EXCELLENCE THROUGH EQUITY

Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student

Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu
Foreword

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Having helped to act as a catalyst and to shepherd one of the world’s few peaceful transitions from a colonial occupation to a democratically elected president, I can say that a movement is born out of the convergence of dire conditions, a powerful idea, and people committed to carrying out that idea. This landmark book, edited by Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera, may be a similar catalyst to such a movement. Complete with a bold and compelling vision, cases of success throughout the world, and a guide to action for the reader, *Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student*, offers a powerful way forward and new hope for millions of children.

The timing for this book is on target, as America may be reaching a breaking point. Some of the signs—growing economic disparities, segregated housing, police brutality, and inequitable education for children—are well known to me and all South Africans who suffered 4 decades of apartheid. Unlike America, the inequities and brutality endured by our people were systematic and officially state-sanctioned. Yet America’s challenges may still feel similar to the children, families, and communities that endure them. Looking from afar at cities throughout America like Ferguson, Missouri, it would seem so.

When a growing number of a country’s citizenry feel overwhelmed, disenfranchised, angry, or hopeless, the possible roads forward are finite and known. Overall economic decline due to neglect of infrastructure and support for the common good is one; violent struggle for power is another. We in South Africa, however, chose a road less traveled. Probably unique in the history of colonialism, White settlers voluntarily gave up their monopoly of political power. The final transfer of power was remarkably
peaceful; it is often described as a “miracle” because many thought that South Africa would erupt into violent civil war.

The challenges in choosing the road to higher moral ground and prosperity for all are many. They include confronting old zero-sum game thinking in which someone must lose. Blankstein and Noguera tackle this head-on and provide a more compelling reality in evidence in schools throughout the world. It more closely aligns with our own most highly held tradition of Ubuntu: “I am because you are.” This view of a united community was a saving grace in South Africa.

Ubuntu was drawn on by our first popularly elected president, Nelson Mandela, and served as an underpinning of our work in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which we ourselves were wounded healers of our people. We attempted to repair the gap between the races by getting the ugly truth of the apartheid regime and of the liberation movements out into the open, granting amnesty even to the worst offenders, and then seeking to find ways of reconciling the conflicting parties. We realized that everyone in the room—from the most powerful leader, to the most victimized young person—had much to learn, and we modeled an environment of equity and equality. We made sure when we had these public hearings that even the furniture layout demonstrated this. We didn’t sit on a platform higher than, but we deliberately sat on a level with the victims.

Fortifying this reality of being stronger united than separated similarly, the authors of this book demonstrate in case after case how every student advances when learning in an equitable system. In such an environment, everyone learns and each person counts.

Allowing for this brighter reality in which all of God’s rainbow children succeed within an equitable environment alarms those who fear for the loss of resources for their own child. Blankstein and Noguera rise to the challenge and, along with their coauthors, offer up schools, districts, and even nations that have discovered a more powerful secret: when done well, school communities focused on equity actually better educate wealthy majority students as well as those who are less privileged!

Following one’s moral compass to an enlightened but less traveled road to success takes courage. Even if the mind is captured by a glorious vision that the heart is morally compelled to pursue, the body will need specific direction and courage to make the journey successfully in the face of many obstacles. Equity Through Excellence takes this into consideration, spotlighting how pioneers in this venture have successfully moved forward, and framing all of this in five principles of Courageous Leadership.

In their section on “The Arguments for Equity,” Blankstein and Noguera share an insight that was also critical to our successful transition
of power: We didn’t struggle in order just to change the complexion of those who sit in the Union buildings; it was to change the quality of our community and society. We wanted to see a society that was a compassionate society, a caring society, a society where you might not necessarily be madly rich, but you knew that you counted. *Excellence Through Equity* provides direction for those bent on creating such a society for generations to come. Letting go of a system of winners and losers in favor of what is proposed in this book is a courageous leap forward that we all must take together. Let this bold, practical book be a guide; and may you travel into this new exciting vista, in which every child can succeed, with Godspeed.

God bless you.
Acknowledgments

This work was catalyzed by many who have taught me about the power of equity, inequity, systems, organizational culture, and leadership. The Jewish Child Care Agency advanced much of this by taking me in as a teenager. The late W. Edwards Deming, my personal mentor, decried the prevailing system of winners and losers and had the courage to do so—and often prevail—in corporate Japan, corporate America, and throughout the world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and the amazing cadre of South African leaders that overthrew apartheid did so to replace that system—not perpetuate it with leaders of a different color. Desmond Tutu’s work, in particular, has moved me and influenced this work since our first meeting in 1994.

It has been a joy to work with and learn from the work of all the authors in this book, particularly my coauthor, colleague, and longtime friend, Pedro Noguera, whose brilliance and passion for this work is superseded only by his love of family and compassion for those in need. I’ve been uplifted for decades by Andy Hargreaves’s work and his support of my own; intellectually stretched by Michael Fullan’s work and honored by his support throughout those same decades; and deeply touched by the humility and humanity of Marcus Newsome. Behind the scenes, this book has been informed and supported by longtime friends and colleagues Jay McTighe and Andy Cole.

At Corwin/Sage the mission for social equity began at the top and long ago. Sara McCune, herself a first-generation American, was imbued with this value and has pursued it relentlessly in her life and work. She is an inspiration and conduit for others committed to justice and advancing the human condition. In keeping with these values, Blaise Simqu and David McCune have unflinchingly followed the moral high ground and demonstrated courageous leadership and integrity in tackling critical challenges while running the Sage Corporation. This particular book is also owed to the affirmative decision and actions of Mike Soules and Lisa Shaw early on—thank you! Dan Alpert, assisted by Cesar Reyes, has been an invaluable
advocate of this work, along with Lorena Kelly, who stepped in and stepped up at every turn, helped to bring this book to light in record speed.

I would like also to thank Deb Delisle, Executive Director of ASCD, for her interest in and support of the work. ASCD’s commitment to educational and social equity is a hallmark that has always been evident through their work and dedication to the Whole Child approach. Our partnership with this preeminent organization and with Deb directly is a thrilling prospect for advancing "the movement" Archbishop Tutu refers to in our foreword.

On a personal note, Sue-Je Gage helped me to realize that an inequitable system—no matter who is on top at any given moment—is still inequitable. Special acknowledgments go to Nancy Shin, also “Nana” to both of my children, who has been an unflinching and essential supporter of equity, and my work in general, since I was a pup—in 1988!

—Alan M. Blankstein

I would like to thank the educators who have collaborated with us over the years; who have allowed us to enter their classrooms and schools; who have confided in us, sharing their fears, challenges, hopes, and dreams. Your hard work and commitment to excellence through equity is a constant reminder of the power and potential of education. Those who dedicate their professional lives to working in the trenches of education and who do so with an unswerving commitment to serving all children well are true heroes and beacons of hope. You are the ones who give us reason to believe that the future for this country may be more just and equitable than the present.

There are a few individuals I worked with at the beginning of my career who I want to single out for additional recognition: George Perry, the former principal of East Campus Continuation School, who used his demotion by the district to become an incredible leader for the most underserved children; Timiza Wagner, who treated each child she encountered with love, dignity, and respect and showed me through her example what it means to truly serve as a role model for young people; Afriye Quamina, who showed me how teaching could be a healing profession; Verde Delp, an English teacher who maintained high standards for all students and provided high levels of support; and Joan Cone, the social studies teacher who single-handedly led the effort to detrack her high school and won over her colleagues and parents in the process.

—Pedro Noguera
About the Editors

Award-winning author and educational leader Alan M. Blankstein served for 25 years as president of the HOPE Foundation, which he founded and whose honorary chair is Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu. A former high-risk youth, Alan began his career in education as a music teacher. He worked for Phi Delta Kappa, March of Dimes, and Solution Tree, which he founded in 1987 and directed for 12 years while launching Professional Learning Communities beginning in the late 1980s. He is the author of the best-selling book *Failure Is Not an Option®: Six Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools*, which received the Book of the Year award from Learning Forward. Alan is senior editor, lead contributor, and/or author of 18 books. He has also authored some 20 articles in publications including *Education Week*, *Educational Leadership*, *The Principal*, and *Executive Educator*. Alan has provided keynote presentations and workshops for virtually every major U.S. education organization and throughout the United Kingdom, Africa, and the Middle East. Alan has served on the Harvard International Principals Center’s advisory board and the Jewish Child Care Agency, where he once was a youth in residence.

Pedro Noguera is a Distinguished Professor of Education in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences at UCLA. His research focuses on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions, as well as by demographic trends in local, regional and global contexts. He is the author of eleven books and over 200 articles and monographs. He serves on the boards of numerous national and local organizations and appears as a regular commentator on educational issues on CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio, and other national news outlets. Prior to joining the faculty...
at UCLA he served as a tenured professor and holder of endowed chairs at New York University (2003–2015), Harvard University (2000–2003), and the University of California, Berkeley (1990–2000). From 2009–2012 he served as a Trustee for the State University of New York (SUNY) as an appointee of the Governor. In 2014 he was elected to the National Academy of Education. Noguera recently received awards from the Center for the Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences, from the National Association of Secondary Principals, and from the McSilver Institute at NYU for his research and advocacy efforts aimed at fighting poverty.

Lorena Kelly is an assistant principal in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She began her career in education as an elementary teacher. After 9 years of teaching, she became an instructional specialist. Her interest in curriculum, specifically literacy, led to a position as a language arts curriculum coordinator. She used this opportunity to work with colleagues and partners to enhance learning for all students. She continues to follow her dreams by returning to a school as a school-level administrator.

Dr. Kelly holds a PhD in education with a concentration in educational leadership. Her interests include literacy, finance, and policy. Currently, she is focusing on literacy and job-embedded professional development to support teachers as they strive to help all students reach their maximum potential.
About the Contributors

**Dr. Ann H. Bacon** is the director of curriculum in Abington School District. Prior to assuming her current position, Dr. Bacon was the coordinator of mathematics, K–12, and a secondary school mathematics teacher in the district. Dr. Bacon graduated from Chestnut Hill College with a bachelor of science degree in mathematics and earned a master’s degree in education and a doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania. She is a recipient of the Pennsylvania Council of Supervisors of Mathematics Hall of Fame Award, the Outstanding Contributions to Mathematics Education Award given by the Association of Teachers of Mathematics of Philadelphia and Vicinity, the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of Mathematics Hall of Fame Award, and the Educational Service Award presented by the Willow Grove Branch of the NAACP. Dr. Bacon has served as the president of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics of Philadelphia and Vicinity and of the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of Mathematics. In addition, she has been a member of the Mathematics Advisory Council for the Pennsylvania Department of Education and has given presentations at national, state, and local conferences. Dr. Bacon is an adjunct instructor in the School of Graduate and Professional Studies at Delaware Valley College.

**Avram Barlowe** has taught history and other social studies subjects in New York City public high schools for 33 years. He is a founding member of the Urban Academy Laboratory High School and an active participant in the New York Performance Standards Consortium. Both the Urban Academy and the Consortium have been featured in the media and several publications. Mr. Barlowe is the author of three publications in the *Teacher to Teacher* series, distributed by Teachers College Press. His American history class was one of those featured on Public Television’s Teaching Channel.

**Darlene Berg** has had a teaching career in elementary schools that has spanned two continents. She has worked in public and private schools in
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the United States, in the state of New Jersey, and in schools outside of Lisbon, Portugal. Her experiences with teaching children from divergent social and cultural backgrounds, as well as opportunities to work with the New Jersey Department of Education’s Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement (CAPA) teams, prepared her for the work she went on to do with the students and teachers of West Orange, New Jersey. She began her career in West Orange 10 years ago, as their elementary math coach. Ms. Berg received a graduate degree in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University and is currently the Math Supervisor (K–5) for the West Orange Public Schools. Darlene and her husband have two children and reside in New Jersey.

Carol Corbett Burris has served as principal of South Side High School in the Rockville Centre School District in New York since 2000. She received her doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University, and her dissertation, which studied her district’s detracking reform in math, received the 2003 National Association of Secondary Schools’ Principals Middle Level Dissertation of the Year Award. In 2010, she was named Educator of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State, and in 2013, she was named SAANYS New York State High School Principal of the Year. Dr. Burris is the coauthor of Detracking for Excellence and Equity (2008, ASCD) and Opening the Common Core: How to Bring ALL Students to College and Career Readiness (2012, Corwin). Her new book, On the Same Track: How Schools Can Join the 21st Century Struggle Against Re-segregation, is available from Beacon Press.

Ann Blakeney Clark brings a quarter-century of experience in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) to her role as deputy superintendent. Clark has held a variety of teaching and administrative positions in CMS since joining the district in 1983 as a teacher of behaviorally and emotionally handicapped children.

Clark’s extensive education background includes serving as principal at elementary, middle, and high schools. She most recently served as the chief academic officer, overseeing the district’s curriculum, professional development, classroom instruction, and school zones.

She graduated from Davidson College with a BA in English and earned a master’s degree in special education from the University of Virginia. She also holds administrator and curriculum and supervision certification from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

In addition to her work with CMS, Clark serves on multiple community boards, including Communities in Schools, Children’s Theatre, the Davidson College Board of Visitors, and Levine Museum of the New South.
Her achievements in education and the community have been widely recognized. She has been named a Broad Superintendent Fellow, Charlotte Woman of the Year, the Thomas Jefferson Distinguished Alumnae Award from University of Virginia, National Principal of the Year (1994), and William Friday Fellow and Council for Great City Schools Outstanding Urban Educator Award winner.

Ann Cook is the director of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a nationally recognized coalition of New York State public secondary schools that uses a system of performance-based assessment in lieu of high-stakes tests. She is the cofounder of the Urban Academy Laboratory High School. Ms. Cook is the editor of the Teacher to Teacher series distributed by Teachers College Press, which includes seven booklets and four DVDs. She is author of several books for children including the Monster series, as well as numerous articles and education publications.

Lucy N. Friedman is the founding president of The After-School Corporation (TASC), which is dedicated to expanding the school day to give disadvantaged kids more opportunities to discover and develop their talents, more support to overcome the challenges of poverty, and more time to achieve at the high levels essential for success in the global workplace. Before joining TASC, Ms. Friedman was the founding executive director of Safe Horizon (formerly known as Victim Services), a crime victim assistance and advocacy organization. She serves on several boards including the Afterschool Alliance, Leadership Enterprise for a Diverse America (LEDA), and the Human Services Council. She is cochair of the New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN). Ms. Friedman received a BA from Bryn Mawr College and a PhD in social psychology from Columbia University.

Michael Fullan, OC, is Professor Emeritus of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Recognized as a worldwide authority on educational reform, Michael is engaged in training, consulting, and evaluating change initiatives around the world, and his books have been published in many languages. He holds five honorary doctorates.

