.

The US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services co-funded preschool block grants totaling $226 million in 2014. These grants went to 18 states and are expected to serve over 18,000 children in the first year. States could apply for two types of grants: development or expansion grants. Development grants targeted states that serve less than 10 percent of four-year-olds and had not previously received Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grants. The grant focuses on high-quality preschool programs that serve children in one or more high-need communities. States were allowed to apply up to 35 percent of the award for state-level infrastructure and quality improvement. Expansion grants went to states that serve 10 percent or more of four-year olds or have received RTT-ELC grants. The grant allowed states to apply up to 5 percent of the award for state-level infrastructure and quality improvements. The program emphasized serving children in two or more high-need communities.

disparate programs and services. It involves public, private, and business contributions, along with tuition. It is common for independent service providers to combine program features and braid sources of funding. State and federal programs have moved to increase flexibility in funding and program management strategies. As a result, complex partnerships have formed in which schools and community providers work together.

The mixed-service, mixed-funding landscape encompasses child care, private preschool, district preschool, Head Start, early intervention, and home-visiting services, for example. It is a difficult context for education policymakers as they contemplate expansion of policies and programs relating to early childhood education. To address these realities and counter the perceived decline in quality of child care facilities, states have been working on broad initiatives to improve the quality and access of early learning across multiple settings, and particularly since the US Congress passed the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant program in 2011. Most states have established quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to monitor and support evidence-based standards that have been directly or indirectly linked to improved child outcomes. A QRIS is a voluntary, tiered rating system for systematically assessing quality, supporting continuous improvement, and informing families about their choices in child care (box 2).

Through QRIS, states have been trying to improve the supply of quality care by defining and monitoring standards for quality, creating a path for quality improvement, and investing in incentives and technical assistance to motivate providers (see map). Programs typically receive financial incentives for earning high ratings and enrolling more high-needs children.

In developing such programs, states clearly intend to direct more at-risk children to high-quality programs by providing families with reliable information they can use when selecting early childhood services. In theory, the supply of higher quality care will rise to meet demand, as families gain access to ratings and choose high-quality services and as new entrepreneurs step up to supply this care. Conversely, the supply of low-quality care is expected to decline as a function of decreasing demand.

Yet this is not what is happening. In states with mature, fully implemented QRIS, the quasi-public-private market for quality child care is not operating efficiently. Instead, the child care market remains bifurcated between high-quality and low-quality providers, with strong demand for both.

The Challenge of Supply and Demand

In many states with mature QRIS, data suggest that after years of increased participation, the supply of high-quality child care has reached a saturation point and stagnated. Furthermore, advocates and policymakers have noticed that the supply of low-quality services may actually increase concomitantly as licensed providers self-select into two groups: those participating in the voluntary QRIS programs and those that don’t. If true and unchecked, separate markets for early learning services may remain entrenched. State officials must be alert to trends in provider QRIS participation that exhibit such a sorting, with the higher-quality cohort receiving increased state funds, and the second cohort continuing to serve the same children with diminishing resources. States must consider how investments in quality may not always translate to increased access and may have the perverse consequence of decreasing access to quality.

How could this be? First survey research of families suggests that limited enrollment in high-quality services is not always a problem of limited supply. While there are often waiting lists at high-quality centers, in many instances, the same is true for many low-quality or nonparticipating centers. For example, Georgia was one of the first states to offer universal pre-kindergarten and yet enrolls 58 percent of its four-year-olds. Pennsylvania has a 12-year-old QRIS, with provider participation hovering above 50 percent for several years. It is against this backdrop that many state systems are expanding pre-kindergarten and QRIS.

Second, insufficient demand due to lack of consumer information may be constraining access to high-quality early learning. Moderate increases in the supply of low-cost, high-quality early learning thus cannot translate into greater access as long as there are low-cost, low-quality options.

To increase the take-up rate for children who are most at risk, state and local efforts should
focus not only on the supply of high-quality services but on repairing the market separation in early learning. State and local public education leaders should consider the following strategies to address this mismatch between supply and demand.

