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Leading Educators Call for a New Direction for Education Reform, Focused on the Opportunity Gap

Learning Gains Depend on Joining Outcome Goals to Sufficient and Smart Inputs

On the 30th Anniversary of the Report “A Nation at Risk”
New Book and Campaign on Closing the Opportunity Gap
Announced in Remarks to the National Press Club

WASHINGTON DC, April 25, 2013 – For more than a generation, policymakers have intensely focused on the achievement gap, the difference between primarily low-income and minority children compared to their peers on standardized tests and other outputs. In doing so, they have neglected the basic truth that achievement follows from opportunities to learn, according to the authors of a new book and campaign launched today, called *Closing the Opportunity Gap*. Students’ learning and academic performance will, the authors explain, only improve when state and school district officials make a commitment to addressing the nation’s opportunity gap.

“Quite simply, children learn when they are supported with high expectations, quality teaching and deep engagement, and made to feel that they are entitled to good schooling; the richer those opportunities, the greater the learning. When those opportunities are denied or diminished, lower achievement is the dire and foreseeable result,” explained Stanford University Professor Prudence Carter co-editor of *Closing the Opportunity Gap*.

The book's expert authors and campaign leaders note that while measuring achievement gaps is important, identifying gaps does not address needs or capacity. "Achievement gap measurement is best used as part of a balanced evaluation, pointing us to where we need to focus our capacity-building efforts. Simply recognizing gaps does nothing to close them," explained University of Colorado Boulder Professor Kevin Welner, the book's other editor. Added Welner, "Today is the 30th anniversary of the publication of 'A Nation at Risk.' And 30 years later we are still failing to provide all children with rich learning opportunities, so we are still a nation at risk."

Welner, along with Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, one of the book's 21 authors, announced the Closing the Opportunity Gap campaign today at a news conference in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the National Press Club.

No Gain in Achievement without Improving Opportunity

"Addressing opportunity requires looking at inputs as much as outputs. What we're proposing is a pivot for American education," said the Schott Foundation's President, Dr. John H. Jackson. The new Opportunity Gap initiative is working with the Schott Foundation's "Opportunity to Learn" campaign.

Campaign leaders point out that for more than two decades, predating the Bush-era "No Child Left Behind" legislation, education policy and school improvement efforts have given short shrift to capacity building. Policies arising out of the so-called school accountability movement have instead used student testing to identify achievement gaps and to create strong incentives to improve test scores.

At today's news conference, Welner, who is also Director of the National Education Policy Center; Darling Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University and co-director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; and Jackson, the Schott Foundation's President, together explained how and why no real academic improvement can be made with the same old approach.

“We as a nation have already obtained any gains that might be garnered through high-stakes, test-centric teaching” said Welner. “In fact, high expectations become a punitive false promise if combined with low resources, low opportunities, and a lack of support.”

Darling-Hammond addressed the nation’s potential to move forward, “Children have plenty of opportunities to fill in bubbles, but they lack opportunities to learn. When we start creating more equitable opportunities and gauging how well states and districts are doing to create those opportunities, we will join our best international competitors in showing strong academic progress.”

Rep. Mike Honda of California’s 17th Congressional District provided introductory remarks, stressing the importance of addressing the opportunity gap. Rep. Honda authored the legislation that created the Equity and Excellence Commission, which earlier in February issued its groundbreaking report, “For Each and Every Child.”

The Cost of Not Minding the Gap

In their chapter in *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, economists Clive Belfield and Hank Levin conservatively estimate that the economic benefit of closing the opportunity gap by just one-third would result in \$50 billion in annual fiscal savings and \$200 billion in savings from a societal perspective (for example, by lowering rates of crime and incarceration). By point of comparison, they note, total annual taxpayer spending on K-12 education, including national, state and local expenditures, is approximately \$570 billion.

Opportunities Denied to Low-Income and Minority Youth

Our society becomes more diverse each year and is on its way to becoming a majority-minority society by mid-century. Yet, opportunities to learn are most often denied to students of color and to students who come from impoverished homes. The results can be shocking. For example, the average White 13-year-old reads at a higher level and performs better in math than the average Black or Latino 17-year-old. Similar outcome gaps exist for graduation rates, grade retention and course failure rates, and college preparatory course taking.

