



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. This month's issue provides an in-depth review of the insights and suggestions reform advocates offer for our consideration as we work to meet the needs of all students.

Closing the Opportunity Gap



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

Much of what I wrote in “Closing the Achievement Gap,” the November 2005 issue of *Just for the ASKing!*, still rings true. That issue focused on ten specific practices that could potentially reduce the gap. However, a great deal has changed during the past decade and new perspectives have arisen about what should be happening in schools to decrease the discrepancy. According to Matthew Lynch, Associate Professor of Education at Langston University, “the achievement gap is a well-documented phenomenon in American schools that has been talked about, to at least some extent, for over forty years. Despite all that chatter, the achievement gap is still alive and well in American K-12 schools.” Educators fully understand that it is in everyone’s best interest to close the gap that especially impacts minorities or students who come from economically disadvantaged situations, since these children with lower achievement than their peers have the potential to become discouraged and drop out of school altogether. As Lynch further states, “The days of letting children fall by the wayside simply because of home environment or skin color are becoming things of the past as more and more educators and even some politicians vocalize the need to level the achievement playing field.” It is our moral imperative to continually revisit the topic since what we do in our classrooms today can have a profound effect on our students that will impact them for the rest of their lives.

A new twist on the “gap” has emerged in recent years. Attention has shifted from an emphasis on the achievement gap to the significance of the “opportunity” gap. **The Glossary of Education Reform** states, “the term opportunity gap refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, and familial situations contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students.” The discussion around the discrepancy in academic progress has been further expanded through the publication of books on the topic including:

- ***The Opportunity Gap: Achievement and Inequality in Education***, edited by Carol DeShano da Silva, James Philip Huguley, Zenub Kakli, and Radhika Rao
- ***Creating The Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap***, by A. Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera
- ***Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance***, edited by Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner

In an *Education Week* blog post, California communications consultant Steve Cohen summarizes what he heard in an **American Educational Research Association (AERA)** session this way: “The kids who come to school with less get less from school. Closing the achievement gap with high-stakes, test-centric teaching combined with low resources, few opportunities, and a lack of support has failed. The best way is to close the mushrooming opportunity gap, create more equitable opportunities and gauge how well states and districts are doing to create those opportunities. Achievement follows from opportunities to learn.”

An Inconvenient Truth

To borrow a title from Al Gore’s book on climate change, it is important to examine the current reality related to the deficit in learning by some students in our schools. Linda Darling-Hammond, in multiple publications and presentations, provides these points for our consideration:

- Two-thirds of minority students still attend schools that are predominantly minority, most of them located in central cities and funded well below those in neighboring suburban districts.
- Elementary school students who have three ineffective teachers in a row score nearly fifty percentile points below students who have highly effective teachers during the same period.
- Teacher expertise and the quality with which they deliver curriculum are interconnected since a challenging curriculum requires a highly effective teacher to deliver it; most expert teachers teach the most advantaged students while lower-achieving students receive lower quality teaching along with less demanding materials.

Additional facts to consider include:

- Twenty-two percent of school-age children live in poverty (Census Bureau, 2011); some critics of our “accountability-driven reform movement” argue that test scores exacerbate the widening disparity between rich and poor and the expanding opportunity gap for too many of our country’s youth.
- In addition to deficits in learning, many children come to school with unaddressed health needs and nutritional shortages.

Potential Remedies

Advocates for addressing the opportunity gap have offered insights and suggestions we can implement to remedy the problem. Below are ten compelling points of view for educators to consider as they work to meet the needs of all students.