Michael Fullan is currently adviser to the Premier, and to the Minister of Education in Ontario. His book, Leading in a Culture of Change, was awarded the 2002 Book of the Year Award by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), and Breakthrough (with Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola) won the 2006 Book of the Year Award from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Change Wars with Andy
Hargreaves won the 2009 NSDC book of the year award, and *Turnaround Leadership in Higher Education* with Geoff Scott won the 2009 Bellwether book of the year. His latest publications are *Change Leader, Stratosphere, Professional Capital* (with Hargreaves), and *The Principal Leadership*.

More information can be found at www.michaelfullan.ca.

**Andy Hargreaves** is the Thomas More Brennan Chair in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and adviser in education to the Premier of Ontario. Before that, he was the cofounder and codirector of the International Centre for Educational Change at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Andy was the founding editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Educational Change*. His books have achieved outstanding writing awards from the American Educational Research Association, the American Libraries Association, the National Staff Development Council, the International Leadership Association, and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and are translated into many languages. His most recent books are *Uplifting Leadership* (with Alan Boyle and Alma Harris, Wiley Business), *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School* (with Michael Fullan, Teachers College Press 2012), and *The Global Fourth Way* (with Dennis Shirley, Corwin, 2012).

Andy consults widely with educational systems and organizations across the world and is one of the best known and most respected figures in the fields of educational change, leadership, and development.

You can follow Andy on Twitter @HargreavesBC.

**Dr. Linda Harper** is an award-winning secondary school administrator with a career spanning more than 20 years. She has served in many key educational leadership roles. In 2009, while serving as principal of Oak Hill School, the special needs and alternative school programs (STARS Academy) were recognized by the Council of Leaders for Alabama Schools (CLAS) as a CLAS Banner Award recipient. Under her leadership, students in the special needs program successfully met all reading and math goals as well as received local, state, and national recognitions in the area of Special Olympics. Both programs were featured in the National Association of Elementary School Principals Journal. She worked with her leadership team to develop and expand Success Prep Academy. The Academy was featured as an effective program at the 2013 School Superintendents of Alabama Conference. It was also one of the few programs in the state and the only program in the city to receive the Preparing Alabama Students for Success Grant. Success Prep Academy was featured in the 2013 Edition of Voices for Alabama Children, Success Stories as well as featured
at the National Alternative Education Conference. It was also honored as a 2013 CLAS Banner Award recipient. Dr. Harper presented the system’s Success Prep Academy model at the 2014 International Institute for Restorative Practices Conference, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. With proven results, it continues to be a model program for supporting students at risk of leaving high school. She is currently the principal of Paul W. Bryant High School and lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, with her two amazing children, Stephen and Hayleigh.

**Dennis Littky** is the cofounder and codirector of The Met School, Big Picture Learning and College Unbound. He is nationally known for his extensive work in secondary education in urban, suburban, and rural settings, spanning more than 40 years. As an educator, Dennis has a reputation for working up against the edge of convention and out of the box, turning tradition on its head and delivering concrete results. From 2000 to 2010, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave Big Picture Learning 25 million dollars to replicate The Met School nationally and internationally. Currently there is a network of 113 schools, 52 across the country, 40 in Australia, and 21 in the Netherlands.

Presently, Dennis’s focus has been to expand the Big Picture Learning design to include a program, College Unbound, for adults, that allows them to earn a bachelor’s degree while working full time. He also leads the Rhode Island Partnership Project, which is charged with identifying the barriers to access and completion of college degrees for adult learners in Rhode Island, and has recently started a Gateway Course for those interested in returning to school.

Dr. Littky holds a double PhD in psychology and education from the University of Michigan. His work as a principal at Thayer Junior/Senior High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, was featured in an NBC movie, *A Town Torn Apart*, based on the book *Doc: The Story of Dennis Littky and His Fight for a Better School*. In 2004, he wrote (along with Samantha Grabelle) *The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone’s Business*, which went on to win the Association of Educational Publishers’ top award for nonfiction in 2005. In 2003, Dennis was recognized as a leader in education and awarded the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education. *Fast Company* ranked Littky #4 among the top 50 Innovators of 2004, and the George Lucas Educational Foundation recently selected Dennis as part of their Daring Dozen. Locally, Dennis was awarded the Local Hero Award by Bank of America in 2008 and College Unbound was awarded The Innovative and Creative Program Award by UPCEA, New England. Most recently, Dennis was awarded the New England Higher Education Excellence Award in 2011.
Marcus J. Newsome serves as superintendent of Chesterfield County Public Schools in Central Virginia, one of the 100 largest systems in the United States—and a national model for high performing school districts. He is a creative, innovative, and forward-thinking educator who has served as a consultant and adviser to governors, members of the United States Congress, and business leaders around the globe on solutions to close achievement gaps, narrow the digital divide, assessment design, professional development, and 21st century teaching and learning. Dr. Newsome began his career as a teacher in the District of Columbia Public Schools and later served as a curriculum writer, principal, and district administrator in a variety of positions that include superintendent of Newport News Public Schools.

Estrella Olivares-Orellana is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her scholarly interests are in the areas of bilingual and bicultural education, science education in bilingual settings, and the academic experiences of immigrant students. Presently, she is conducting qualitative research with students who have been classified as presenting interrupted formal education. Estrella is a part-time instructor in the department of Arts & Humanities at Teachers College, Columbia University, a full-time bilingual science teacher at a high school in the suburbs of New York, and a contributing editor for Esteem Conversations Between Educators Journal. Estrella holds an EdM in International Educational Development from Teachers College and a BS in Biochemistry from SUNY, Stony Brook.

Paul Reville is the Francis Keppel Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education (HGSE). He is the director of HGSE’s Education Redesign Lab. He recently completed nearly 5 years of service as the Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As Governor Patrick’s top education adviser, Reville established a new Executive Office of Education and had oversight of higher education, K–12, and early education in the nation’s leading student achievement state. Prior to joining the Patrick administration, Reville chaired the Massachusetts State Board of Education, founded the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, cofounded the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education (MBAE), chaired the Massachusetts Reform Review Commission, chaired the Massachusetts Commission on Time and Learning, and served as executive director of the Pew Forum on Standards-Based Reform, a national think tank which convened the United States’ leading researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to set the national standards agenda. Reville’s
career, which combines research, policy, and practice, began with service as a VISTA volunteer/youth worker. He served as a teacher and principal of two urban alternative high schools. Some years later, he founded a local education foundation which was part of the Public Education Network. He holds a BA from Colorado College, an MA from Stanford University, and five honorary doctoral degrees.

Dr. Amy F. Sichel was elected as the 2013–2014 president of the national organization, AASA, The School Superintendents Association, which represents 13,000 school superintendents from across the country. She has been a member of the Abington School District for 37 years and Superintendent of Schools for 14 years. During her tenure in the district, she has served as assistant superintendent, director of pupil services, a school psychologist, and an elementary school counselor. Dr. Sichel is an adjunct associate professor for the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and an adjunct instructor in the School of Graduate and Professional Studies at Delaware Valley College. She graduated from Lafayette College with a major in psychology, and majoring in School Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, she earned her MS and PhD degrees. Dr. Sichel was selected from among the leaders of the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania as the 2010 Pennsylvania Superintendent of the Year and was also named a 2010 eSchool News Tech-Savvy Superintendent Award winner in recognition of her vision, leadership, and accomplishments in educational technology. In addition, Dr. Sichel received from AASA and Farmers Insurance the Women in School Leadership Award in 2012 as a finalist in recognition of outstanding talent, creativity, and vision. Other awards include recognition by the Pennsylvania State Education Association for outstanding service, an educational leadership award from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and recognition by the local chapter of the NAACP. Dr. Sichel was the president of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA) in 2010 to 2011. Dr. Sichel and the Abington School District are recognized nationally for the district’s work in narrowing the achievement gaps for historically underrepresented students.

Dr. Susan Szachowicz retired after serving as the principal of Brockton High School, a large (4,200 students) comprehensive urban high school, and is currently a senior fellow with the International Center for Leadership in Education. At Brockton High for 39 years, Sue describes herself as Brockton High’s greatest cheerleader. Originally a history teacher, she was the social science department head for many years, and then became a housemaster. In 1999, she was appointed the associate
principal for curriculum and instruction and directed the school’s literacy initiatives to improve student achievement. She was appointed principal on January 1, 2004, and in that capacity led the academic turnaround of Brockton High. She has served on numerous state commissions on education reform. Her leadership at Brockton High was committed to “high expectations, high standards—no excuses.” Under her leadership, Brockton High received many state and national honors including recognition as a Massachusetts Compass School, a National Model School by the International Center for Leadership in Education for 12 years in a row, recipient of the National School Change Award, five times the Bronze Medal from U.S. News and World Report as one of America’s Best High Schools, and the Gould Education Award from the Associated Industries of Massachusetts.

Sue received both her BA in History and Sociology and MA in History from Bridgewater State College and earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership and Administration from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

**Saskia Traill** is the vice president, policy and research, at The After-School Corporation (TASC), dedicated to giving all kids opportunities to grow through expanded learning opportunities that support, educate, and inspire them. She is currently leading research and policy efforts for TASC’s ExpandED Schools, a reinvention of urban public schools by bringing together all members of the school and community to expand the day and increase learning options for students. Saskia also leads research and policy efforts in summer learning, high school expanded learning models, and opportunities for children to engage in quality science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Prior to working at TASC, Saskia was a program manager for the Insight Center for Community Economic Development, working to build state systems for early care and education. She has authored and coauthored articles for peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, and reports on a range of issues, including family economics, how to fund innovative education strategies, and engaging kids in STEM. She received her BA from Columbia University and a PhD in research psychology from Stanford University.

**Allison Zmuda** is an author and independent consultant based in Virginia who works with schools and districts to create dynamic learning environments for like-minded educators, parents, and kids. Allison received her undergraduate degree at Yale University and graduated with her teaching certification. She then became a public high school social studies teacher for 8 years and earned National Board Teaching
Certification during that time. Allison went directly from the classroom to being a consultant and author. Allison collaborates with school staff on curriculum assessment and instructional practices to make learning more purposeful, relevant, and engaging for students. She has written seven books to date, most notably The Competent Classroom (2001), Transforming Schools (2004), Breaking Free From Myths About Teaching and Learning (2010), and Learning Personalized: The Evolution of the Contemporary Classroom (early spring 2015). Her latest project is the founding and curating of a website, learningpersonalized.com—a community where students, parents, and educators can view blog posts, share stories, contribute resources, and pose questions for further discussion. Allison can be reached at zmuda@competentclassroom.com. Her Twitter handle is compclass.
PART I

For Every Student

A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.
—Lao-tzu

Powerful leaders are those who have the courage to take the step and embark on the journey. Courage is derived from the French word *coeur*, meaning heart. In many early Native American societies, having “heart” was considered one of the greatest virtues. The primary attributes of this virtue were to strengthen oneself by serving others and to face fears. Educators often make sacrifices and face their fears in service to the success of children. Courageous leadership is necessary to foster change in our educational system.

In the opening section of this book, the authors announce their call to action. A new paradigm is described: one addressing among the most charged issues of our time, enhancing success for all students through equity. Each author highlighted in this book demonstrates one or more of the core principles of Courageous Leadership (Blankstein, 2004, 2010, 2013). Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera challenge the notion of zero-sum thinking (the “haves” versus the “have nots”) and explain the new paradigm grounded in child development, neuroscience, and environmental influences.

In the opening chapter, we outline the makings of a new paradigm and a vision of reaching *Excellence Through Equity* for every student. We also provide a framework of Courageous Leadership as the engine to get us to this vision. Each of the five principles of courage (Blankstein, 2004, 2010, 2013) are exemplified in subsequent chapters by an array of extraordinary contributors to this book. As you will see, these principles are interactive, and more than one of them is present in each of these
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chapters. These principles serve as a frame of reference rather than as a discrete set of activities. Thus, when we describe “getting to your core” as a leader, we recognize that there will be overlap with what it takes for “making organizational meaning” for the entire learning community.

We begin this section from two contributing authors whose chapters demonstrate at the school and system levels, respectively, the interaction of the five principles of courage. Susan Szachowicz, principal of Brockton High School, shows how these core principles have guided the largest high school in Massachusetts from being named one of the lowest performing schools in the state, to being cited as among the top high schools in the country by U.S. News and World Report. The fact that progress continues to be made at the school even after Szachowicz’s retirement is further illustration of her effective leadership.

In Brockton High School, the leadership displayed the “Cycle of Courage” described in this chapter in which the leadership was faced with a crisis brought on by compelling facts, chose to face their fears and the facts of the situation, got to their core, and created organizational meaning and sustained relationships around the purpose and plan to which they held tightly. The plan, developed to serve all students at Brockton High School, also illustrates how the three principles of the new paradigm, a focus on the malleability of the brain, the developmental needs of students (adolescents in this case), and the contextual obstacles they face, were integral to their action plan.

Michael Fullan’s chapter focuses on the big picture by providing the whole-system approach to achieving greater equity. He provides principles that not only increase the chances of achieving greater equity, but he elaborates on how to foster conditions that sustain continuing improvements.

This section lays the foundation upon which the remainder of the book is built. Each section will highlight principles of Courageous Leadership and examples from various perspectives that will help other leaders take the first step for their journey.

REFERENCE

Introduction

Achieving Excellence Through Equity for Every Student

Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera

In education circles, the word equity is often controversial and confusing. When it is brought up to an economically diverse audience, those with affluence and privilege often become squeamish and start looking for the exits, while those in financial need often become more engaged, hoping that a focus on equity will bring relief and attention to what they lack. Such responses tend to occur because when the term equity is raised, it often evokes a zero-sum scenario; a perception that if we do more for those who are disadvantaged it will mean there will be less for the advantaged. When this occurs and the pursuit of equity—which we define as a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed—is subverted by the assumption that there must be winners and losers, rarely is any progress achieved. Invariably, conversations about equity either degenerate into acrimonious debate over how to serve the needs of both privileged and disadvantaged children, objectives that are typically perceived as irreconcilable, or we lapse hopelessly into a state of paralysis.

This book offers a way to move beyond zero-sum thinking and compelling reasons to do so. In the following chapters we provide practical, detailed accounts of what schools, districts, classrooms, and community-based organizations are doing to promote excellence through equity. We also show through these cases that overcoming the impasse between the pursuit of excellence and equity is essential if we are to avoid remaining trapped on a path that is not only generating greater inequality in academic outcomes but also contributing to deeper inequality within our society generally.
U.S. EDUCATORS ARE SWIMMING AGAINST A WAVE OF POOR POLICY

The persistence of disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes has contributed to America’s decline in educational performance in comparison with other nations. Results from the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that American students have made little progress, and in some cases declined, relative to children in several other wealthy nations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Closer examination of the results shows that growing inequality is a central factor contributing to America’s educational decline. Recent results from scores on the ACT show that only 39% of those students who recently took the exam were deemed college ready. Of these, only 11% of African Americans and 18% of Latinos passed with scores that met the college-ready threshold, while 49% of Whites and 57% of Asians met the mark (Resmovitz, 2014). Given that the majority of children in our nation’s schools are presently students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and people of color are projected to make up the majority of the U.S. population by the year 2041 (Frey, 2013), these trends are especially troubling.

