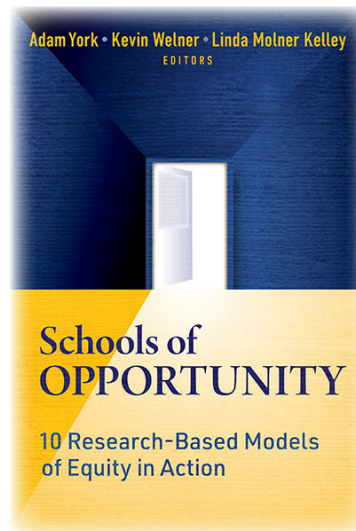




NEW BOOK SHOWS HOW HIGH SCHOOLS CAN BECOME SCHOOLS OF OPPORTUNITY



At South Side High School in Rockville Centre, New York, three decades of districtwide de-tracking reforms have created an environment in which the majority of students complete the requirements for the rigorous International Baccalaureate Diploma and nearly all the students earn their state's Regents diploma with Advanced Designation.

On the other side of the nation, in Seattle, Washington, graduation and attendance rates at the historically African American Rainier Beach High School skyrocketed as the school, once a candidate for closure, implemented a shared leadership model that empowered parents, students, and community members.

And in the nation's heartland, Nebraska's Lincoln High School, which enrolls a vibrant group of resettled refugees, has embraced a policy of treating the native languages of its emerging bilingual students as resources rather than deficits, offering "heritage language Spanish," holding career and education fairs showcasing opportunities for bilingual learners, and creating a "Cultural Ambassadors" program where students help parents and other visitors negotiate the school during public events.

All three schools are among those featured in a new book, *Schools of Opportunity: 10 Research-Based Models of Equity in Action*, edited by NEPC research associate Dr. Adam York, NEPC's Director Kevin Welner, and Dr. Linda Molner Kelley, co-director of the Schools of Opportunity project, an NEPC initiative.

Published last week by Teachers College Press, the book showcases some of the exemplary public high schools recognized by the Schools of Opportunity project. The program honored 52 U.S. high schools from 2015 until it went on hiatus in 2019, when the pandemic made school visits impossible.

Schools of Opportunity was founded to offer a stark alternative to the many school recognition programs that reward schools for enrolling academically elite students—those who, outside of school, have the richest opportunities and therefore produce high test scores. In contrast, the Schools of Opportunity recognition project focuses on what schools actually do. Drawing upon the work of the 2013 book, *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, co-edited by Welner and NEPC Fellow Prudence Carter, a professor at Brown University, it honors schools that demonstrate a commitment to equity and excellence while engaging in research-based practices that close students’ opportunity gaps.

While the project’s work has been on hiatus, the new book picks up where the awards program left off, reporting on updated progress and challenges that have arisen in the years since the schools were recognized.

“This book’s outlook on public schools is highly optimistic,” explain Drs. Matt Garcia and Michelle Renée Valladares in the book’s Introduction. It “shows that educators can successfully pursue equity despite immense obstacles such as educating students during a global pandemic, increasingly polarized political contexts, an educator shortage, and, in many cases, unsupportive policies and limited funding.”

Each of the book’s 10 core chapters focuses on research related to one of the 10 criteria used to select Schools of Opportunity honorees, and each of these chapters is co-authored by a leader of the recognized school along with a researcher with expertise in the focus area. These jointly told stories provide concrete examples of how public schools can use these reforms to increase students’ opportunities to learn and thrive.

For instance, Chapter 2 focuses on Criteria 2, “Create and maintain a healthy school culture, with attention to diversity and to reassessing student discipline,” as exhibited by Revere High, a Massachusetts School of Opportunity where overarching school climate reforms included the replacement of overly punitive, inequitable, and ineffective exclusionary discipline practices with a restorative justice approach that emphasized the need for students to learn from misbehavior by, for instance, coming up with alternative ways to resolve conflicts. And Chapter 6 addresses the need to support and challenge students with disabilities, as exemplified by the work of Clark Street Community School, a Wisconsin honoree that provides a rich and innovative curriculum to a population where roughly half the enrollment is comprised of students with disabilities.

The book’s Conclusion chapter, authored by NEPC Fellow Jeannie Oakes and Welner, considers the problematic and unrealistic demands that society makes of these and other schools. “[W]e place individual schools within their broader contexts, recognizing that exceptional schools will always be just that—*exceptions*—if the policy context favors practices that are less effective and less equitable.”

Oakes and Welner stress the importance of recognizing that factors beyond the control of

schools (e.g., racialized poverty) explain the majority of variation in student outcomes. They then put forward a group of systemic reforms that would restore a balance between schools and the obligations of larger society. These reforms would include reciprocal accountability between students, educators, and parents on the one hand and the policymakers who allocate resources on the other. They would also include adopting opportunity-to-learn standards that focus on equity.

“Schools can mitigate the harms of poverty and racism, but schools cannot mandate that the community’s employers pay a living wage,” Oakes and Welner write.

They cannot reform police forces and carceral systems. They cannot provide housing. Until we see greater investment in young people society-wide, schools will often sit as the primary resource filling these gaps—leaving us to seek isolated examples of amazing, overextended schools.

NEPC Resources on Schools of Opportunity

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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