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## HOW TO CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP: KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

*Students' overall opportunities to learn are affected by multiple factors that arise both inside and outside of school. Significant educational growth will occur only when we comprehensively address these levels of influence. Our recommendations – at the level of students' individual needs, at the level of in-school opportunities and resources, and at the level of communities and neighborhoods – are as follows:*

### **STUDENTS' INDIVIDUAL NEEDS**

#### **Policy Goal: Address Children's Health and Pre-School Education**

The nation's high level of childhood poverty, coupled with the low level of social supports for low-income children's health and welfare, creates daunting obstacles for learning. Effective policies would:

1. ***Address Key Health Issues.*** Unaddressed health issues, such as a lack of eye care, dental care and adequate nutrition, undermine academic success. These health issues impact academic success. Addressing these needs would go a long way toward ensuring that children arrive at school ready to learn.
2. ***Correctly Identify the Needs of Language Minority Students.*** Failure to recognize and address these health issues, as well as issues of residential mobility, isolated or unsafe neighborhoods, and overwhelmed parents, can lead to misdiagnoses of children's strengths and weaknesses, including incorrectly assuming that language is the primary obstacle faced by language minority students.
3. ***Expand Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education.*** High-quality pre-school for children ages 3-5 improves cognitive and social development and produces lasting increases in positive social behaviors, school achievement and decreased delinquency. This means schools with highly qualified teachers, a balanced curriculum, and small, well-staff classrooms. Adults who as children had high-quality early education have higher rates of employment and increased earnings.

## **IN-SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES**

### **Policy Goal: Provide Equitable and Adequate School Funding**

The unequal allocation and inadequate levels of resources in schools and communities is at the heart of many gaps in student opportunity. Effective policies to address these problems should:

1. ***Reform State Funding Laws.*** School funding formulas should be developed by carefully analyzing the resources shown to be critical for students' success, such as strong supports for students and their teachers. Federal policy should encourage states to adopt policies that promote equitable and adequate school funding and assist states in developing those policies.
2. ***Provide Adequate Resources for Safe and Well-Maintained School Environments.*** Schools that lack heating or air conditioning, have bathroom facilities that are not sanitary or functioning, are chronically overcrowded, or are dirty and in disrepair create obstacles to student success. Schools where students face bullying, harassment or discrimination also hamper students' ability to learn. A safe, welcoming school environment is the starting point for a successful education.

### **Policy Goal: Make a Broad and Rich Curriculum Available**

The best, most challenging and engaging curriculum and instruction should never be rationed, and its availability should never be undermined. Policies in this area should:

1. ***Broaden School Curriculum.*** The curriculum should include a range of subjects, activities and experiences that provide a full, high-quality education. Curriculum should be designed locally, with the particular needs of the students in mind. A rich and diverse array of subjects, including social studies, science, art, music and physical education, should be available throughout the school year.
2. ***Provide More and Better Learning Time during the School Year and Summer.*** Initiatives to extend learning time are a sound first step in promoting school success if they focus on broadening and deepening students' knowledge and understanding of curricular topics. Research shows that academic setbacks frequently occur for disadvantaged students who do not have sufficient access to after-school, in-school, and summer enrichment programs like more affluent youth. Engaging enrichment programs would sustain the momentum of learning that occurs during more formal education.
3. ***End Disparities Created by Tracking and Ability Grouping.*** Detracking reforms help increase student access to challenging curricular materials and high-quality instruction.
4. ***Reform Testing.*** In recent years, tests have taken on new uses. Their main purpose is no longer to provide feedback to teachers about what their students understand, or to allow teachers to assess knowledge and skills in order to grade. In fact, the test takers – the students – are no longer the focus. Instead, tests have become the key to high-stakes accountability policies that are part of No Child

Left Behind and Race to the Top. This has narrowed curricula, especially in schools serving at-risk students. Tests should be designed with teachers and should help them understand how well their students are learning and provide feedback that improves their teaching.

5. ***Reassess Student Discipline Policy.*** Students cannot access rich learning opportunities when they are excluded from school. Across the U.S., there is a double standard when it comes to school discipline. Based on the small amount of solid data currently collected, we know that for the same types of offenses, African American students are suspended from school at higher rates than White students. These suspended students then are at greater risk of dropping out of school.

### **Policy Goal: Support Teachers as Professionals**

Disadvantaged students are often in classrooms with the most inexperienced teachers, in school settings with the worst working conditions and the least support for educators. The teacher turnover and poor results that follow are hardly surprising, and no amount of tough evaluations or alternative certifications will change this dysfunctional dynamic.

Policies that help ensure a high-quality teacher promote:

- Mentoring relationships between new teachers and experienced teachers
- Adequate teacher compensation
- Professional development for teachers and collaboration among teachers
- Relationships between teacher teams and social service support providers that serve students and families.

### **Policy Goal: Building on the Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds of Students**

Policies that help ensure that every child has access to high-quality learning will:

1. ***Meet the Needs of Language Minorities.*** Effective policy will build on and invest in the native language skills Language Minority (LM) children already possess. Policies that treat these native languages as a resource support multilingual students who will have brighter academic futures and who are better able to contribute to our society and economy. Policies should:
  - Provide incentives for recruiting and training of bilingual teachers
  - Devise policies that encourage the integration of LM students with English-speaking peers
  - Encourage outreach programs where bilingual teachers, counselors and parent liaisons inform families of LM students about educational opportunities in their communities
2. ***Reflect Students' Culturally Diversity.*** Effective school policies and practices seek to bridge the difficult communication divides that often occur among and between students and educators who differ in areas such as race, ethnicity, culture and socioeconomic status. Effective policies will:
  - Develop a cadre of well-trained teachers who have a deep understanding of students' diversity and of how inequality affects them
  - Promote instruction that is culturally relevant for students

- Support efforts to change the attitudes and beliefs that administrators, teachers, school personnel and students have regarding teaching, learning, and student ability

## **COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS**

### **Policy Goal: Build Stable and Diverse Communities**

Effective policymaking can advance stable and diverse communities by promoting affordable and more integrated housing, creating integrated magnet schools, enforcing existing civil rights laws and prioritizing diversity in school choice policies. Specific examples of such policies include:

#### **1. *Housing Policies that:***

- Promote metropolitan-wide housing desegregation
- Expand access to mixed-income, affordable housing developments in suburbs and gentrifying cities
- Make integration a priority in mortgage subsidy funds
- Effectively enforce fair housing laws

#### **2. *Neighborhood Integration Policies that:***

- Promote faculty and staff diversity at schools and local institutions
- Develop housing and school laws to produce and sustain stable integration

#### **3. *Focused School Choice Policies that:***

Promote options such as magnet schools, inter-district desegregation plans and school socioeconomic integration plans; these have shown promising results in terms of equity, access to high quality curriculum and student achievement.

### **Policy Goal: Promote Engaging and Enriching Learning Outside of School**

The way students spend their time in school, after school and during the summer can help promote their success at school. Effective policies can:

1. ***Provide More and Better Learning Time during the School Year and Summer.*** As noted above, the need for enriching and extended learning time applied to in-school as well as outside-school resources.
2. ***Expand Access to Libraries and the Internet.*** One-fifth of Americans have no ready access to the Internet. This limits their ability to master computer and internet technology and learn software applications which, in turn, limits their ability to make full use of educational offerings, to write a research paper or to fill out a college application.
3. ***Use Technology Wisely.*** Online learning and blended learning are currently being marketed to policymakers and to schools as affordable ways to individualize, personalize and engage students in education. Some of these technologies have some potential, but the evidence thus far is unconvincing or negative.