**Strategy 1: Increase Demand for Quality**

Nationally, families perceive they have fewer early learning options than they actually do, and many believe they can't afford quality. States and communities can develop new strategies for engaging families and sharing information around availability, affordability, and benefits of quality early learning. Most states with QRIS are developing strategies to communicate with families about their options. To be effective, these strategies must recognize that families that typically choose low-cost, low-quality environments have relied on word of mouth and personal connections to make child care arrangements, not websites or published material. As such, communications must be responsive and representative of diverse families concerns and values concerning early childhood. Local schools may be well positioned to engage families with young children in a conversation about available options. State strategies could also consider other ways to motivate demand, as Minnesota does by offering tax credits to families that choose high-quality programs.

**Strategy 2: Build Capacity for Local Quality Improvement**

Improving the quality of an individual early learning provider's program requires a significant investment of time, money, and expertise. Not only do providers face low demand for making difficult improvements, but they lack the resources and capacity for making those changes. State QRIS provide a range of supports, but state and local education agencies can also assist independent programs through shared teacher training and proactive planning around the transition to kindergarten. Through partnerships between public schools and private early learning providers, schools can build capacity for quality improvement. It is also important that these efforts focus on more providers than simply the motivated ones who are already accessing support through existing initiatives.

**Strategy 3: Universal Access to High-Quality Early Learning**

There is reason to suspect that the quasi-public-private market alone cannot provide universal quality, even with strong family engagement and considerable effort to build capacity. A third policy option to consider: supplying high-quality service that is free or low cost. This course would likely achieve the goal...
of ensuring that children at risk of low achievement in school get access to high-quality early learning, in part by removing the market for low-cost, low-quality providers. A challenge for those choosing this strategy would be to create monitoring systems that ensure that public investments are yielding high-quality results.

**Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Learning**

Have public investments in quality split the child care sector into two markets: high-cost high-quality and low-cost low-quality? If so, initiatives that promote increased supply of care are not likely to increase access to quality care. Moreover, policies that reward high quality risk greater market differentiation. The reasons are insufficient capacity among many providers to improve quality and insufficient demand for quality. Movement toward high quality and equitable early learning starts with building a complete picture of families. Families, not state agencies, are the principal engine and advocate for increasing access to high quality services. State boards of education and state education agencies that seek to close the readiness gap should consider a range of strategies that engage families and local providers. Specifically, clinics and pediatricians, local libraries, and state health and human services agencies have access to families with young children and can disseminate information about quality early childhood programs. Local provider engagement can be fostered through policies that encourage public school districts to establish and maintain

**State Progress on Child Care Quality** 2013 Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

![Map showing states' progress on child care quality](image-url)

outreach with early childhood providers in their communities. As these providers’ clients will matriculate to public schools, local school districts can provide access to professional development opportunities to local early child-care providers.

Research is under way to provide more evidence of the validity of QRIS ratings and their efficacy for improving quality and child outcomes. Important questions remain about the effects of QRIS on families’ access to high-quality programs. Future research will likely clarify questions not only about efficacy and cost benefits but could also help address broader problems with market supply and demand.


Working in education policy as I do, I hear the term “achievement gap” as much as a dietician might hear “obesity” or a court-appointed counselor might hear “recidivism”. In fact, the opportunity to have some small impact on closing the achievement gap is why I get up in the morning. So when it comes to such a fundamental issue of professional purpose, I ask myself whether my peers and I are looking at the right numbers. For example, when we say achievement gap, do we really mean only the differences in reading and math test scores?

The question of what to focus on is not just a professional or academic question, and the achievement gap isn’t just something I research but something I have lived. When I was eight years old and a prospective third grader, my family immigrated to the United States, arriving in a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania with no funds to our name. These two facts—immigrating and lack of funds—stuck me with two classifications that are still essential to today’s achievement gap discussions: First, I was an English language learner, a designation I would lose in a few years, and, second, I was a free and reduced-priced lunch student, a designation I would hold all the way through high school. I immediately found myself in a reading class with the “slower” students and understood that expectations for me and my peers in that class were not high. Like my peers, I struggled.

I find persistent achievement gaps for these and other groups very concerning, but they raise a broader question about the efficacy of relying solely on math and English achievement numbers to define a complicated problem. If education systems close the achievement gap in tests for reading and math, could they declare success? I would hope that the answer is no. Closing the achievement gap is not an end. At best, closing the gap is the means by which we will signify that all K-12 students, regardless of background and circumstance, have the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential in postsecondary education, careers, and life. Testing in math and English is only a starting point in assessing whether education is helping students in this way.