Furthermore, our nation has higher levels of child poverty than most other wealthy nations, with 23%, or almost one in four children, coming from households in poverty. In the nation’s largest urban school districts the number of children from impoverished families is considerably higher. Unlike many nations that outperform us, we tolerate gross inequities in school funding, in access to quality preschool, and in health care (Sahlberg, 2011). Despite compelling evidence that growing poverty and inequality are at least partially responsible for our decline in educational performance (Barton & Coley, 2010), policy makers have largely ignored the issue. Instead, they have fixated on the idea that slippage in academic performance can be reversed simply by raising academic standards and increasing accountability on educators despite consistent evidence that the strategy has not worked (Fullan & Boyle, 2014).

There is compelling evidence based on comparisons with nations that have outperformed ours that the policy direction we have pursued has contributed to our decline relative to other nations (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Despite this evidence, policy makers from both major parties have been unwilling to consider a new set of strategies or to change course. A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education called for greater focus on equity in funding and educational opportunities (Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). Despite the report, the federal government has not called for a change in policy, and we continue to focus
narrowly on accountability and standards. Instead of building the capacity of schools and providing them with additional support to meet the complex needs of students, we continue to rely on pressure and humiliation as a means of prodding schools to improve. The strategy hasn’t worked, and it is increasingly clear that it never will. Ignoring equity, not merely in education but in wages, housing, health, and quality of life, has contributed to widening levels of inequality and is undermining our well-being and our future as a nation.

AN EQUITY TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS

There is an alternative to growing inequality (in education at least) or remaining trapped indefinitely in a zero-sum quagmire. The alternative is to recognize that equity and excellence are not at odds, and that the highest level of excellence will actually be obtained through the pursuit of equity. To many, excellence through equity may seem like an implausible or even a radical concept. In some ways it is, given the policy direction we have pursued in recent years, but closer examination reveals that it has been a central part of the human experience for centuries. It was inherent in the message and the ethos that Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to push through the New Deal, that made it possible for a president from Texas (LBJ) to overcome powerful opposition in Congress to obtain approval of the Civil Rights Act, and that compelled the U.S. government to cooperate with Martin Luther King Jr. as he and others marched and organized for a peaceful end to American apartheid. In all three examples it is clear that by advancing equity the greater good of society would be furthered, or as Eleanor Roosevelt put it: “We do well when we all do well.”

Similarly, a commitment to excellence and equity has been central to many of our nation’s advances in education. The idea that we could achieve excellence through equity made it possible for President Lyndon Johnson to overcome opposition from southern legislators and enact Title I, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as a key provision of the effort to expand civil rights and launch the war on poverty. Later, the principle of excellence through equity served as an essential premise for advancing the educational rights of women (Title IX), linguistic minorities (Lau v. Nichols, 1974), and the disabled (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014). It served as an effective rationale once again when the Clinton administration moved to significantly expand access to the internet for poor children in American schools during the 1990s (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and when President Obama launched the Promise Neighborhoods initiative.
What each of these examples has in common is recognition that societal progress is contingent upon expanding opportunities for all. These examples also remind us that in certain crucial aspects of life, the advancement of a small group cannot be achieved or sustained unless the larger population, including the most vulnerable, is allowed to share in the benefits. FDR didn’t demand a New Deal for Democrats or northerners. Martin Luther King Jr. did not organize to demand a better life for Blacks alone while poor Whites and others languished in poverty. These visionary leaders understood that everyone would benefit when justice and opportunity was available to all. In a similar way, advancements in educational opportunities that have helped to eliminate structural barriers related to race, gender, poverty, and learning differences have benefited our entire society. In the United States, measures to expand civil rights for some have incrementally enlarged rights for all people and increased our ability to provide quality education to all children. Equity-based reforms have strengthened our democracy by reducing some, though by no means all, of the blatant injustices. They have also increased the ability of those who were once discriminated against and excluded to contribute to the advancement of the very society that had previously held them back.

When seen in this context, the notion that excellence can be pursued through equity is an idea that is neither novel nor far-fetched; it has been central and essential to human progress throughout time. When the idea has been applied to education it has allowed our society to move closer to living up to its democratic ideals, and it has increased the number of people who are able to participate fully in our society as genuine enfranchised members (Katznelson & Weir, 1985).

Throughout this book, we advance the idea that expansion of equity in education does not pose a threat to those with power and wealth. Instead, we argue that when equity is advanced it actually benefits those who are able to provide their children with the very best opportunities. It does so by helping them to develop a sense of empathy and compassion toward those who are less fortunate and to acquire emotional and intellectual skills that are essential to success in the 21st century (Wagner, 2008). As we will show, when the privileged are denied the opportunity to work with people from diverse backgrounds, they lose the ability to effectively interact with the vast majority of the population with whom they will ultimately have to share the planet.

We have ample evidence that by focusing narrowly on what we perceive as our self-interests, we are not only harming the common good but undermining the best interests of our own children. The efforts of affluent parents to secure a place for their children in elite preschools while poor and middle-class parents struggle to secure adequate care for their babies...
undermines our ability to provide each child with the opportunity to succeed in life. Similarly, when economically disadvantaged parents surreptitiously enroll their children in affluent school districts only to be removed and charged with crime upon discovery, it should serve as a reminder that we cannot afford to secure educational advantages for the few while others put up with woefully inadequate conditions. Certainly, most parents will do whatever it takes to secure excellent educational opportunities for their children. The mythology that must be challenged is that we can afford to take care of our children while ignoring the needs of others, and we must do so by showing that by helping others it is actually beneficial to our own children.

This book challenges the mythology that “haves” and “have nots” are divided by insurmountable barriers and difference. In its place we put forward the premise that it is in our common interest to ensure that all young people receive an education that allows them to cultivate their talent and potential. Finding ways to do this should be the mission of education, and it is indeed becoming the focus of the most successful schools and districts in America and beyond. History has shown us that separation and segregation will never provide a road that leads to excellence. Nor will maintaining the either/or dichotomy that keeps us looking out for ourselves and prevents us from pursuing strategies that benefit all. This book demonstrates how adopting the win-win paradigm based on the pursuit of excellence through equity can lead to better outcomes for every student.

In the 21st century, demography need not determine destiny, and a child’s race and class can be decoupled from how well they will do in school or college. A vast body of research has shown us that talent and ability are present among all types of children (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2011). As we show in the pages ahead, we now have strategies and interventions that make it possible to meet the educational needs of a wide variety of learners. The real issue is how to make these resources available to educators rather than rehashing the debate over whether or not we can or should educate all children. In the following section, we review and challenge some of the common beliefs that are barriers to the attainment of excellence through equity.

**THE ARGUMENTS FOR INEQUITY**

In the prevailing paradigm, it is widely believed that there are limited resources available and that it is necessary, though perhaps unfortunate, for scarce resources to be distributed in a manner that assures success of some and likely failure of others. The operating assumption is that if we
redistribute resources in a more equitable manner, those who gained in the past will begin to lose, and those previously short-changed will advance at their expense. This mental model forms the basis of the following arguments:

**If we spend money in one place, we don’t have it to spend elsewhere—it’s that simple.** This presumption leads many to advocate for resources and policies that will benefit their child—even when it clearly comes at the expense of other children. Under this scenario, only the most high-minded and altruistic people would conceive of yielding resources for their children in order to advance the interests of others. Yet, this is only part of the picture. While financial resources are indeed essential to obtain resources such as technology or to support excellent instruction, there is considerable evidence that staff morale, school culture, and collaborative relationships premised on trust and respect among teachers and parents are as important if not more so than financial resources alone, as demonstrated by several of the examples used in this book. Moreover, there is evidence that suggests that when highly qualified educators are deliberately placed in low-performing schools, *all schools* benefit, as was the case in the award-winning Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools—the subject matter of Chapter 6.

**If my child is forced to collaborate with poor students, he or she will be pulled down academically.** In the past decade, the number of school districts that have considered socioeconomic status (SES) in student placement has grown from a few to more than 80 (Kahlenberg, 2012). This has made it possible to carry out more research on the impact of diversity (based on race, SES, and perceptions of ability) in the classroom. Some research shows that a mix of students by SES, race, and ethnicity can improve performance in higher math courses among students who were previously low achievers (Mickelson & Bottia, 2010). Several of the chapters featured in the pages ahead show that when students from diverse backgrounds learn together and are taught by teachers who know how to provide differentiated support, all children can benefit. Furthermore, research shows that in schools that are diverse with respect to race and SES, the achievement of advantaged students has not been harmed by desegregation policies (Harris, 2008, p. 563).

Subsequent chapters demonstrate how classrooms have been structured to improve math and literacy skills and performance of students at all levels simultaneously; how tapping students’ native language and culture advances their achievement while enriching classes for students overall; and how systems of engagement, assessment, and project-based learning can effectively be deployed for all kinds of students, creating
equity within several schools in the largest system in the United States—the New York City Public Schools.

**Changing paradigms is difficult, especially when it involves changing attitudes about race and resources!** Indeed this is the case, and for that reason we have framed this book around the theme of “courage.” As we will show, pushing for excellence through equity requires great courage and conviction. We provide the five principles of Courageous Leadership at the end of the chapter as a guide for others who seek to follow this path. Interestingly, we were surprised to find that many of the leaders in this book who embraced these principles—intentionally or not—found far less resistance to their shift to equity than they had expected. This is true in the case studies of several of the districts, one state, and at least two countries described in coming chapters.

### THE ARGUMENTS FOR EQUITY

**It’s the right thing to do.** That members of a society share a moral imperative to assure that every child gets what he or she needs to succeed is in many ways the most important, and—until recently—the major argument that has been advanced by human rights movements throughout much of the world. While some comply with equity mandates as a result of external pressure or desegregation orders, we would argue that the courageous action and leadership that is required to enact excellence through equity can only be *sustained* if they are grounded in clear and unflinching moral reasoning. Several of the leaders profiled in subsequent chapters were successful in overcoming opposition by framing the need for change as a moral imperative. This book is rooted in the moral high ground but also based on evidence that shows that advancing equity is both *morally* and *practically* the “right thing to do.”

**The most advantaged and successful students do even better in an equitable school setting.** Schools committed to equity don’t do so by limiting opportunities for the most advanced students. On the contrary, by providing differentiated support to all students, academically advanced students can have a richer educational experience. When efforts are made to integrate students from a variety of backgrounds, the learning environment becomes more compelling and enriched. When Langston Hughes’s poetry is analyzed by Black, brown, and White students together, all students gain more than when they learn in homogeneous settings. Chapter contributors Dennis Littky and Darlene Berg share examples in which the
social/emotional skill development critical to a 21st century education becomes integral to learning when students communicate with others across cultures and economic status. Similarly, teaching strategies become much more complex and sophisticated as teachers are challenged to reach every student and incorporate every learning style.

**Financial support for schools may actually increase.** It is often the case that those who do well get more attention and opportunities to do even better. Many of the educators, schools, and districts highlighted in this book have won prestigious awards, recognition, and additional funding to expand the meaningful work they were already doing on behalf of children in greatest need. For example, Brockton High School, the largest high school in the state of Massachusetts, has received numerous awards for its success in serving a racially and socioeconomically diverse student population. Charlotte-Mecklenburg just received the Broad Prize based on the outcomes of their equity agenda. And in suburban Abington, Pennsylvania, students attending private and charter schools were drawn back to the public schools by parents who were impressed with the philosophy and student gains experienced by this equity-embracing district!

**Parental, staff, and community support grows.** In other chapters that follow, leaders describe their initial fears and the ensuing conflict and anger that erupted in the community over educational changes, like making AP classes accessible to all students in the district. In such cases, even some of the most ardent detractors to equity eventually became champions of change.

**The alternative to equity is catastrophic.** In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu describes the “nine fighting grounds” and the pros and cons of each. The ninth, in which the trapped enemy has no means of escape, was described as the most treacherous to the apparent victor, and should be avoided at all costs, because the prevailing army would face an enemy with “nothing to lose.”

As we have seen inequities widen and despair grow in communities where poverty has become deeply entrenched, more and more people have come to the conclusion that they have no possibility of improving their lives. When hope disappears, some become despondent and turn to substance abuse while others come to the conclusion that they want change now and that they have nothing to lose. In some countries, this has led to revolutions (most recently, the “Arab Spring”), and more recently it has produced social upheaval in the United States in communities like Ferguson, MO. However, we also have rare examples like that of South
Africa, where we have seen hope expand through advances in equity (albeit very slowly). This was made possible by the enlightened leadership of the African National Congress, which assumed power without punishing the White minority. Rather than trading places with their former oppressors and inflicting pain on the White minority, Mandela and his allies opted to dismantle the system of apartheid instead.

It is increasingly clear that if we do not address the profound inequities in education, the disparities in learning opportunities that are behind the so-called achievement gap, our entire society will be imperilled. Pursuing excellence through equity is a genuine alternative. In the pages ahead we demonstrate how this can be done by nothing less than a paradigm shift from our current one-size-fits-all factory model, the inevitable outcome of which is failure and hopelessness for increasing numbers of children, to a system that celebrates individual differences and serves the needs of every student.

A NEW PARADIGM

The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process . . . Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations . . . When the transition is complete, the profession will have changed its view of the field, its methods, and its goals.

— Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), 84–85

What we want to achieve in our work with young people is to find and strengthen the positive and healthy elements no matter how deeply they are hidden.

— Karl Wilker, 1921

This book is about how to create schools and learning communities where all students are able to thrive. Instead of being defined by their behavior (e.g., hyperactive, disruptive, etc.), labeled because of their needs (e.g., slow, insolent, etc.), and discarded, all children must be served by schools that are organized to meet their needs. This means that educators must take time to get to know all students so that they can spend time cultivating talents and build on their potential. By building on
strengths and addressing the factors that underlie learning difficulties and behavior problems, educators are in a better position to instill confidence and, ultimately, promote independence.

Instead of schools that practice a form of triage—giving the best resources to those regarded as having the most potential, and the least to those perceived as too troubled or inferior to be worthy of a quality education, we need schools that are committed to the success of every child; where the learning needs of all children can be served. Equity is premised upon a recognition that because all children are different there must be a deep commitment to meet the needs of every child in order to ensure that each student receives what he or she needs to grow and develop and ultimately to succeed.

