



Erasing the Opportunity Gap

| EDWIN C. DARDEN

In his early days as a boy on Earth, comic book hero Superman lifted tractors or accidentally threw objects into orbit because he didn't know his own strength.

It's much the same with school board members who do not fully recognize the power they wield to give kids in poverty a better chance to achieve. The source of strength is a purposeful change in policy and practice that embraces an intentional mission to erase the opportunity gap.

The opportunity gap is simply explained. It's a comparative technique that challenges the all-too-common circumstance in which students in middle-class neighborhoods have more and better learning resources than youngsters in high-poverty areas — within the same school district. We term it an

“opportunity gap” because it shifts the focus from the achievement deficits students might arrive with to the role schools have to defeat those shortcomings.

Key learning adjuncts — qualified and talented teachers and principals, facilities that are conducive to creative uses and 21st century technology, and access to advanced classrooms that accent critical thinking — are all vital in driving school improvement. Those learning-related education resources also happen to be where school boards have Kryptonite-proof authority. Each action requires a

vote. You can choose to treat such moments as perfunctory or consciously consider the equity impact and weigh carefully whether the decision is wise.

In this rare instance, money per se is not the central issue. Resource equity does not ask how much cash is doled out to each building. Instead, the inquiry is qualitative and distributive. Does the money buy good stuff? Is high-quality raw material shared in an equitable manner? What resulting education opportunities are available to low-income kids compared to those of their middle-class peers?

Sure, legal and social arguments can be made in favor of a resource equity framework. Yet, the strongest and most persuasive one is this: Nothing less than fundamental fairness is at stake.

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The Same Starting Line

Pursuing the high road has clear benefits. Uppermost is the connection between resources and results. Better opportunities for poor kids can lead to higher test scores, increased high school graduation rates, more supportive and engaged community, a stronger reputation for the district, and students who leave school more fully prepared for college or career.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (also known as No Child Left Behind) has in recent years heavily focused attention on exam results, which aim to measure how much students learn. By contrast, the inputs — the resources available to help students learn — receive less acclaim.

Earlier this year, my organization, Appleseed, released *The Same Starting Line: How School Boards*

Can Erase the Opportunity Gap Between Poor and Middle-Class Children. Five school districts in five states were examined, with Appleseed Centers in the various locations doing the local fact gathering. We looked at a variety of key learning-related education resources, comparing the resource holdings of schools with a well-off socioeconomic population (as measured by free and reduced-price meal eligibility) with what students in impoverished areas had in their possession.

In many instances we discovered equity, but the overall results were disappointing if not predictable. The “aha” moment of our work is not that an opportunity gap exists, but rather that school boards can and should take simple and concrete steps to make sure academic opportunity is there for every child — regardless of family income.

These stark examples help illustrate the point.

- The *Washington Post* reported in November 2010 that the affluent section of Washington, D.C., had four times as many “highly effective” teachers (based on district evaluations) than the poorest neighborhood.
- Two months later, the *Post* reported that Washington, D.C.’s, Ballou Senior High School, which serves a high-poverty population, only had about 1,185 books in its library collection, or about one for every student. Typically, library holdings in high schools should have an 11:1 ratio.
- In Cobb County, Ga., Appleseed research concluded that the average age of a school building in a middle-class neighborhood is roughly 28 years old. By contrast, the average age in the high-poverty area is 41 years old.

Clearly, this idea of erasing the opportunity gap does not apply in two situations: when the school district is overwhelmingly poor or when it is overwhelmingly middle class or affluent. But take a look at

the majority of urban, large suburban, and countywide districts and you’ll often see a wealth disparity that follows residential patterns.

Where one lives translates to community and is the conversation’s other “X factor.” Addressing resource equity requires high-poverty communities to be more vocal about their needs. In other words, they must recognize the “mobilization moments” when the board is considering important learning-related education resources. By speaking up, they will imitate the collective voice that works so effectively in middle-class communities.

As part of its work, Appleseed created the Resource Equity Assessment Documents (READ) for communities and school districts to use together. The READ inventory, which comes in three versions (basic, side-by-side, and detailed), is a matrix of learning resources such as textbooks, library holdings, technology, security, professional support personnel, extracurricular activities, and more. It is not a scoring sheet, but a tool meant to raise questions that can be the basis for discussion and strategic planning about future adjustments. READs can be done for a single year or over several years.

In addition, the READ acts as the equivalent of a tip sheet, spotlighting which resources are important for learning and the key moments when impoverished communities should be present as advocates. For school boards, it serves as a tip sheet, letting you know that when these items are being debated, a discussion about the equity impact is warranted before a vote.