The premise underlying current measurement of the achievement gap is fundamentally flawed for three reasons:

- **It is an incomplete picture.** The tests to diagnose the achievement gap provide
an incomplete assessment of the problem. First, in their focus on English language arts (ELA) and math, they neglect disciplines in areas of rising national demand such as science, technology, civics, and the arts. Even in those two subjects, analysis indicates that exam questions in most states lack rigor. The RAND Corporation found that only 2 percent of math items and 20 percent of ELA items on current state tests measure higher order skills.\(^1\) It is no surprise then that research has found that K-12 test scores are by no means the only indicator determining postsecondary success and can even be counterproductive to this goal.\(^2\)

- **It is misaligned with economic shifts.** Even if the tests were more rigorous, sole reliance on them should be considered outdated. According to economists Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, the last 40 years have been marked by a decline in jobs requiring rote skills and an increase in demand for complex skills. In 1970, Fortune 500 companies rated writing, computational skills, and reading as the most important skills students should master—by 1999 the top three skills were teamwork, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. Even new tests such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced cannot fully measure these sorts of skills.

- **It understates the full range of student talents.** Last, and perhaps most important, defining achievement gaps by a narrow measure is as disempowering as it is ineffective. The approach advantages certain types of learners—namely auditory learners—at the risk of providing needed and deserved affirmation for everybody else. As Sir Ken Robinson said, the system leads to “many creative, highly talented people thinking they’re not.”\(^3\)

These factors have proved true not only in research but in my own experience. The day I realized that I overcame an achievement gap was not when I started scoring as well as my peers in pop quizzes, or did well on the Pennsylvania state tests, or even when I scored well enough on the SAT to get into a good college. The days I knew that I had made it included the day I completed my senior project, conducting original research and interviews leading to a report on nonprofits serving youth in northeastern Pennsylvania. It was my first day in college, when I knew I had the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to pursue and succeed in my chosen path. It was the day I made a meaningful contribution as an intern in a congressional office. Those days were important because the real achievement gap for me was never a matter of test scores and always a matter of my capacity to meet my own potential.

There is a better way to support that potential and measure success for all students—not just those who have been traditionally disadvantaged—and some states are taking the lead. Examples include program reviews for arts and humanities in Kentucky’s Unbridled Learning accountability system, California’s inclusion of student engagement within its state Local Control Accountability Plans, and New Hampshire emphasizing performance assessment measures as a means to evaluate student success.\(^4\) If states continue not only to advance new measures of success but disaggregate them across race, income, disability, and language proficiency for both students and schools, they will have a much better sense of how well they are closing the most important achievement gap of all: educational opportunity. Using these new numbers as a starting point, they can then invest in interventions that close the opportunity gaps between groups of students. In the process, they will close the gap between state measurements of success and how parents like mine conceive of success for their children: the ability to meet one’s full potential.

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Educators and policymakers have worried about achievement gaps in public schools for a long time. Is it possible to close gaps in achievement? What signs of hope do you see?

We can close the gap if we make it a priority. Recently, as a result of the increase of data collection and analysis, the achievement gap has become more visible. That visibility has led to initiatives in many states, and I hope we will continue to learn what works to close what is more accurately defined as an opportunity gap. We need to acknowledge the role poverty plays in educational achievement.

What are the challenges your state faces regarding achievement gaps? What has your state done to address those challenges?

Massachusetts has a significant achievement gap and has instituted a number of programs to close it, including a student early warning system, revision of discipline regulations, early college, and credit recovery programs. The state has also invested in support for struggling districts and schools.

What are the most important policies for state education policymakers to focus on?

Let’s concentrate on what works and increase support for early childhood education and early intervention programs. Summer learning for low-income kids is essential in order to stop the two- to three-month “summer slide.” Every child eligible for free or reduced-price lunch should have not just lunch but breakfast and an afterschool snack. Well-educated, caring teachers are essential to success. Teacher certification programs should reflect what research has found, and compensation should reflect the importance of their role.

There are clearly many drivers of these gaps that lie outside the classroom. Given they can’t address all the societal factors involved, how should state education policymakers think about their roles in achieving educational equity?