As we have stated, creating a school community in which excellence through equity is the ultimate objective would be transformational, not only for the disadvantaged but for all students. The good news is that this is an attainable goal. We know this because this goal is steadfastly being pursued in a small number of classrooms, schools, and districts right now. It is also a central feature of educational policy in some nations. This book includes many illustrations of how the commitment to excellence through equity is being achieved with different types of children. The contributors provide insights into the strategies that have been used and the challenges they have faced. We are convinced that by exercising persistence and courageous leadership (the subject of the final section of this chapter), these successes can be replicated in other settings across the United States.

However, we realize that for the pursuit of excellence and equity to occur on a larger scale we need much more than a new set of reform strategies. We need a new paradigm to guide us; one that can help us to escape the assumption that there must be winners and losers and that can free us from zero-sum thinking that presently limits us. A new paradigm is much more than a new policy, strategy, or set of practices and techniques. A new paradigm is premised on a different epistemological outlook that makes it possible for us to see our work through a different lens. According to Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), shifts in paradigms occur when scientists encounter anomalies that cannot be explained by the paradigm that previously provided the framework for scientific inquiry. A paradigm, in Kuhn’s view, is an entire worldview that defines the basic features of the landscape of knowledge that scientists can identify around them.

Although Kuhn thought of paradigms exclusively in reference to science, we can apply the concept, with some degree of modification, to education. In American education, the paradigm that has guided our thinking about teaching and learning has been rooted in the belief that intelligence
is an innate property that can be measured and assessed (Lehman, 1996). It is also intimately tied to the concept of meritocracy, the notion that society should be organized on the basis of merit (e.g., talent, effort, and skill) rather than privilege or status (Bell, 1973). The meritocratic ideal gave rise to the development of intelligence tests that were used in the early 20th century to identify the capabilities of individuals and rationalize promotions and ranks within the military, admissions to colleges and universities, and in some cases, job placements (Fischer, 1996).

In many respects, the concept of meritocracy was an advance over the beliefs and practices of the 19th century that rationalized slavery, the subordination of women, and other forms of discrimination. This is because it was well-aligned to the emerging notion of the American dream; the idea that in this country, intelligence, hard work, and natural talent would be rewarded and have greater value than inherited privilege. As the concept of meritocracy gained currency during the 20th century, it became easier to challenge discriminatory practices and to call for barriers to opportunity, especially those that were related to education, to be removed (Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Of course, the concept of meritocracy is undermined by the fact that those with inherited wealth and privilege still retain considerable advantage over others. Affluent parents are less dependent on schools. They typically have access to a wide variety of resources that make it possible for their children to keep ahead. Nonetheless, the emergence of the ideal of meritocracy was an important step forward because it introduced the notion that achievement should serve as the basis for organizing social hierarchies rather than race, class, religion, or other inherited forms of privilege.

Yet, despite the advances achieved under the meritocracy paradigm, it has clearly outlived its usefulness. In most schools throughout the United States, a child’s race, socioeconomic status, and zip code continues to predict not only how well he or she will do in school but also the quality of school he or she will attend. While it is certainly good to reward talent and effort, it is also important to recognize that some children are denied the opportunity to have their talents developed because their families lack the time and resources to invest in them, and the schools they attend are often unable to develop their latent abilities. Too many students possess talents and potential that are unrecognized in school, especially when their parents lack the ability to advocate for their educational needs. The current approach to educating children has left us with millions who leave school disinterested in learning and unprepared for work, college, or the challenges of life in the 21st century. If we truly seek to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop their potential, we will need a new approach to teaching and learning, one that matches what we now know about the nature of intelligence.
We need a new paradigm in order to move beyond the fear and trepidation that keeps us clinging to the idea that there must be winners and losers and that allows us to accept the failure of so many children in so many schools. High drop-out rates and pervasive failure, particularly in schools serving poor children, are by-products of the meritocracy paradigm that allowed us to believe that individual talent and grit are all that’s needed to overcome society’s obstacles. In order to free ourselves from the traditions and practices that keep us locked in predictable patterns of success and failure, we must embrace a new paradigm, one that makes it possible to pursue excellence through equity for all.

If we want to create schools where all students have the opportunity to be challenged and stimulated, and where their talents can be cultivated, we need a different paradigm to guide our schools. It could be argued that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) took us a step in that direction. When the law was enacted in 2001, for the first time in U.S. history schools were required to produce evidence that all children, regardless of race, class, or status, were learning. It was a bold idea except the only evidence schools were required to look for was how well students performed on standardized tests. While testing, and assessment generally, is an important tool that can be used to monitor learning (and even more beneficial when used to diagnose learning needs), NCLB has actually reinforced the notion that students can or should be judged based on how well they perform on tests. In many schools it has also led to a narrowing of the curriculum. Art, music, and even physical education are not tested subjects, so in many schools they are treated as extras that can be cut when resources are scarce or to create more time for subjects that will be tested. Sadly, rather than moving us forward, NCLB has reinforced the tendency to make premature and often inaccurate judgments about the abilities of children and has left the so-called achievement gap, which it was designed to ameliorate, largely untouched.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE NEW PARADIGM FOR EXCELLENCE THROUGH EQUITY

The new paradigm we are offering for achieving excellence through equity is grounded in knowledge derived from three important areas of research: (1) child development, (2) neuroscience, and (3) environmental influences on child development and learning. While awareness about the importance of these three sources of knowledge to education has been around for many years, what we think is new is a recognition of how the three interact and can be used to meet the needs of individual students.
and guide the development of educational policy and practice. As we briefly spell out the specific aspects of what we think of as the three pillars of the paradigm, throughout the book we pay particular attention to their interaction and application.

**Child Development**

For the longest time, educational theory and practice has been guided by research in child development. The early architects of formal education (e.g., Froebel) recognized that that the cognitive, emotional, psychological, and physical development of children were interrelated, and that the capacity of children to undertake different learning tasks was related to their progression on different stages of the life cycle (Wood, 1998). Research from child development has influenced the development of school curricula (Connor, Morrison, & Petrella, 2004), learning strategies that have been applied within schools (Chatterji, 2006), and most importantly, the training of teachers (Ames, 1990, 1992). A central theme in the literature that has guided this work is the recognition that while child development followed typical patterns that correspond to age, there are also significant variations in how and when children acquire skills during different stages. Individual differences, differences in social context, and differences in culture have all been recognized as having bearing on the development process. For example, while it is common for most children to learn to walk sometime between 8 and 15 months, or to learn to use the potty independently sometime between age 2 and 4, the range for what is considered normal in acquiring these skills is quite broad. Furthermore, most developmental psychologists and pediatricians recognize that if a child is more advanced or delayed in acquiring these skills it does not necessarily mean that they are gifted or abnormal (Brooks-Gunn, Fuligni, & Berlin, 2003).

In recent years, educational practice has been less aligned with knowledge and research derived from child development. As policy makers have become more focused on holding schools accountable for producing evidence of student achievement as measured by performance on standardized tests, recognition of how variations in child development relate to reaching milestones such as learning to read has increasingly been ignored. Since the adoption of NCLB and its accompanying mandate for schools to produce evidence that students were achieving “average yearly progress” in math and literacy (Brooks-Gunn, et al., 2003), recognition of variations in child development have been replaced by the assumption that all children of the same age or grade should be able to acquire similar skills at a similar pace, regardless of who they are, whether
or not their first language is English, the types of schools in which they are educated, or their life circumstances (Paris & Newman, 1990).

As we will show in the pages ahead, schools and academic programs that are committed to the principle of pursuing excellence through equity strive to address the developmental needs of each student. In fact, many attempt to personalize learning for their students in order to ensure that their needs are met. While personalized learning plans may seem beyond the skills and resources of most schools, a number of new innovations in the field of education are making it possible.

However, even when schools and academic programs that are committed to excellence and equity do not have access to such resources, some are still devising creative strategies to meet student needs. For example, rather than assuming that all students should read with proficiency by the third grade, some of the educators we feature in these chapters have developed practices grounded in an understanding of child development that make it possible for English language learners and children who learn differently (e.g., those who are dyslexic) to receive more support and take more time as they are learning to read in English. This is not a matter of lowering expectations or accepting that some children won’t learn to read; it is simply an approach rooted in the recognition that not all children learn to read at the same pace. Similarly, while it might be a good thing to encourage high school students to take rigorous math courses such as Algebra and Geometry, some schools have figured out that if a student’s literacy skills are not strong enough to comprehend complex word problems, it might not make sense to require such courses unless additional literacy support can be provided.

As we will show, when such an approach was implemented at Brockton High School, it not only benefited the large number of English language learners at the school; it also helped the large number of students that entered high school with limited literacy skills. In each of the examples that will be shared in the pages ahead, the educators, schools, and programs demonstrate a profound recognition that understanding and responding to the developmental needs of each student is the only way to ensure that they will receive the education they need.

**Neuroscience**

In recent years, neuroscientists have gone from regarding the brain as a static organ that undergoes few changes after early childhood, to understanding that the neural pathways and synapses that wire the brain go through ongoing changes in response to behavior, the environment, and neural processes. The term *neuroplasticity* has been used to describe the
ability of the brain to continue developing through neuronal activation in response to stimulation and experience. A growing body of neuroscientific research suggests that experience can actually change both the brain’s physical structure and its functional organization well into adulthood (Pascual-Leone, Amedi, Fregni, & Merabet, 2005).

Research on the brain has significant implications for how we think about how children learn. For years, schools have relied on testing to sort students into groups or tracks, presumably for the purpose of efficiently meeting their learning needs. These practices have persisted despite evidence from research on tracking that has shown that such practices almost always result in separating students by race and SES. When this occurs, invariably low-income and minority students are consistently more likely to be placed in slow and remedial groups, while the most affluent and privileged children are generally placed in the advanced groups (Oakes, 2005). Given what we know about the elasticity of the brain, these practices are not only outdated and uninformed by the latest research; they also deny numerous children the right and opportunity to have their learning needs met. According to Fischer and Bidell (2006), “The brain is remarkably plastic, even in middle or old age, it’s still adapting very actively to its environment” (p. 27). Several researchers have shown that when students are encouraged to view academic success as a product of hard work rather than an outgrowth of natural intelligence, they are more likely to perform at higher levels (Dweck, 1999; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Research has also shown that when students learn about the malleability of the brain it can actually improve their performance in school (Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007). Furthermore, when teachers understand that learning is facilitated by the formation of new or stronger neural connections, they are able to prioritize activities that help students tap into already-existing pathways by integrating academic subjects or devising class projects that are relevant to their students’ lives.

As we will show in the pages ahead, a number of schools and districts are drawing upon research from neuroscience to provide students with the instructional supports needed to advance academically. Their success, and the research that supports it, provides further evidence that we can do much more to cultivate talent and ability in children.

Environmental Influences

For many years, educators have understood that environmental influences, including family, peer groups, and neighborhood environmental factors, have an influence upon child development and student learning (Rothstein, 2004). Neighborhood environmental factors may include air
quality, interpersonal and institutional violence, the quality of housing, and even the level of noise or quality of water a child is exposed to on a regular basis (Jackson, Johnson, & Persico, 2014). In more recent times, awareness about how the environment impacts children has been extended to include recognition that even less direct environmental influences such as media, video games, music, and other forms of popular culture also have tremendous influence on the development of children (Syme, 2004).

Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner theorized that there were five layers to the environmental context that impact an individual’s growth and development: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (1975). Bronfenbrenner’s theory focused on the impact that environment played on the growth and development of the individual. Bronfenbrenner’s work is important because it draws attention to the various layers of environment, from the interpersonal to even broader societal trends such as de-industrialization and immigration, and how they impact the individual.

As poverty rates have risen in recent years, a growing number of researchers have drawn attention to the ways in which food insecurity, poor health, lack of safety, housing instability, violence, and poor nutrition negatively influence the welfare and well-being of children (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Similarly, for immigrant children who often remain connected to families and relatives abroad even as they settle in the United States, war, famine, and natural disasters can all have tremendous bearing on their well-being and their academic performance (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009).

While the relationship between the environment and student learning may seem obvious, in recent years, education policy has increasingly ignored the influence of environmental factors on children. Rather than devising or even recommending strategies that might make it possible for schools to respond to and mitigate harmful environment factors, policies at the federal and state level have adopted a context-blind approach and largely failed to acknowledge the ways in which the environment affects schools and children.

As an alternative, we suggest that schools must take time to deliberately understand the environmental factors that influence the children they serve. Plant closures, toxic waste sites, gangs, housing foreclosures, the absence of healthy food, and other conditions can have significant influence on children and learning. While schools may not be able to counter the harmful effects that arise from such conditions, they are more likely to be able to create strategies to counter and even mitigate these conditions if they understand how they may be influencing their
students. For example, some of the schools that will be described in the following chapters developed partnerships with health clinics and after-school programs to address needs that they could not respond to on their own. While such strategies do not eliminate environmental obstacles, these examples show that when such strategies are pursued, which we describe as a more integrated and holistic approach, the ability of schools to meet the needs of their students is increased.

When these three pillars of the excellence through equity paradigm are used together in a coherent system for responding to and addressing the needs of children, the ability of schools to meet the developmental and academic needs of students increases significantly. When this occurs, the pursuit of excellence through equity becomes possible and attainable, but of course, never easy. We are under no illusion that the forces responsible for growing inequality can be easily abated through the adoption of a few strategies. That is why we describe the approach we are calling for as a new paradigm because we think it represents a very different way of thinking about how schools can serve the learning needs of students. Our hope is that readers will be inspired by these examples to think about how the paradigm can be applied in more classrooms, schools, cities, states, and beyond. While all elements of this paradigm are not necessarily reflected in the examples that will be presented in the pages ahead, we think the paradigm itself serves as a useful framework for thinking about how schools can effectively pursue excellence through equity.

PRINCIPLES OF ACTION

It is very important that our readers understand that we do not envision the pursuit of excellence through equity as a set of strategies that can be followed in a formulaic manner. On the contrary, we believe it is important to acknowledge that because children are different with respect to their interests, temperament, and needs, the strategies employed to serve their needs must vary. Equity is not about treating all children the same. However, schools and educators that use the three pillars of this paradigm—child development, neuroscience, and recognition of environmental influences—to guide their action will undoubtedly rely upon strategies that are similar. For example, some of the schools and districts we feature rely upon performance-based assessment to gauge student learning and personalized learning plans to monitor their progress and ensure that their needs are being met. Many of the educators also recognize that a key feature of equity is providing disadvantaged students with more learning time through high quality after school and summer
learning experiences and increased exposure to the world outside the communities where their students reside to expand their horizons. These and other strategies will be described in detail in the pages ahead.