Equity-Colored Glasses

Looking at school board decisions through a resource equity lens is effective because awareness demands a different approach. The problem in the past has been that decision making has followed well-worn paths. Inequity compounds year



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after year when you do not examine the impact of resource equity. Better teachers, specialized programs, building renovations, new schools, talented counselors, and more resources flow freely to the district's middle-class sections, while low-income students settle for second best. Over time, the opportunity gap grows despite efforts on other fronts to close the chasm.

The fact that an opportunity gap exists does not imply that intentional discrimination is automatically the cause. In other words, this is not self-flagellation or an excuse for a lawsuit. It's unlikely that any cause of action would be seen as viable by even the most creative attorney. If it did, chances are slim that the action would get past the first hurdle in a court of law.

This issue really is about social justice and the compassion of school board members — most of whom invest time and personal funds to be elected because they love kids and want to serve their community by making a difference far into the future.

Yet, the law could be a factor. In July, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released the latest Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) information, which was collected from 7,000 districts across the nation during the 2009-10 school year. The CRDC asks for academic offerings and then cross-tabulates results by race, gender, and disability — the legal categories OCR enforces.

One finding was that 3,000 schools serving nearly 500,000 high school students offer no algebra 2 classes, and more than 2 million students in about 7,300 schools had no access to calculus classes. Meanwhile, an independent analysis found

a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and opportunity.

Looking at the CRDC results overall, government officials talked a lot about equity and resources. "Despite the best efforts of America's educators to bring greater equity to our schools, too many children — especially low-income and minority children — are still denied the educational opportunities they need to succeed," Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Russlynn Ali said in a statement accompanying the data release.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also weighed in. "These data show that far too many students are still not getting access to the kinds of classes, resources, and opportunities they need to be successful."

Pro Publica, the Pulitzer Prize-winning, nonprofit, investigative journalism organization, conducted its own analysis of the data — by poverty. Using free and reduced-price lunch information and adjusting for outliers, the organization found a strong correlation between income and opportunity. It identified a particularly egregious opportunity gap in connection with access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which provide students with sophisticated curricula and a chance to earn college credits for free while in high school.

Reacting to the Pro Publica data, education researcher and Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond drove home the point: "The opportunity to learn — the necessary resources, the curriculum opportunities, the quality teachers — that affluent students have, is what determines what people can do in life," she said.

A positive example of creatively addressing the opportunity gap

exists in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The district's strategic staffing initiative uses incentives to attract excellent teachers and principals to schools with the heaviest needs. As a unit, the team enters low-performing schools and receives a financial reward for its willingness to confront tough circumstances. While that incentive costs money, the results have been promising.

Resource equity, however, is but one factor. To fully succeed, schools must address the other social and educational needs that exist. Poverty is widely viewed as the third-rail of education. It dooms kids to the high-risk category instantly. Still, government data indicate that poverty among schoolchildren is widespread and growing.

According to the 2011 edition of *The Condition of Education*, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 19 percent (one in every five) of schools nationwide are "high poverty" based on the 2008-09 academic year. By definition, "high poverty" means 75 percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. That same year (the most recent data available), about 22 percent of all elementary school students and 8 percent of secondary school students attended high-poverty schools. At each level, that is 2 percent higher than in the previous year.

Some might say the problem will fix itself over time, pointing to alternatives like private school vouchers, charters, choice programs, and magnet schools. While each of those alternatives gets beyond the residence-bound approach of standard attendance zones, none has the

capacity to accommodate the entire population of students in poverty. Therefore, providing the resources for neighborhood-based schools continues to be the superior choice.

You Have the Power

So what can board members do? First, you can pioneer the leadership and direction needed to make resource equity and erasing the opportunity gap for high-poverty students a part of the district's culture. Second, school boards can pass a stand-alone equity policy that outlines the district's shared values, provides specific implementation steps to the superintendent and staff, and then holds both educators and the board itself accountable. The policy would be precise about what is expected, including an analysis of the equity effects of decisions you

make, a regular cycle for district-wide self-assessment, and community conversations on the topic.

The good news is that school boards do not have to wait on the federal government, the governor, the legislature, the courts, or anyone else to get started. Regardless of how much money a district holds, resource equity applies because it is about how you distribute what you have — whether a lot or a little. This also is not about the Robin Hood approach of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Yet, the new view might require a realignment of resources over time to correct current unfair imbalances and to propel school improvement.

As a board member, you might not be able to change the course of mighty rivers, or bend steel with your bare hands. But you can make

a difference in the lives of students — perhaps thousands over the long term — with the authority already vested in you. The strength lies in doing the right thing.

Will some of the current, influential, middle-class community members be upset by a school board seeking a more genuine definition of equity and the same starting line for everybody? Perhaps. Is there a political risk? Absolutely. Nonetheless, flex your muscles on behalf of the kids who need it most.

Superman never shied away from Kryptonite — and neither should you. ■

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