We should ensure that children are prepared to enter school having all essential health screenings. A short summer learning experience to introduce a child who has not had a school-like experience has proven helpful. Schools can do much to alleviate hunger through healthy meals. Schools should support the whole child, and understanding that socioemotional development is essential. The myriad state agencies dealing with children need to be coordinated and programs designed from the child’s needs up. Parents should be able to understand the range of services available and schools should be sources of information and access.
When the new year began, NASBE opened for business in a brand new office. Our old space was just too big for our current staff. So when we found a tenant who was willing to sublease, we came back to Old Town Alexandria—just a few blocks away from the location of NASBE’s offices for most of its history.

In the process of moving, we sorted through old publications and documents. We unearthed real treasures—like the art work that now hangs in our entry—and more than a few items that left us scratching our heads asking, “Why on Earth did anyone save this?”

The move was also a great learning experience. Here are some important lessons we took away from our relocation—lessons that may be helpful to you as you undertake work on your state board of education:

1/ **Do not move in December.** Perhaps we should have realized that adding the stress of a move to other year-end responsibilities was, well, a bit much. Instead of holiday decorations in our office entryway, we had a big dumpster. (We had rejected the idea of adding twinkling lights around the top.) On the other hand, we did start 2015 in wonderful new offices.

2/ **NASBE has a solid history to build on.** Over the years, NASBE has produced a wealth of resources to help state board of education members, and as we dug through closets, we located most of them. (Our old catalog system was pretty basic: We simply asked long-time editor Dave Kysilko whether we had ever produced anything on the topic, and he pointed us in the right direction. His retirement forced us to dig through the piles ourselves.) In that process, we realized that many of these older publications still have relevance for the citizen leaders who serve on state boards today. Now we have catalogued all our publications—expect to see more of them as issues arise.

3/ **Some things are just not worth holding on to.** Deep in a closet, we found two boxes of plastic lunch trays—50 in all—of the type used in every school lunch room in the country. Try as we might, we never figured out what they were doing in our office. We found a brand new preschool that was thrilled with our donation.

Now that we are in our brand new offices (333 John Carlyle Drive, Alexandria, Virginia, should you be in the area), we have learned some important lessons. First, change can be a good thing. Our move has given us bright new offices and a new opportunity to think about what we do with and for state boards of education.

Second, it’s important to remember—and build on—your heritage. We are rediscovering a wealth of great NASBE work. Your state board also has built a strong policy foundation. So before you decide you need to create a policy from the ground up, research what has come before.

On the other hand, you may find your own equivalent of our plastic lunch trays. There are some vestigial policies and practices that it might be time to reevaluate, or just toss! Just don’t move in December. Trust us on this.
In this Policy Update, NASBE’s Amelia Vance tracks the wave of state legislation in 2015 to protect student data privacy and to further strengthen the oversight role of state boards of education. She urges policymakers to balance the need for protection with the need for appropriate access to education data.

In this State Innovations, NASBE’s Francis Eberle traces the diverse paths to successful adoption and implementation of science standards undertaken by six states that obtained NASBE stipends for their work.

In this Education Leaders Report, NASBE’s Ace Parsi details the actions state boards of education can take to make deeper learning the norm in schools across their state.

But the mission remains the same: equipping state education policymakers with the information they need to increase their voice and effectiveness. A new format, the Education Leaders Report, covers hot topics as well as over-the-horizon thinking on education, with background on policy issues, relevant research, and practical steps state policymakers can take. State Innovations and Policy Updates are concise reports on education policy and trends, with relevant examples from the policymaking experiences of state boards of education. The State Education Standard, published three times annually, includes articles by leading education experts and policymakers.
Follow the Story of Summer Learning

Can district-led programs help more students succeed? The largest-ever study is finding out.


RAND captures how-to lessons from six school districts:
- Recommendations on planning, curriculum, attendance, academics and enrichment
- Best practices
- Lessons learned

Ready for Fall? Near-Term Effects of Voluntary Summer Learning Programs on Low-Income Students’ Learning Opportunities and Outcomes (2014)

The first student-outcomes report from a multi-year study:
- Early impact on math and reading scores
- Factors linked to higher math and reading scores

See ongoing findings and more free resources at www.wallacefoundation.org and RAND.org