Second, the pursuit of excellence through equity invariably involves forging collaborative relationships among adult stakeholders—parents (or guardians), teachers, and administrators. When these adults begin working together to support the success of every student, possibilities for breaking predictable patterns of achievement increase. Of course, getting adult stakeholders to work together is challenging and sometimes involves conflict. As we will show, establishing shared goals for every student requires willingness and an ability to deliberate thoughtfully about what is in the best interests of the child. There must also be shared responsibility for ensuring that all students are equipped with the skills they will need for the future. Providing teachers with the social skills to have candid conversations with parents across race, class, and language differences, and supporting principals and superintendents so that they can handle the resistance mounted by affluent parents when they protest a decision to detrack a college prep course or expand access to advanced placement classes, is challenging to say the least. Yet, as we will show in the pages ahead, creating a sense of shared accountability for the long-term outcomes of students is a common characteristic of schools and programs that are committed to these values.

We realize that one of the most complicated issues at the center of this work is defining what success means for every student. When administrators do not pledge to get all students into college or promise that all students will graduate proficient in core subjects like literacy and math, it may seem like a step backward and open those individuals to attacks. However, we have already seen that grand promises like those associated with NCLB have not resulted in success for every student. In fact, because NCLB largely ignored the conditions under which children are educated and focused narrowly on test score results, it did relatively little to improve educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged students, the very students its advocates claimed it would help (Darling-Hammond, 2011). As we will show, calling for schools to set high but realistic goals for every student need not result in a drift back to the time when we assumed children from poor and working-class backgrounds were not college material and should instead be prepared for a trade. If we remain vigilant and focused on outcomes, if we examine achievement patterns to make sure that they don’t become predictable with respect to the race and class of students, and if we genuinely hold all stakeholders—educators, policy makers, parents, community leaders, and students—responsible for their role in promoting academic success, it should be possible to create schools where a child’s
background does not predict how well he or she will do academically and that serve all children in significantly better ways than the ones we have now.

When there is mutual accountability and a shared commitment to the common goal of meeting the needs of all students among all stakeholders, schools can begin to realize the goal of excellence through equity. As our authors show in the pages ahead, some schools are doing this now by aiming for mastery in learning rather than settling for passing or even proficiency in critical subjects. They are doing it by ensuring that the support systems are in place for teachers so that they are clear about what effective teaching is and so that they can deliver high quality learning experiences to their students. When these principles are reflected in our work, the most important question that educators ask of themselves is this: Have we created learning environments that make it possible to serve the needs of every student? By focusing on the conditions within schools, the climate and the culture of the learning environment, it is easier to shift learning outcomes for students. Because they are not preoccupied with blaming students, parents, or the neighborhoods they live in for poor academic outcomes, the schools, programs, and educators we feature are able to ensure that the futures of the students they serve are not determined by demographics. These are the challenges that educators in various parts of the country and throughout the world are actively pursuing when they commit to the goal of excellence through equity.

Finally, the reader will undoubtedly be struck by the fact that the starting point for working toward the goal of excellence through equity is creating a community where the needs of each student are thoroughly known, and each member understands his or her role. By knowing our children—how they learn, what motivates them, what challenges they face, and so on—we are better able to create an environment in which all students can get what they need to succeed. We will also show that students can be part of this process, and spaces can be provided so that they can tell us what they need to be successful. No one, including children, should be expected to passively accept what others provide for them, even when presumably it is done in their interests. We want learning environments where students are invested in seeking out knowledge and information, where they are willing participants and collaborators in their education.

The central argument of this book is that if we can use this paradigm for excellence through equity to guide larger numbers of schools and districts, we can create a system that will do much more than simply espouse slogans about the ability of all children to learn. We have such schools and slogans already. Our deep and pervasive disparities in learning outcomes, disparities that mirror larger patterns of inequality in our society, are the
clearest evidence that a new approach is needed. We offer the examples in this book because they show that pursuing excellence through equity can be achieved through the adoption of practices and procedures that are significantly different from those we rely upon now. In the final section of this chapter, we describe the five principles of Courageous Leadership, which serve as the organizational framework of this book.

**COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP:**
**THE ENGINE THAT DRIVES THE PARADIGM SHIFT**

The subsequent chapters demonstrate how excellence through equity is being achieved through the courageous action of educators who have taken decisive steps to make this ideal a reality. Each chapter presents concrete examples of educators, schools, districts, communities, provinces, states, and even nations that have successfully pursued this agenda. We also point out the common obstacles that can hinder success and ways to move forward and circumvent these barriers.

We conceived of this book as a resource that could provide a framework and practical guide so that educators, parents, and advocates who are committed to going beyond moral suasion can root their calls for excellence through equity in evidence. In order for the concept of excellence through equity to be widely embraced, we need not only the vision for our new paradigm (described in the preceding section) but also specific strategies that will make it possible for the affluent to overcome their fears of loss when questions of equity are raised. We want to show them how their children can benefit from being part of an equitable school community. Likewise, the vision must be robust enough to support the aspirations and needs of children who come to school needing more: socially, economically, psychologically, and academically. We need a win-win strategy for all involved if our society is to make real progress. We offer this book, and the ideas, strategies, and experiences presented within it, as the starting place for this new vision, one that is bold enough to erase the fear of losing privilege among the “haves” and uplifting enough to counter the resignation and helplessness that too often characterizes the “have nots.” In the chapters ahead, we present concrete examples to show with cognitive and visceral certainty that the best possible road to excellence is one that is paved with equity.

**COURAGE TO ACT**

Leaders across disciplines and throughout time have seen courage as the essential human virtue. Consider this small sampling:
Courage is the mother of all virtues because without it, you cannot consistently perform the others.

—Aristotle

Without courage, all other virtues lose their meaning. Courage is, rightly esteemed, the first of all human qualities (that) guarantees all others.

—Sir Winston Churchill

Courage may be the most important of all virtues, because without it one cannot practice any other virtue with consistency.

—Maya Angelou

Courage, the footstool of the virtues, upon which they stand.

—Robert Louis Stevenson

Leadership has for centuries been closely associated with courage. King Richard I, who reigned from 1189 to 1199, was dubbed “Richard the Lionhearted” for his prowess in battle. Likewise, Western interpretations have associated courage with war, battle, and physical feats of life-saving or life-taking heroes. Yet the word comes from the French root *coeur*, or heart, and the concept traditionally corresponds to acts of the heart.

Native American societies systematically developed courage in young braves by encouraging sacrifice for the greater good. “The greatest brave was he who could part with his cherished belongings and at the same time sing songs of praise” (Standing Bear, as cited in Agonito, 2011, p. 235). Developing young leaders’ ability to face inner fears associated with loss strengthened their ability to sacrifice for the safety and well-being of the weakest in their village, invariably elders and children.

Likewise, we see the need to return to the roots of courage in our quest to defend and advance the well-being of the weakest in our community. As Natives of this land understood, courage, or acting from the heart, can be developed and is the most powerful virtue we can all tap. In this quest for equity for the weakest members of our society, and ergo for all of us, we use courage both as our source of strength and as the framework for this book.

While the research and practice point clearly to the need for a new and better approach than the one we are currently using to educate our children, making such a shift will require commitment and courage.
Advocates of policies like NCLB defend the policy based on the fear that schools can’t be trusted unless they are held accountable for student outcomes (i.e., high-stakes testing). As an alternative, we describe systems that are based on mutual accountability among all stakeholders and show that positive changes in academic outcomes can be achieved when there is accountability in the state legislature and governor’s office for adequate funding, in the classroom and the schoolhouse when educators are provided with adequate resources and guidance, and in communities and homes when trust and engagement are promoted. Advancing a new paradigm, especially one addressing one of the most charged issues of our time, requires courageous leadership at all levels. Our chapter contributors demonstrate a path forward, and we use the core principles of Courageous Leadership outlined in *Failure Is Not an Option* (Blankstein, 2004, 2010, 2013) to frame this work.

The principles are not discrete, and indeed acting on one advances the others, and collectively they build leadership capacity to advance equitable outcomes for every student. Although we have grouped the chapters under specific principles, the majority of chapters encapsulate more than one of these principles. A common narrative that emerges in many of the chapters is that a catalytic event or striking new data underscore glaring disparities in student performance along racial or SES lines. A courageous leader or leadership team “faces these facts” and their own related fears by tapping into their core values in order to derive strength to commit to specific, high-leverage goals and actions to change the situation. Once a strategy is set, those in leadership work to achieve buy-in from teachers, parents, and students so that together they can relentlessly pursue them while developing organizational cohesion through supportive relationships. The Courageous Leadership cycle is a common refrain throughout the book and is exemplified in our first chapter. We present the case of Brockton High School, the largest school in America’s highest performing state (Massachusetts), and show how they moved from being among the worst schools to one of the best. (Using equity as a driver for change and overall success is another common theme that is further articulated by the former commissioner of that same state in Chapter 10). In Chapter 2, author Michael Fullan states, “It is crucial to declare that the moral imperative of all students learning is a core goal of the system.” His case study of Garden Grove points to five success factors that overlap with the five principles of Courageous Leadership, including bringing “coherence” to educational efforts within the district.

Chapters 3 through 15 are framed by these principles of Courageous Leadership. They include the following:
Getting to Your Core

A new initiative may be undertaken initially through external mandate (e.g., due to a desegregation order), and the practical strategies in this book can assist in advancing the work. Yet to sustain the initiative, there will invariably need to be clarity around how it ties in with the moral purpose of its leadership and a majority of the stakeholders. People need to know *why* what they are doing is worth the effort and *how* it connects to their personal and collective mission and values, or the endeavor will soon be stalled. We show that morality is often reflected in the work and used as a means to inspire others. Virtually every author in this book describes a deep and personal connection to assuring equity for all students.

Carol Corbett Burris, in Chapter 3, sounds the theme of lifting all students to excellence through an equity agenda in her chapter describing how detracking occurred in a large suburban high school and then throughout the system. Catalyzed by dramatic data on school fights and academic failure, the Rockville Centre Schools’ leadership connected to their core mission and values to bring about a dramatic and sustained turn-around in an inequitable school system.

The Chapter 4 example presented by Linda Harper at the Oak Hill School demonstrates how her personal reflections on inequity became a catalyst for initiating collective action in the larger school community. We also feature in Chapter 5 the work of Avram Barlowe and Ann Cook, who have responded to their core values in addressing the inequities foisted upon children in states and schools that use high-stakes testing to rank academic performance. Together with other educators, they have created a highly successful network of schools that use student-focused performance assessments throughout New York City.

Making Organizational Meaning

Bringing cohesion to schools and systems that are otherwise fragmented is critical for galvanizing and unifying all stakeholders toward common visions and goals. The gains in bringing this about in systems where clarity is lacking can be significant and notable early on. In Chapter 6, Ann Blakeney Clark writes about how using one simple, yet strategically important concept—“talent development”—made it possible to deploy talent that was desperately needed in low-performing schools. The results achieved through the courageous implementation of this strategy in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools contributed to the district receiving the Broad Prize for excellence in urban education last year.
At the level of curriculum and assessment, Allison Zmuda, the author of Chapter 7, introduces an approach to personalized learning that helps students make meaning, prior connections, and relevance of their school work. Dennis Littky, in Chapter 8, organizes the entire approach of Big Picture Schools around the idea of finding and building individualized curriculum based on student interests. Similarly, Estrella Olivares-Orellana, a bilingual science teacher, describes in Chapter 9 how drawing upon culture as a resource in teaching can help in making classroom lessons relevant to English language learners (ELLs). In each of the cases presented, the authors provide a clear and compelling rationale for their efforts and how meaning for students who are often marginalized brought about unprecedented results for young people who previously were disconnected and had minimal hope of success in school or life.

Ensuring Constancy and Consistency of Purpose

Any new initiative is vulnerable to derailment, especially those that challenge the status quo. Courageous leadership is required to mitigate this common pitfall. The author of Chapter 10, former education commissioner Paul Reville, writes forcefully about six reasons for the “uncommon success” experienced by the state of Massachusetts. This includes “long-term commitment by various partners.” Moreover, he further exemplifies this principle of assuring constancy and consistency of purpose by courageously concluding that even despite their extraordinary successes they still have further to go in providing additional supports to impoverished schools and communities. Reville provides eight recommendations for designing a “New Engine” in policy to take us to higher levels of success, pointing out that “we’ve gone as far as we can” get by simply “reforming” our current K–12 system.

Facing the Facts and Your Fears

It is typically easier to maintain the status quo than it is to change; yet this is not always the right or best thing to do. Several authors used the facts of glaring student disparities as the catalyst for their efforts to promote change, while successfully helping others to overcome their fears. Chapter 11, by Amy E. Sichel and Ann H. Bacon, chronicles the experiences of Superintendent Amy Sichel, who was running a school district that was widely regarded as successful, but when faced with the data that clearly showed low-income students and students of color were doing poorly, she and her team used that information to catalyze the school community to go from good to great. Likewise, Darlene Berg,
author of Chapter 12, became aware of the disparity between high- and low-SES students in math outcomes. Rather than accepting disparities as inevitable, she challenged elementary school teams not to be complacent about the predictable results, while simultaneously providing them with the support they needed to rise to that challenge.

**Building Sustainable Relationships**

All of the courageous actions and advances described in the coming chapters occurred within the context of myriad relationships. Wise leaders understand the importance of fostering trust and buy-in to create common ground with key stakeholders, even with and among those of differing viewpoints. Marcus J. Newsome, in Chapter 13, provides a case study in advancing an agenda aligned with his “core” in a manner that builds and sustains relations. In Chapter 14, Lucy N. Friedman and Saskia Traill write about how to create these sustainable relationships on an organizational level to support both the launch and the continuity of successful after-school programs. Similarly, other authors remind us that building relationships rooted in respect, trust, and mutual responsibility is essential to advancing excellence through equity.

The closing Chapter 15 by Andy Hargreaves, in fact, draws on all five of these principles in an analysis of the variables—including a focus on equity—influencing the rise and fall of educational attainment in three European countries vis-à-vis one another and the United States and Canada. He closes this book as we began, with a call to action for courageous leaders to advance the economic, educational, and overall quality of life for all of our citizenry by using the facts to reevaluate our current reality and advance our future prospects. The lessons learned are summarized in eight recommendations for policy makers who are challenged to abandon failed policies and pursue those that *uplift* our children:

1. Equity also requires uplifting leadership as a process—to inspire multitudes, not just a few individuals, to have the courage, commitment, and tenacity to lift up those around them.

