



The Promise of Policy: Holding Us Accountable for Helping All Kids Achieve

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,

Debates about reauthorization of 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. Without annual testing and other accountability measures, the country could return to a time not too far in the past in which no one could say for certain where achievement gaps were occurring and how wide they were.

by Sonja Brookins Santelises

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should not, however, cause us to lose sight of the law's fundamental idea that a school should only be considered effective when it serves all its children well. Successful schools significantly accelerate the learning of students who are behind and challenge students already reaching proficiency. Good schools provide rich learning opportunities to students from all ethnic backgrounds and pay close attention to closing gaps in opportunity between groups of students.

Transparency: Keeping the Full Challenge in Sight

Before passage of NCLB, federal education policy had indeed moved substantially in terms of equity. *Brown v. Board of Education* removed the physical barriers to equitable learning opportunities based on race in 1954. With the first passage of ESEA in 1965, the federal government targeted additional resources to schools serving the needs of young people from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) affirmed the rights of students with disabilities to full educational opportunities and supports. Yet this influx of federal resources also sparked a growing number of questions about whether the nation's investment was having the desired effect.

As recently as 2000, information about how federal spending affected the academic achievement of low-income students and young people of color was spotty at best and in most cases nonexistent. The majority of states still had no annual measure of student performance across consecutive grade levels and subject areas. They also lacked any disaggregation of data among subgroups of students.

In the everyday world of parents and families, there was no way to understand a school's performance across grade levels. Having students' academic test results in only fourth grade, for example, is the educational equivalent of having official medical exam results only once during the time a child is in elementary school or middle school. Parents of color who were selecting schools had access to some test data but nothing that showed the performance of African-American and Latino students in particular. That's a problem. Many parents of color and low-income families would be well served to look beyond the seemingly high aggregate test

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.¹ 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

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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. ■

¹Natasha Ushomirsky, David Williams, and Daria Hall, "Making Sure All Children Matter: Getting School Accountability Signals Right," (Washington, DC: The Education Trust, 2014), <http://edtrust.org/resource/making-sure-all-children-matter-getting-school-accountability-signals-right/>.

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