- Steve Cohen in his *Education Week* blog post writes that at this year’s **AERA** annual meeting, Darling-Hammond spoke about some of the comparisons that are made between American schools and international institutions. Schools in South Korea, Singapore, and Finland tend to reach higher achievement levels than the United States. She reported that these countries “pay much more attention to the spectrum of needs that students bring to school and provide opportunities to address them, whether it’s through early childhood education, highly-trained and highly-compensated teachers, or through cheaper and better health care.” She further said, “Other countries don’t allow for the concentrated poverty in schools. We can’t ever expect to compete with these countries until we address those issues.”
- Cohen also writes about another important point made by Darling-Hammond. She addressed the fact that a major issue that has led to the expanding opportunity gap has been the inequitable and inadequate funding that school districts within the same state receive. She gave as an example the fact that through thirty years of litigation, the state of New Jersey made a decision to close the funding gaps between well-funded and less-funded districts and as a result, the achievement gap in their schools has been reduced by forty-six percent for students of color and more than thirty percent for children living in poverty. Other states and localities should examine their long-standing funding practices to see if changes will make for a more equitable and adequate situation for more children.
- Lesli Maxwell, staff writer for *Education Week*, notes in “Fixing the ‘Opportunity Gap’ to Close the Achievement Gap” that the Obama administration has committed to spending \$75 billion over the next

ten years to help states provide more quality early education opportunities. Expanding early education opportunities, including more attention to health-related issues, will create brighter futures for millions of children. In fact, Steve Cohen notes that states that have already invested in preschool and other supports have seen reductions in the achievement gap.

- In their chapter of *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, economists Clive Belfield and Hank Levin paint an optimistic picture. As Cohen reports, they surmise that if the opportunity gap were closed “by just one-third, it would result in \$50 billion in annual fiscal savings and \$200 billion in savings from a societal perspective (for example, lowering rates of crime and incarceration).”
- A number of school districts are making a broad and rich curriculum available to more students. Additionally, they are providing more and better learning time during the school year and summer months, ending disparities created by tracking and ability grouping, and reassessing their discipline policies so that so many students are not excluded from school.
- UCLA Professor, Co-director of the Civil Rights Project, and author of Chapter 11 in *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, Patricia Gandara, calls for reducing the isolation and segregation of English Language Learners by increasing immersion programs that give English speakers and English learners ample opportunities to interact in class. Research has shown that children learn from and grow to respect one another when they are exposed to learning situations in which they have sustained equal status. A further recommendation is to train more bilingual teachers and integrate them with English-speaking peers.
- Those who advocate for closing the opportunity gap are calling for greater supports for teachers as professionals, which include quality mentoring relationships between new teachers and experienced teachers, adequate teacher compensation, improved collaboration among teacher groups, and improved relationships between teacher teams and social service providers outside of school that serve students and their families.
- Poorer Americans are less likely to have access to or use the Internet thus reducing some students’ opportunity to understand and master computer and Internet technology. For this reason, we need to expand access to the Internet for those students. More and more school systems are putting technology in the hands of their students that will promote greater engagement in their learning, personalize learning in greater depth, promote problem solving in real-world situations, and provide students with skills they will need to compete globally after their schooling.
- We often say that children need to arrive at school ready to learn. They will never learn at high levels if they come to school hungry and in ill health. Only when health issues, including dental and eye care as well as adequate nutrition are addressed, will we see improved school performance.
- The best uses of test results are to provide teachers feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction and the opportunity to give growth-producing feedback to students. According to the **Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE)** of which Linda Darling-Hammond is Faculty Director, “with the implementation of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, tests have become the key to high-stakes accountability policies.” As a result, far too much time has been spent preparing students for tests and thus reducing the time teachers have to focus on curricula. Decision makers at all levels should heed the recommendations of educational experts and change the focus from outputs (achievement tests) to inputs (expanded opportunities).

Proponents for tackling the inequity problem admit that the suggestions they put forth are not without costs. On the other hand, if we continue along the same path we already follow, the achievement (and opportunity) gap will continue to widen, poverty will remain a blight on our country’s productivity, and the idea of an equal education for all will just be vacant words. There are some practices which are difficult, or even impossible for schools and districts to tackle without more outside support. Nonetheless, the actions recommended here can provide the impetus to begin productive conversations that may lead to local solutions or perhaps provide arenas to influence policy makers, both local and national. We are not powerless and our voices should be heard.

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