We suffer from such gaps for reasons that are well understood but largely ignored: a cumulative and devastating mountain of denied opportunities to learn and to thrive.

In the first chapter of *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, children who have advantages are compared to someone taking an elevator, while disadvantaged youth take the stairs:

“To visualize how unfair this system has become, imagine two children asked to race to the top of a stairway. One child is well nourished, well trained, and well equipped; the other lacks all these basic resources. But, instead of designing a system around the needs of this second child, her stairway (akin to the minimal opportunities and resources available at her school) is steep and slippery.

Meanwhile, the first child’s stairway is replaced with an escalator. Holding these two children to the same standards may allow for a comforting ‘no excuses’ sound byte, but it does nothing to help that second child achieve.”

The Shifting Policy Climate

Over the past year, the Obama administration has shown clear signs of shifting more attention to improving opportunities to learn and thereby reducing the opportunity gap. President Obama’s State of the Union Address stressed the importance of high-quality early-childhood education. Last month, at a White House meeting of newspaper publishers, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called for more attention to be paid to closing the opportunity gap. He has also indicated a receptiveness to the Equity and Excellence Commission and its February 2013 report noted above, which spoke clearly to the need to emphasize opportunities to learn: <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2013/02/equity-and-excellence-commission-delivers-report-to-secretary-duncan/> As stated in the April 2013 report from the Leadership Conference, “If adopted and implemented fully, the commission’s recommendations could go a long way toward reversing a ‘rising tide’ of inequality and ensuring an equitable education for every child in the United States.”

Some Areas for Improvement: We Can Create Opportunity

Among the many areas where opportunity can be created and the gap narrowed, according to the book’s expert authors:

- **Provide High-Quality Early Childhood Education.** Daunting achievement gaps exist even in kindergarten. Pre-school experiences that are not of high quality do little to change this. But well designed and well supported, high-quality early childhood education has been shown to make a huge difference and to provide an excellent return on investment.
- **End Segregation in Housing, Schools and Classrooms.** Instead of policies that lead to segregation and stratification of students and their families, we can turn to policies demonstrated to promote affordable and more integrated housing, policies that create integrated magnet schools, policies that enforce existing civil rights laws, school choice policies that prioritize diversity, and differentiation policies that turn to universal acceleration instead of racialized tracking and the rationing of high-quality curriculum. While the United States has a long history of segregation, the nation also has a long history of policies proven effective at addressing segregation. Right now, the nation's schools are more segregated than they were 30 years ago.
- **Provide Crucial Funding and Resources.** At the heart of many existing opportunity gaps lie the unequal allocation and inadequate level of resources in schools and communities. Funding spent wisely to address these clear needs is a vital element of any serious effort to close the nation's opportunity gaps. While more resources are needed to achieve equivalent outcomes in high-cost locations with high-need students, the sad truth is that they often are given even less.
- **Provide More and Better Learning Time.** The time that youth spend after school and during the summer can be enriching and thus enhance learning, or it can be stultifying and thus result in substantial learning loss. Children growing up in communities of concentrated poverty get the short end of the stick. Initiatives to extend learning time are a good first step. Those initiatives must be designed to ensure that disadvantaged children are provided with enrichment, not additional test preparation.
- **Focus on Childhood Health.** The 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. Instead of "no excuses" demands leveled at children and their teachers, lawmakers should address their very real needs for health care, eye care, dental care, and a healthy diet. These health issues have been proven to have a direct linkage to academic success.
- **Focus on Teacher Experience and Supports.** Schools with the most disadvantaged students tend to be in classrooms with the most inexperienced teachers and also the school settings with the worst working conditions and limited support for those teachers. 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. Only through improved preparation, supports, and working conditions can we realistically expect to close this element of the opportunity gap.