The practices, policies, and purpose of courageous leaders described in the following pages are connected by our new and more powerful paradigm described in the preceding section of this chapter. By embracing its core tenets, we will advance the possibility of achieving excellence through equity. As we pointed out earlier, this is the manner in which progress has been achieved throughout the centuries. Our current approaches are holding too many back and preventing others from even envisioning a
brighter, more equitable future. By embracing this paradigm, we believe that you, the reader, can begin taking steps toward a brighter future for all of our children.

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Part I For Every Student


Empowering Students and Teachers Through Performance-Based Assessment

Avram Barlowe and Ann Cook

A dangerous thing has happened to American education—predictable, but disturbing nonetheless.

We have lost sight of what education is for: why we send our kids to school; why people enter the teaching profession; indeed, what a school or classroom should look like or what a well-educated high school graduate should be able to do. The goal of leveling the playing field to enable all students to have access to opportunity has been lost. We have become so obsessed with keeping track—of holding accountable—of comparing and ranking and sorting—that we have little time or appetite left to question what we are keeping track OF . . . or WHY.

The United States Federal Department of Education and most state education departments rely heavily on high-stakes standardized tests to do the ranking and sorting. For well over half a century, these tests have determined which students succeed and move on and which students are held back and have future prospects seriously impaired. Their reach has been extended to teachers and schools as well, illegitimately defining success and failure with assessments not even their creators think are valid. Test scores often determine promotion, school admission and graduation, school closures, teachers’ tenure, and principals’ contracts (not to mention property values).
Standardized tests have become the main instrument for determining children’s worth and teachers’ competence. And, because test results have been tied to every aspect of instruction, testing and curriculum have become interchangeable.

This occurs despite the fact that, nationally, test results show that the same type of students who did poorly on standardized exams 40 or 50 years ago continue to do poorly on them today with even greater consequences. An analysis of this year’s twelfth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores revealed that the last dozen years of test-based accountability have had virtually no effect on the test scores of high school seniors taking NAEP tests. There has been no improvement for high school seniors on NAEP tests in reading and math since 2009 and only minuscule progress in the last decade.

Poverty and segregation are at the heart of the matter; schools cannot, and must not, be held solely responsible for redressing society’s deep-seated inequities resulting from poverty, nor for the impact of racism and segregation on children’s psyches. What educators should be accountable for, however, is the excessive, and nearly obsessive, use of poorly designed instruments intended to capture children’s educational achievement (along with politicians, policy makers, and billionaire philanthropists).

However, despite years of lackluster test results, no urgent demand for alternative measures of assessment has emerged—no acknowledgment that if learning is complex, assessment should be too—that short-answer, multiple-choice questions and formulaic essays on topics of little interest to the test-taker send all the wrong messages about what teachers should teach and what children should learn. Why is it that attempts to chart educational progress remain so stuck in the use of conventional and failed approaches?

Some would argue that one powerful reason for muted opposition is the influence of those who call themselves reformers but who favor a public education system that is “an unregulated, survival-of-the-fittest, business-first market” (Brazile, 2014). For such “reformers” testing represents an opportunity to subject public institutions to the laws and vicissitudes of the marketplace.

Others hold that educational achievement is mainly about competition anyway—that for every child who succeeds (most often, White middle- or upper-class children), one must fail (most often poor children of color). That’s the way it is. In that scenario, results will always be separate and unequal.

The introduction of so-called “new standards,” cast as promoting civil rights, was hailed by some as creating greater opportunity for equity. But, though the standards may have raised the bar, the resulting curriculum
and assessment instruments have not. High-stakes testing is still regarded as the central measure of student achievement with the added twist that the new higher standards will be met if test-makers simply ratchet up the difficulty of test items to reflect a more challenging curriculum. Put another way, this approach argues that not the idea of standardized testing but rather the tests themselves are presumably misguided. Change those, and the problem will be fixed. So far, however, the goal of improved results has proven elusive. The one-size-fits-all approach has continued to yield unequal results, not to mention growing resistance from parents and teachers, and even students. (When was the last time you heard even successful test-takers extolling the virtues of standardized tests?)

So isn’t it time to consider a fundamental shift in our thinking? Shouldn’t we be asking ourselves whether all the attention and time, not to mention money and resources, spent on test development, test prep, and test analysis is actually resulting in better schools and better prepared students? Isn’t it time to acknowledge that we need to rethink what we mean by achievement, student success, and quality education? Shouldn’t we be disturbed by the unintended consequences of such tests . . . the drop-out rates, student accounts of classroom boredom, and the high rates of college failure?

Isn’t it time to consider an alternative approach to assessing what students know and can do—a new paradigm in which all students can contribute, learning from and with each other in a process where a variety of academic, intellectual, and social skills can develop—an approach which results in greater equity?

This chapter describes an alternative: a different and more equitable way to build students’ skills and assess progress in achieving them. While it certainly does not claim to solve all of the social issues connected to equity, the system of student-focused performance-based assessment developed and implemented by the New York Performance Standards Consortium presents compelling data in support of more equal educational opportunities. It captures and uses students’ strengths, interests, and ideas in ways that create a different paradigm.

The Consortium, a coalition of public schools, has developed and implemented a system of performance-based assessment that is practitioner-developed, student focused, and externally assessed. The schools that have embraced this approach are committed to four central ideas:

- A pedagogy based on inquiry teaching and learning
- A respect for the diversity of ideas and experiences
- High expectations for all students
- The value of community and collaboration
Together these principles have resulted in schools that promote equity. The Consortium’s system of assessment includes these components:

- Practitioner-designed and student-focused assessment tasks in the major disciplines with additional school-designed tasks
- Educator-designed rubrics used in the assessment of student work
- Moderation studies in which student work is reassessed annually by practitioners and critical friends in order to maintain task and rubric validity
- Extensive professional development designed to support and develop teachers’ ability to use inquiry, pedagogy, and performance assessment tasks
- Predictive validity studies based on graduates’ college performance

A recent consortium school graduate explained the system’s assessment components this way:

All consortium school students are expected to complete four Performance Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs): English, social studies, math, and science. Individual schools require additional PBATs. In my school, Urban Academy, I also did a creative arts PBAT, a PBAT in art criticism, a library PBAT, and an internship. With the exception of the library PBAT, students choose to pursue their own PBAT topics, which grow out of classroom work.

Consortium students are required to make an oral presentation for each PBAT, and there are rubrics, which a committee uses to assess their work.

The social studies PBAT requires us to do text-based research using primary source materials and then to write an analytical research paper. My paper grew out of a philosophy class I took. I wrote a paper on Hobbes’s and Kropotkin’s views on what is the right form of government. Although I started off convinced by Hobbes, I reread Kropotkin’s writing a few times, read background material, and found that I actually agreed with many of his opinions. I revised, and in my paper I argued that neither of them was completely correct.

For the English PBAT, you have to write a well-developed literary analysis. I did an analysis of the religious views of the main character in *The Life of Pi*. Pi claims he’s a part of three different religions, but I felt there were many contradictions to that claim and examined how successful the author was in conveying that idea.
For the science PBAT, students must develop an original science experiment about a question that requires developing a hypothesis, doing the experiment, writing a lab report on it, and then defending the project in a discussion with a team including a real scientist. My science PBAT grew out of work in a course on anatomy and physiology. I designed and carried out an experiment on the effect of stress on memory.

The math PBAT requires us to use what we have learned to solve problems in the real world. For example, I used what I had learned in trigonometry to calculate how far away the Empire State Building is from my school and then explained how you could solve this and other problems using trig.

RESULTS

The Consortium’s system has demonstrated impressive results:

1. The Consortium has a documented record of improving skills in ways that standardized testing does not. In addition to maintaining a graduation rate that exceeds that of overall New York City public schools, a study conducted by Dr. Martha Foote shows that the Consortium has a proven record of producing graduates who go on to successful undergraduate careers. Results from the study have been impressive.

   In the sample, 77% of consortium school graduates attended 4-year colleges, 19% attended 2-year colleges, and 4% attended vocational or technical programs. In the sample of students attending 4-year colleges, 7% enrolled in the most competitive colleges, 14% enrolled in highly competitive colleges, 30% enrolled in very competitive colleges, 32% enrolled in competitive colleges, 14% enrolled in less competitive colleges, 2% enrolled in noncompetitive colleges, and 1% enrolled in specialized colleges. These results, combined with the consortium’s high school statistics, indicate that consortium schools are highly effective. They hold onto their students, teach them well, graduate them, and send them on to higher education prepared to accomplish college-level work and persist in their studies. (Foote, 2007, pp. 359–363)

2. Using National Student Clearinghouse data, the study further revealed that Consortium school graduates have a 93.3% 4-year and an 83.9% community college 2-year persistence rate compared with the 74.7% and 53.5% national rate. The Consortium’s impact on minority males is equally telling: 86% and 90% of African American and Latino
male Consortium graduates, respectively, were accepted to college in 2011. In contrast, the national acceptance rate for African American and Latino male high school graduates was 37% and 42% nationally.

3. Consortium schools also have significantly lower student suspension and teacher turnover rates than both charter high schools nationally and New York City high schools as a whole.

All this was accomplished despite the fact that the Consortium’s pool of students includes more students living at the poverty level, a higher percentage of Latinos and English Language Learners, and a higher percentage of students with lower English and math skills than the overall New York City public high school population (Performance Standards Consortium, 2012).

These outcomes were achieved by holding students to high standards through a performance-based system that emphasizes curriculum and instruction that challenges students to build on the skills they have to improve and by encouraging them to grapple with difficult questions. Performance-based assessment gives students ownership of the learning process—something standardized testing and conventional test prep cannot do. It says to the student: “We are asking you to develop and demonstrate skills by reading, writing, investigating, and problem solving topics and questions that you participate in choosing. The topics you choose should be something that interests you and about which you may have a strong opinion. You must support your viewpoint with evidence, do research, ask questions, and learn how to express your views while still respecting others.” Through this process, the assessment itself becomes a vehicle of equity because it tells students that their ideas matter, and that the development of their ideas is a crucial component of the hard work they must do.

**PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT: NUTS AND BOLTS**

The contrast to standardized testing could not be more striking. In test preparation, students are expected to work hard acquiring disparate concepts and pieces of information; motivation rests on a delayed gratification (i.e., the notion that their test score will open doors or catapult them into the next and higher phase of their life). The false assumption here is that working-class students, minority working-class students, in particular, will assimilate the middle-class value of doing well in school so as to enter the best universities and access the better paying jobs. Performance assessment, however, insists upon empowering all students, not through
external motivation, and not as a one-day performance resulting from repetitive drills and test prep, but through the realization and expression of their ideas in more extensive and nuanced activities experienced over time.

In the following discussion, the Urban Academy Laboratory High School, a public transfer school and one of 39 Consortium schools in New York State, is used to illustrate the Consortium’s performance assessment principles in practice.

**INQUIRY PEDAGOGY AND THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION**

Effective performance assessment cannot be standardized. It has to occur within the context of curriculum and instruction that empowers students in the learning process. The centerpiece of such an approach is the type of discussion that allows students to exchange and develop ideas within an inquiry framework. Whether students are interpreting historical documents to debate a question or offering different methods of solving a math problem, analyzing a poem, or considering the results of a science investigation, they will learn more effectively when they feel that their ideas are incorporated into instruction. Teachers introduce topics, themes, concepts, or materials, but in an inquiry classroom students are encouraged to make informed contributions reflecting their own point of view. Inquiry teachers become skilled at asking open-ended questions and maintaining a focus while mastering the art of exploring new, student-generated questions and arguments as they arise. The classroom agenda reflects an ongoing partnership between teachers and students.

Discussion of this kind is by nature more equitable, especially in diverse school settings. Critics will say that mixing students of different racial and economic backgrounds often has a negative impact on more skilled and privileged students since they will not be challenged as teachers seek a happy medium, while less skilled and privileged students will be intimidated and silenced as the academic bar is raised. Such a view assumes a competitive structure very different from that of a school community in which inquiry discussion is the foundation. In an inquiry discussion, students begin to look at differences between them in new ways and approach participation quite differently.

As Khalil, a student at one of the performance assessment schools, put it,

> The school I came from before the Urban Academy, which was a very competitive school with all college bound students, was not
a very diverse environment. So there weren’t too many opportunities to hear ideas from kids who came from really different backgrounds and neighborhoods. It wasn’t a place where your ideas really mattered in the classes. Discussions were pretty predictable leading to specific answers that we knew the teacher wanted us to give.

The first week I came here, I was in a class where students were having a lively discussion about the behavior of people during the Great Depression, and I hear a White girl—someone with dyed red hair—make a controversial point. I’m sitting there thinking, wow, I agree with her. . . . I didn’t expect someone like her to say that. . . . And the next person who speaks is a Black guy in a hoodie, and he’s agreeing with her! That was a very important moment for me, because I suddenly realized that in this school, in this class, in this discussion, kids could learn from one another—from what others say. School wasn’t just a social place; it was academic. You could agree with kids and share something uncommon—the hoodie guy and the dyed redhead could agree on a topic . . . people who were not like one another could agree on a point . . . and the teacher could listen to the points being made without judging.

THE TEACHER’S ROLE IN DISCUSSION

As this student points out, the teacher’s role in such discussions is crucial as all students must feel that the teacher is a neutral chair, a fair arbiter of debate, and a defender of their right to interpret and analyze through the prism of their perception and experience. Listening to students is therefore critical. This does not mean the teacher is passive. During the discussion, he or she is taking notes, asking for evidence when arguments are made, feeding back the threads of the discussion, managing digressions and diversions, and framing and reframing arguments as the discussion unfolds. And the teacher is maintaining order especially when disagreements enliven the proceedings.

Discussion and Privilege

In inquiry discussions at schools like the Urban Academy, privilege and the classroom behaviors traditionally associated with it are constrained, allowing everyone to participate on a more equal footing.
Commenting on his experience in a previous school, T.J. noted that in his former school,

if you were a struggling student, and especially if you were a struggling Black student, you wouldn’t feel comfortable speaking because you didn’t have the credentials, meaning you were a low B or C student, and everyone in the class knew it.

A middle-class White girl who had attended a similarly competitive school before transferring to Urban Academy described the manner in which discussion in such places can frequently be gamed:

Discussion in my school was very predictable. . . . There was a rigid formula. You made an argument, supported it with a small piece of evidence, and you could participate in class without even having read the book. The whole thing felt scripted because kids weren’t asked for their own reaction to the text or to what others were saying.

In contrast, the realization that your ideas are an important part of the learning process, and that therefore your voice matters, is especially empowering for students who have previously been labeled disruptive or resistant. As James, an African American boy, put it,

the kids who in another school you may have considered the bad kids—in this school, you’ll see them participating. And they’re not participating by (just) saying, “Shut up! You have to listen to what I have to say.” They’re participating by actually intelligently telling how they feel about a certain topic. They’re not just blowing out answers for no good reason.

