

ministrators. We cannot look to policies, regulations, and slogans to do the job. □

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— JOSEPH MURPHY —

## Is There Equity in Educational Reform?

Early evidence indicates that, contrary to what many educators fear, current efforts to raise standards are having a positive effect on at-risk students.

A number of thoughtful scholars believe that the reform movement of the 1980s has ignored the needs of minority and disadvantaged students. They fear it will, therefore, exacerbate differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students; legitimize school structures and practices that harm low-functioning students, such as tracking; and compel at-risk students to drop out of school at accelerating rates.

I contend, on the contrary, that the reforms may indeed have a positive influence in promoting educational equity. First, the integrated approach to serving low-SES students that is

embedded in current reform initiatives augurs well for increased equity. Trying to improve equity by superimposing discrete programs onto schools has not been a particularly successful strategy in the past. Current reform initiatives—which are designed for *all* students, align needed special services with core curriculum and instructional activities, and aim to create schools that function as "organic wholes"—offer more promise than did our previous efforts to promote equity.

Second, the basic themes of the current movement also bode well for improved equity. One such theme, "the emergence of concerns for edu-

cational productivity" [outcome focus] (Boyd and Hartman in press), has for the first time prevented the inequitable achievement gains of at-risk students from being explained away. This concern for productivity offers as much promise as anything to date to ensure continued efforts to increase equity. Another theme, "tightening organizational linkages," (e.g., defining goals, raising standards, and so forth) emphasizes what we have known for some time: loosely coupled educational systems put at-risk children at a disadvantage. As linkages are tightened, it becomes increasingly difficult to hide or to

justify the poor performance of disadvantaged students.

However limited the evidence is at this time, recent reports suggest that the important reform efforts are promoting equity in terms of both student access to favorable conditions of learning and student outcomes.

**Dropouts.** The evidence to date shows that, while the overall holding power of schools continues to be unacceptably low, the reform movement has had little impact one way or the other either on the overall dropout rate or on reducing or enhancing the discrepancy between white and minority dropouts (BEPC 1988, California State Department of Education 1986, *Education Week* 1988a, Hawley in press; Odden and Marsh 1988).

**Course enrollments.** The benefits of increased standards in academic requirements have gone disproportionately to minorities and disadvantaged students, especially those who populate low-ability and low-track classes (*Education Week* 1988b, Plank 1987, Bartell and Noble 1986). For example, Grossman and her colleagues (1985) found that academically rigorous courses were increased more at low-SES schools than at high-SES ones.

**Student outcomes.** In terms of equity and student achievement outcomes, preliminary reports indicate that the current reform initiatives are helping at-risk students to improve their performance (Peterson 1988) and are increasing the achievement of

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minority students at a faster rate than for white students (BEPC 1988, Guthrie and Kirst 1988). For example, the most recent (1986) National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics data reveal that not only have black and Hispanic students made steady gains in achievement at all grade levels, but that their progress has been greater and more consistent than the gains of white students (*Education Week* 1988b, p. 29).

The belief that reform in the 1980s has neglected equity issues in its drive for excellence represents a profound misunderstanding of the effects of major elements of the reform. Two facts are emerging about these effects. First, the requirements of minority and special-needs students have not been overlooked in efforts to reform schooling (Guthrie and Kirst 1988, p. 140). What's more important and hopeful, the positive effects of reform have actually been flowing disproportionately to disadvantaged students. □

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**The integrated approach to serving low-SES students that is embedded in current reform initiatives augurs well for increased equity.**

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