- **Provide Access to libraries and the Internet.** Vast numbers of students are held back by their lack of access to books, libraries, and the Internet. For example, one-fifth of Americans have no ready access to the Internet; these numbers are much higher in low-income and minority households, making writing a research paper or filling out a college application far more difficult and limiting career opportunities. This lack of access was exacerbated during the economic downturn, when library hours and services were cut and at a time when many middle-class families have opted to buy a smart phone rather than a home computer that can be used by children for studying.
- **Provide Tutoring.** While tutoring services provided by wealthy school districts and private tutoring companies are expanding, tutoring for disadvantaged students—who often have greater need for one-on-one help—is often non-existent.
- **Create Safe and Well-Maintained School Environments.** Students are less likely to learn when school facilities lack heating or air conditioning, when bathroom facilities are not clean or usable, when overcrowding forces classes into gyms or denies students their own seats or desks, and when vermin infest hallways or classrooms. Similarly, students who face bullying, harassment or discrimination are less able to focus on learning or even to show up for school. Safe, welcoming school environments should be a basic starting point for education.
- **Improve policies on Student Discipline.** While maintaining a healthy learning environment in schools is very important, a double standard exists in many parts of the nation when it comes to school discipline. Based on the small amount of solid data currently collected, we already 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.
- **Understand Student Cultures and Schooling.** Healthy reform would develop a cadre of well-trained teachers who would move forward with a deep understanding of students' diversity and of how inequality affects them. Effective school policies and practices would seek to bridge the injurious communicative divides among and between students and educators who differ in areas such as race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status.
- **Change the Focus of Testing and Accountability.** Instead of continuous batteries of high-stakes tests, the focus should be on low-stakes, informative testing that enables teachers to understand how well their students are learning. The focus should also be on a portfolio of work that expects students to use the full range of critical thinking skills expected of more advantaged children.
- **Address the Needs of Language Minorities.** Instead of policies that treat language minority students as simply deficient in English, policies can build on and invest in the native language skills these children already possess. Policies that treat these native languages as a resource can cultivate multilingual students

who will have brighter academic futures and who are better able to contribute to our society and economy.

An opportunity gap may arise because of any single one of the factors. But our opportunity gap in the United States is cumulative. Students of color and students from lower-income communities must generally overcome many of these obstacles.

Building Awareness about Opportunity

The national Opportunity Gap campaign, tied to the *Closing the Opportunity Gap* book, hopes to spark awareness that can lead to a change in the way we as a society approach education policy. Next week, for example, a panel of the book's authors will address the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association; a few days later the book's findings and details on the campaign will be presented at a national meeting of the Education Writers Association—a professional organization of journalists who cover education across the country.

Ranking the States

A key part of the Closing the Opportunity Gap campaign will be a state-by-state comparison, to be released in September, that will examine how each state and the District of Columbia compare with regard to opportunities to learn. “We hope this information will be a catalyst for state and district officials to redefine their policy priorities to address the opportunity gap,” said Jackson. “We also hope that state and district leaders can use this information to advocate for more and better-aligned resources that propel those who have fallen behind,” he added.

Concrete Legislation

Another part of the Closing the Opportunity Gap campaign will offer model legislative code provisions that concretely address and remedy the causes of opportunity gaps. This element, too, will be available in the fall.

America’s opportunity gap is hurting the nation’s ability to compete in the global marketplace. Some of our competitors are far ahead of the United States in creating equity in education. For example, South Korea, Finland, and other successful nations

invest heavily to ensure that all children are taught by well-trained and well-supported teachers.

The divide that has developed in our nation's education system also touches on how we see ourselves as Americans. As Welner and Carter emphasize in the new book, "While the nation's leaders have concentrated almost exclusively on an achievement gap policy that measures and sanctions students, teachers and schools, they have ignored the vast opportunity gap—a gap that is even more at odds with American ideals."

More about *Closing the Opportunity Gap* and the Opportunity Gap campaign

Funding for the *Closing the Opportunity Gap* book was provided by the Ford Foundation, which also helps to fund the National Education Policy Center. The book is published by Oxford Press. Excerpts from the book, biographical data on the book's 21 contributors and information about ordering the book can be found at <http://nepc.colorado.edu/ideal> and <http://edpolicy.stanford.edu>.

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