According to yet another student, this is because when students’ ideas matter,

it kind of leads to a real respect among students. The minute we stepped into this school we were told by teachers and students that you have to respect people here. You may really dislike another person, but you have to respect them, especially in discussion.

The constant exchanging of ideas in a setting where those ideas matter creates an environment in which students can feel they are on an equal footing. It is often argued that students must acquire fundamental
school knowledge before they can engage in higher, conceptual thought. Yet most teachers who have worked in public schools know of many young people not regarded as academically skilled or sophisticated who often operate at a higher level conceptually than their skills would suggest. Providing a setting in which such students can demonstrate complex thinking helps them realize that they can be just as thoughtful as their classmates who may be better readers, writers, or calculators. It also encourages more conventionally skilled and privileged students to see the possibilities of learning from all of their classmates. Conducted well, with good questions and unbiased facilitation, an inquiry discussion lays the groundwork for other academic skills, building insight and confidence.

Without the pressure of having to articulate correct answers, students also feel free to change their minds. As Maritza put it,

You have to stretch your thought . . . if someone has something to say that I disagree with, by the end of the class she might have changed my whole entire opinion on the subject just because she has stronger points or she’s done more reading or she has more evidence for her point of view. Or I might have changed her mind because of something I know that she doesn’t.

**Listening, Not Talking**

Observers of class discussions, particularly important now in the wake of teacher evaluation, often use formulaic measures of participation, keeping track of the numbers of speakers in a given class period, without ever considering the substance of what was said. Doing the math, they frequently note that this or that percentage of the students participated. In an inquiry classroom where answers require students to present and support their point of view, participation is not always verbal. Some prefer to participate at any given time by listening. In such situations, discussion works just as well for them as for those who speak.

As Nayisha put it,

When I don’t talk, it’s not because I’m not interested or that I’m bored. I like to observe. Me personally, I just like to look at the people and listen to what they’re saying because observation for me helps me get my thoughts together for my papers. And then I write my paper, and that’s how I show the teacher that I’m thinking, that I’ve been paying attention in class. I’ve been listening even though I don’t talk much there.
The talkers understand this insight. Alyssa, a more vocal student, put it this way:

Even for the kids who don’t talk—they’re still taking in other opinions.

The teacher’s job is to discover what quieter students are thinking through their written work, discussions in smaller groups, or conversations with them outside of the classroom, and then to bring their ideas in some form to the other students’ attention.

In most cases, given enough time, even the most reticent students begin to contribute verbally. Juan, an extremely shy boy, barely spoke a word in any class for 2 years. His written work, however, showed serious thinking. Eventually, Juan began to offer his opinions in short snatches that were rarely sustained. Finally, in his last week of high school, he spoke up to offer a highly sophisticated analysis of performance artist Nick Cave’s “sound suits” creations. He suggested that one of their possible functions was protection from overt racial profiling expressed within the cultural context of the African Diaspora. He not only explained his insight at length but also, and in response to others, raised related ideas about Cave’s work. It was a very proud moment for him.

Discussion, Confidence, and Writing

Inquiry discussion lays the groundwork for other academic skills as it builds students’ confidence. Cindy observed:

In every class I did a PBAT in, there was discussion. The whole class had to work as a group to make discussions as good as possible. That meant participating and talking in front of a lot of people, which is nerve-racking a lot of the time, especially when I was speaking about something I cared a lot about. But it also meant creating room for those who were reluctant to speak. I was really embarrassed the first time someone disagreed with me during a discussion because I thought that instantly meant I was wrong, and that I had said something stupid in front of the whole class. But of course that wasn’t true; the other person just had a different way of thinking about it. But no one attacked me, they criticized my idea, and no one thought or acted like I was stupid or inferior, so I learned that it was OK to be disagreed with and to have my own opinions, which was very important for writing papers and developing opinions, ideas, and solutions while doing PBATs.
Herb Mack, Urban Academy’s founding principal, confirms Cindy’s point:

Over and over we see how discussion helps kids become better writers. They think through ideas in discussions with others, and then they write. They do a lot of writing so they get a lot of practice. They write in class. They’re assigned research papers, analytic papers, narratives—across the disciplines. But they get their grounding in discussions.

In exit interviews conducted when they graduate, students often comment on how discussion connected to the writing process for them. As Denise recalled,

I learned a lot about developing my ideas by expressing them to other people; that, in turn, has helped me learn about writing papers. I had an organization problem, and discussion helped me learn how to organize papers a lot better and not get lost.

And Dakota noted,

If you don’t focus in the discussions or sleep through the whole class, and then the written assignment comes due, you’re not gonna write a very good paper, cause you haven’t been thinking about the ideas we’ve been discussing.

Discussion can be particularly helpful to students with learning disabilities. Richard, a motivated, dyslexic student, explains how the Urban Academy prepared him for Hampshire College:

I was very quiet in classes when I first got to Urban. I listened a lot and had ideas, but I preferred just to write about them. I always needed more time to do the reading and writing, but at Urban I realized that I also needed to plan my time better. I’d sit with my teacher and go over everything I had to do and decide when and where I was going to do it, how much time I would need, and who I could go to if I needed help. We also talked about the assignments, the class discussions, and what was going on in school. As I became more comfortable and confident, I began to speak more in classes and that helped me too. My ideas became clearer to me, and the reading and writing became more accessible.
Each of these remarks reflects an understanding that discussion in this context allows students to see and practice how a question or problem can be thought about or analyzed; how different viewpoints or solutions can be considered; how evidence can support or oppose an argument; how an argument can be defended, developed, or modified; and how this would be reflected in a PBAT.

**A CURRICULUM EMPHASIZING DEPTH OVER COVERAGE: ITS IMPACT ON EQUITY**

In performance assessment schools, skills such as inquiry discussion and writing are linked to subject discipline courses that emphasize depth over coverage, which offer students a range of options based on their interests. The curriculum promotes equity by both grounding students in “the canon” (i.e., familiarizing them with great works of established literature, exposing them to key events in history, showing them how to conduct a proper experiment, teaching them how to approach math applications, etc.) while also encouraging them to formulate new questions and seek answers in different ways. This helps students plug in to the disciplines by matching them to their more specific concerns. To the extent that they want their students to have a wide range of choice with respect to PBAT topics, some Consortium schools construct their curriculum around what would ordinarily be considered electives. Other schools prefer to give individual teachers considerable leeway within the framework of required classes. Thus, one Consortium school offers courses ranging from the Civil War and Reconstruction to the French Revolution to Gender Identity to Contemporary Issues in Hip-Hop, while in another, teachers of freshmen and sophomores select the specific themes, to be covered within common topics such as colonialism, imperialism, and industrialization.

Courses in Consortium schools are less bound to cover specific information, remaining responsive to new ideas and questions which might take a course in unexpected directions, pushing both students and teachers to access new resources.

**INQUIRY IN ACTION: PBATS IN FORMATION**

**Student Input**

Inquiry discussions and classwork lead to questions that matter to students, which may become the basis for PBATs. Some of these may be questions the teacher has anticipated and planned for, but others may not.
For example, in a Civil Rights History class, discussion focused on a source that argued that the integration of baseball was negative, destroying both the Negro Leagues and a host of other Black-owned businesses connected to them. Several students disagreed, claiming that the gains made through Jackie Robinson’s breakthrough were worth those losses. Others were not so sure. At this point one student asked,

What if instead of Jackie Robinson coming in as an individual player, they had pushed for some of the best Negro League teams coming in to baseball and competing against the White teams and each other?

A fierce debate ensued generating a host of additional arguments and questions. Several of these provided a framework for students who chose to research and write about the integration of baseball for their performance assessments.

Genuine performance assessments create learning opportunities by using students’ interests and curiosities as entry points. Joshua, for example, describes how a fondness for cookies opened doors:

In a chemistry class I got interested in how the sugar content affects the dimensions and shape of a cookie. My question quickly became more complicated. I began looking at how the molecular structure of the butter fat in a cookie weakens the molecular structure of gluten, which contains proteins. And as I researched the role of proteins in the baking process, I discovered that when proteins are heated they *coagulate*. I didn’t know what *coagulate* meant, so I had to look that up. Then I began to understand that heated proteins bunch up and thicken, which affects the cookie’s height. And all this was happening even before I started setting up an actual experiment.

In designing and completing the experiment, I learned a lot about molecular bonds and denaturation. But what really struck me was the fact that my school allowed me to choose something as minuscule as a cookie, and take it a lot further. It showed me how something that almost didn’t seem serious could turn my mind to think about something so much more than cookie baking. You start thinking about things like what’s going on with these molecules, what are different reactions, how can you change them, why do cookies bake differently on the top shelf of the oven than on the bottom shelf. You begin to think about really deep questions that you would’ve never thought about if you were just baking a cookie.
Joshua’s comments demonstrate that the key to doing authentic PBAT work is helping students find an interesting angle—one that motivates them to construct authentic research questions, to read, revise, edit, tinker, and attend to details. In a genuine PBAT process, a student’s thinking deepens as the exploration of a basic interest unfolds. The teacher often helps a student formulate his or her question, but the question itself develops from something in the classroom that has importance to the student. And, in a setting where all viewpoints and interests have validity, equity is part of this learning process. The problem with even those standardized tests that attempt to include presumably more relevant documents, problems, and questions is that students have little investment in them and certainly no ownership as one size does not fit all; they are simply not invested in what standardized tests select, and no attempt is made in them to start with their interests.

**PBAT SKILLS DEVELOPED THROUGH HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

The same student ownership that pervades the classroom and allows students to formulate PBAT research questions guides the sustained work they put into the PBATs themselves. These analytical research papers, science experiments, literary essays, math applications, and the optional, additional assessments demand much more complex and sustained work than does a high-stakes test. They are student-focused and require students to revise, reorganize, reconsider, extend, or modify their work. As one student put it,

One of the most important skills we learn while doing PBATs is problem solving. I was never told exactly what I needed to do every step of the way. I always knew what my assignment was, but I needed to figure out on my own how I was going to do it. I made a lot of mistakes along the way, and I rarely got things right the first time. But it wasn’t about being right. I revised and eventually got where I needed to be. I did get frustrated a few times, but I developed a problem-solving attitude. If something went wrong, I could fix it. Things will definitely go wrong sometimes in the real world, but I’m not so afraid of that now, because I have the skills I need to try and fix whatever problems come up.

This process is facilitated by teachers’ high expectations of students and themselves.
Consortium teachers created the performance assessment rubrics for evaluating the PBATs in the four major disciplines. These are used by teams of teachers and external evaluators to assess the quality of student work. Periodically, rubrics are adjusted by teachers. If a rubric lacks clarity or is found deficient in some other way, teacher committees have the power to change it. In addition, once a year, teachers across the Consortium come together to reassess work that has already been evaluated by individual schools—student papers, experiments, problems, essays; work submitted across the disciplines—is reevaluated, a process that leads to greater reliability for the PBATs across the member schools. Eventually, exemplar or anchor papers are produced and made available to the public.

In addition, moderation studies—involving the regrading of PBATs by groups of teachers to determine reliability—are conducted on the assignments themselves. Using both the Consortium rubrics and Norman Webb’s Depth of Knowledge, teachers consider the quality of assignments and questions that students explored in their PBATs. Such activities are invaluable as teachers work to constantly improve the quality of these questions and their assignments.

Finally, an external group of educational experts known as the Performance Assessment Review (PAR) Board reviews how well Consortium schools are doing in fulfilling their responsibility to provide the scaffolding and documentation of student work.

This approach relies heavily on teacher trust, that is, on the belief that intelligent, well-trained teachers can teach effectively and, in conjunction with external evaluators, be relied on to assess the results of their teaching efforts. The current focus on standardized testing rests on the contrary assumption that teachers will generally be mediocre unless they are guided by the results of externally developed uniform exams. It supposes as well that mediocre or failing results on such exams and consequent job loss or diminished pay must be used as a threat to motivate better teaching. It is interesting to note the high Consortium teacher retention rates and Consortium graduates’ retention rates in colleges that belie these claims.

**HIGH EXPECTATION FOR ALL STUDENTS**

Amber is an example of a student with uneven skills. When she came to the school, her math work demanded considerable teacher support. The skills she had acquired by her senior year were so newly formed that her ability to grasp and apply them seemed questionable. Teachers worried about her ability to explain the data that are an important component of the PBAT science experiment. The experiment’s focus, however, reflected...
a personal interest, which helped her. It involved analyzing differences between the Disney and Nickelodeon TV stations’ depiction of minority group characters and how these depictions impact young children.

A science PBAT requires the defense of the student’s lab report before a panel of teachers and outside examiners (frequently scientists) and a revision of the report based on their questions and feedback. During Amber’s defense, she demonstrated a grasp of mathematical concepts which, up to that moment, had seemingly eluded her. She had counted the number of minority group characters she and a small group of children had seen in both Disney and Nickelodeon TV shows airing in the same prime-time hours. She found the same number of Black characters on both channels but noticed that there was a difference in the number of times these characters appeared on-screen. Realizing that percentage of appearances was different, she calculated the percentages and included them in her data. She was able to explain this data to the examiners and respond well to nuanced questions about percentages, ratios, and other concepts she had used, demonstrating that she understood not just their operation but what they meant conceptually.

Audrey presented a similar challenge. She is intellectually curious and participates well in analytical discussion, but she had no confidence in herself as a student. Her basic math skills were reasonable, but the subject intimidated her, and her work habits were poor. She chose to do her math PBAT in a course called Proofs and Games, which included students of different skill levels.

She created an assessment based on dominoes, a game she had seen played many times but never understood. “I wanted to learn how to play it,” she reflected, “but also learn what kind of strategies there were. I’d seen other games played in class, like Mastermind, where math helped kids win.” She started by looking up the game’s rules. With guidance from her teacher, she began to consider the different possible variations of domino tiles being distributed in a given player’s hand. She learned that this is a probability concept and began to research that. As she struggled to grasp her findings, explain them to other students, and apply them to dominoes, she realized that success in the game involved a process of elimination: at the game’s beginning there are many possibilities, but with each tile played there are fewer. Through the process of mathematical elimination, as well as intuitive logic, a player can anticipate possibility reductions and craft a winning strategy.

In Audrey’s math assessment paper, she displayed a sample dominoes game showing the application of a “tile tracker” she created on the basis of her research. A student who once found math intimidating was able to work with it at a more conceptual level through her ownership of an
interest. The work had a broader impact as well, prompting the following unsolicited observation in the concluding portion of her paper:

One real world connection I discovered in dominoes is being able to think ahead and making decisions based on what’s going on around you. Just like with games, there are goals in life you want to eventually reach, and if you play it randomly you might not end up where you want to be. That sounds cheesy, but the process I went through here really showed me that it’s true.

A good performance assessment system also stretches students who arrive in Consortium schools with stronger academic skills. Zack comes from a highly educated family of academics and writers. He floundered in his first year at a predominantly middle-class public high school where the classes and work seemed dull. At the Consortium school, however, Zack thrived immediately. Engaged by discussions and assignments, he began to strengthen skills that had atrophied and pursue new interests:

I started out taking the Civil War/Reconstruction class and got interested in different explanations of how and why the war ended slavery. Then I took a course that compared the Autobiography of Malcolm X to Marable’s biography of him and another about American slavery. I wrote a prerequisite assessment paper on why Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, and my PBAT on whether or not the Nat Turner Rebellion was successful. The Turner paper was based in the beginning on a lot of sources we used in class, but the more I dug into my question, the more I began to find other sources and new information and my argument became much more complex.

At this point I said to myself, “This is sort of a trend in me. I guess I’m interested in the history of race in America.” So I took a civil rights history course in my senior year. I really enjoyed the readings and documentaries and hearing how very different people in the class responded to the issues they raised.

I also wrote a pretty extensive paper in this class that required me to do a lot of additional primary source reading, even though I had already fulfilled my social studies PBAT requirement.

Zack’s experience belies the notion that diversity lowers standards for more privileged students. His PBAT work pushed him but so, too, did the
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exchanges he had with students from decidedly different backgrounds. He
drew on their contributions in discussion in the conduct of his own
research and analysis. Having done the minimum or less in an environ-
ment where his opinions were irrelevant, he developed intellectual hun-
ger and a work ethic in the Urban Academy’s more diverse setting. He
enters college with better skills, focused interests, and a greater ability to
relate to varied groups of people.

A student such as Ron faced a different challenge. He had difficulty
with analysis. He struggled with discussions and assignments that
required the development and explanation of his thinking. By senior
year, however, exposure and persistence produced results. In the same
civil rights history class as Zack, he became interested in the move-
ment’s nonviolent strategies and Malcolm X’s criticisms of them. Deeper
discussions of the tactics employed in important civil rights protests had
him making more nuanced and sophisticated comments than before. In
the wake of these discussions, Ron outlined a PBAT that compared
Martin Luther King’s defenses of nonviolence and Malcolm X’s criti-
cisms by applying them to the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the armed
resistance of a local NAACP chapter to White mob violence, and the
Harlem and Los Angeles riots of 1964. This demanded a level of com-
plexity he had struggled with in the past and which the next level of his
education will certainly require.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH CURRICULUM

Policy wonks are fond of evaluating schools on the basis of whether they
provide their students with “21st century skills,” which are typically
defined as creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, decision making,
communication, and collaboration. Yet, despite the rhetorical emphasis
put on these skills, the focus in the current wave of educational reform is
on the individual student in isolation from others. “Personalization” rein-
forces that isolation by emphasizing computer programs for individual
instruction. In contrast, private schools—such as Sidwell Friends and the
University of Chicago Lab School (the Dewey School)—extol the virtues of
community, a concept that is completely absent in the test-driven environ-
ment of so-called school reformers. Consortium schools, guided by the
philosophy of John Dewey, look to find ways to help students in the context
of building an academic intellectual community, not unlike some of the
most admired private schools in the country. True equity occurs when the
nation’s public school children can benefit from the same respected edu-
cation philosophies as the private school child.
As Dewey (1916) wrote,

The object of a democratic education is not merely to make an individual an intelligent participant in the life of his immediate group, but to bring the various groups into such constant interaction that no individual, no economic group, could presume to live independently of others.

At the Urban Academy and other Consortium schools, a key component of intellectual community building beyond the classroom is a schoolwide project, which can occur once or twice a year. These schoolwide projects are collaboratively conceived and planned by teachers (with student input) and conducted in the first 2 weeks of each semester before regular classes begin.

Projects are organized around a single theme or question, which is developed collectively by the teachers. Here are some examples: What is a good museum? Do elections matter? Is our environment doomed? Is New York changing for the better? What role does religion play in people’s lives? and Do the subways work? Project subgroups of two teachers and 15 to 20 students investigate variations on that theme mainly by getting out into the metropolitan area to gather information, make observations, and interview people. Thus, a project whose theme was city parks contained a subgroup that spent 2 weeks researching the history and current state of Tompkins Square Park, a Lower East Side institution in New York, which has been the site of a sometimes hotly contested battle over gentrification. Students in this group decided to unpack the history and legacy of that battle with each of them writing an analysis of it.

Each subgroup ventures, with its own agenda, into different parts of New York, examines different texts, sounds, and images, and speaks to sometimes vastly different people. Periodically, the entire student body is reorganized into even smaller groups that spend a morning or afternoon investigating the general question in a different way. The project groups continue to meet for $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 weeks; on occasion, the entire school community convenes to interview someone who could bring a broad perspective to the question being considered. Thus, during the project focusing on Do Elections Matter?, politicians campaigning for city council came before the full school to make their pitch and answer student questions. During the project focusing on What Is a Good Museum?, a panel consisting of teachers and museum curators debated this question: Whose responsibility is it to make a museum visit enjoyable: the museum’s or the museum visitor’s?
Other clusters of students and staff have joined social action projects (assisting crews undertaking rehab work in post-Katrina New Orleans) and participated in intensive language and cultural studies (living with families in a Guatemalan village). Each project is intended to encourage teachers from different disciplines to work together, to orient new students to the school’s culture, and to explore issues and ideas that may not lend themselves well to semester-long courses. Graduating seniors often talk about “The Project” as a defining aspect of their Urban Academy experience.

The project concludes as each subgroup presents some aspect of its work to the school as a whole for further discussion and analysis.

The “Project” cultivates equity in numerous ways. First, it makes clear that every place visited, every person spoken with, and every text read has validity insofar as it provides answers to relevant questions. The place can be St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue or a storefront Pentecostal church in the South Bronx. The text can be an excerpt from Summa Theologica, a section of Martin Luther King’s last speech in Memphis, or the transcript of a conversation with a subway platform preacher. In conventional school trips, students often visit wealthier parts of town and receive lectures designed to help them process the experience. Students in these project groups, however, have questions they have developed, which the visits are expected to help them answer. Moreover, students in a diverse group ask different questions, have different reactions to what they see and hear, and hold different opinions that can be shared as they process the visits, the readings, and the interviews.

The project also develops and solidifies the school’s sense of community as students and teachers proceed to learn through and with each other. It is a journey that everyone, including the teachers, can take for 2 weeks, and it reinforces the idea that many topics can be interesting and worth exploring.

It features different ways of tackling a common problem based on students’ strengths and interests. By encouraging students to choose a path they want to follow, perhaps a topic whose details are equally new to everyone, it also levels the playing field, particularly in terms of previously acquired knowledge. Everyone, again including teachers, becomes a novice, and traditional subject area lines are blurred when, for example, an elections project group decides to find out “what makes a swing state swing” and spends 2 weeks in Ohio (hosted by families connected to like-minded schools) following the Obama and McCain campaigns in 2008.

Finally, it allows teachers to work intensively in teams to explore their environment and the resources in it. It promotes their learning from each other and helps them find new ways of engaging kids by interviewing people one might never get into a classroom, making connections beyond
the school that can lead to new courses, allowing them to see students in different settings and new ways, or trying out ideas they would be reluctant or unable to embrace in a regular class.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH DISCUSSION PROTOCOLS

The nature of classroom discussion, instruction, and curriculum; the emphasis on student ownership; and the performance-based assessment system all inform the culture of a school. Students who become familiar with each other’s ideas and thinking in the classroom invariably become more comfortable with each other generally.

As a veteran teacher says,

It goes beyond the individual classroom. It transcends that, so that even in a full-group meeting, even if a group of kids is standing around the hallway discussing something, it’s the same kind of value system that prevails: people talking from different perspectives, discussing. It’s so interesting. When you look at the exit interviews we conduct after graduation, they’re not just talking about one particular class, they’re talking about an entire school culture.

In this light, it is significant that Urban Academy graduates frequently return to participate in the school’s annual pot luck Thanksgiving dinner, bringing dishes and experiences to share as a way of reconnecting with the community. Returning students can include graduates from as far back as 15 years ago. While they always speak with staff members, they come primarily to reconnect with the community and the values it represents.

Rituals lend themselves well to the creation of community. The best of them celebrate both the individual and the community simultaneously. When an Urban Academy student has completed a particular performance assessment, the entire school recognizes the achievement by cheering the student as he or she and his or her bell-ringing mentor walk through the school’s hallway. On occasion, when the student completes an assessment after the term has officially ended, many still insist on being “belled” before a much reduced student audience. There is an understanding that whoever is present represents the entire school community.

School communities benefit from meaningful connections to the broader community in which they exist. For 3 hours every week, Urban Academy student volunteers represent the school at an external
community service site of their choice. Their community service assessment involves teacher site visits, personal reflections, and the periodic sharing of community service experiences with other students. The community service experience broadens students’ perspectives, allowing them to participate in community experiences beyond the school in not-for-profit organizations. For many, it is the first time they have had such a responsibility. The school exposes students to the idea that the larger community is a resource they can learn from, and through community service it is strongly suggested that they have an obligation to reciprocate.

The ideas and practices reflected in these experiences—observations, inquiry discussion, respect for diversity, high expectations of students and teachers, the importance of community—are central to the construction of meaningful alternatives to standardized testing.

**BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL: LESSONS LEARNED**

Students who graduate from performance assessment schools are products of this equation. As a result, they emerge from high school with the academic skills needed for college-level work as well as with the feeling that they are competent, powerful, equally intelligent, and prepared individuals.

Maria responded to a question about how minority students coming from a diverse Consortium find themselves functioning in colleges that have relatively few minority students. She replied:

I attend a small rural college with mostly White students, which is a new experience for me. But I came from a high school where I was used to expressing my ideas to students of all different backgrounds and listening to them, too. People at the college could see that, and I was asked to become part of group that deals with race and class differences on college campuses in general. My involvement with this group gave me even more confidence in my classes. It has also taken me to other parts of the country and allowed me to meet civil rights heroes like Joseph Lawson, Marian Wright Edelman, and John Lewis. It gives me another identity to use as a foundation.

Another question asked concerned the adjustment Consortium students coming from a culture of discussion must make when they arrive in college classes that de-emphasize it. Justin explained:
I’ve been there. I experienced that even when I was at Urban Academy and went to church on Sundays. And because of my mom’s wishes, I wound up at a Christian college where most of my classes were lectures. But I always asked questions in those lectures, and I even tried to start discussions in them. I’d stop the professors when I didn’t understand their points and ask them to explain more clearly. I would say that I can’t really learn fully this way. I have to engage people. And when I couldn’t speak up in a lecture, I’d approach the professor after class and ask him for time where we could discuss the topic further. And a lot of them loved this and gave me that time.

Prior to attending Urban Academy, Freddy had never been to school with White students; following graduation he attended a well-known private college on scholarship where the student body is overwhelmingly White. These experiences presented him with unique challenges. As he noted,

I made White friends at Urban Academy, but they were always part of mixed groups. In college, I was sometimes the only minority in a class or a lounge. And most of these kids were really different from the White kids I’d known at Urban. What really helped me, though, was the time in classes. There I always felt like I could participate even when the material was difficult.

When I first got to college, I didn’t like it socially. But, I thought, well, you have to take advantage of this as long you have to be here, and so I decided to try to be premed. Ever since high school, I had it in my head that doctors always work and make a good salary. And I liked science at Urban. So I took a class called Evolution of Model Organisms. At first, it was fun, but eventually I started to hate it. It just wasn’t that intriguing. Then I thought about majoring in Spanish because some of my friends there were doing that, and I figured I’d grasp it pretty quickly. But then someone suggested a computer science class to me, and I took it. It was really hard, but I wasn’t intimidated by the reading and writing because I felt fully capable of doing the work. What I really liked about it was that the class involved problem solving, and I liked asking myself, “How do I figure this out given the problem in front of me?” Of course, I also realized that these were pretty marketable skills to have, so now I am a computer science major.
Freddy’s reflection underscores the value of students becoming active learners seeking meaningful knowledge. This is a crucial dimension of equity and the opportunities it presumably makes possible. Freddy’s testimony shows that while aspirations of upward mobility can animate students, the motivation that can endure adversity in an unequal world comes best from an ownership of and interest in one’s education.

This is where the issue of equity in education meets the problem of equity in society as a whole. Inequality has profound consequences. The failure of standardized testing is that one cannot make young people equal through measures that make them feel inferior and restrict their capacity for analysis and growth. If schools are going to address the issue of equity, they must be more open to new methods of assessing achievement, particularly those that have the potential to allow students to realize that they are capable and smart. Performance assessment creates an environment where a young person’s ideas matter and are part of the educational process. This is the foundation for the creation of a more equitable education.

REFERENCES

Related ASCD Resources: Excellence Through Equity

Below are some of the ASCD resources on related topics that were available at the time of publication (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses). For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. Search the complete archives of Educational Leadership at http://www.ascd.org/el.

Print Products

- Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban Schools Through Fearless Leadership by Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott (#112015)
- The Big Picture: Education Is Everyone’s Business by Dennis Littky with Samantha Grabelle (#104438)
- Breaking Free from Myths About Teaching and Learning: Innovation as an Engine for Student Success by A. Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera (#109041)
- Creating the Opportunity to Learn: Moving from Research to Practice to Close the Achievement Gap by A. Wade Boykin and Pedro Noguera (#107016)
- Detracking for Excellence and Equity by Carol Corbett Burris and Delia T. Garrity (#108013)
- The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners, 2nd ed. by Carol Ann Tomlinson (#108029)
- Meeting Students Where They Live: Motivation in Urban Schools by Richard L. Curwin (#109110)
- Personalizing the High School Experience for Each Student by Joseph DiMartino and John H. Clarke (#107054)
- Raising Black Students’ Achievement Through Culturally Responsive Teaching by Johnnie McKinley (#110004)
- School Climate Change: How do I build a positive environment for learning? (ASCD Arias) by Peter DeWitt and Sean Slade (#SF114084)
- Teaching English Language Learners Across the Content Areas by Judie Haynes and Debbie Zacarian (#109032)
- Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids’ Brains and What Schools Can Do About It by Eric Jensen (#109074)
- Unlocking Student Potential: How do I identify and activate student strengths? (ASCD Arias) by Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott (#SF115057)
- A World-Class Education: Learning from International Models of Excellence and Innovation (2012) by Vivien Stewart (#111016)

PD Online® Courses

- Achievement Gaps: The Path to Equity (#PD09OC64)
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Videos

- Breaking Through Barriers To Achievement (#605133)
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- How to Involve All Parents in Your Diverse Community (#607056)
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