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**EDITOR’S NOTE**
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Poor Students Face Digital Divide
In How Teachers Learn to Use Tech

America’s most innovative schools constantly help train teachers to use new technologies, but the barriers to creating such a culture in high-poverty schools can seem insurmountable

By Benjamin Herold

Pittsburgh

It’s like any other small video-game-development studio, except the coders are 10 and their games have titles like “Evil Donut Unicorn Ping Pong.”

The scene unfolded in a classroom at South Fayette Intermediate School, about 20 minutes from downtown. The walls were covered with whiteboards and sticky notes. Students worked in teams, arguing passionately and high-fiving when there was a breakthrough. Teacher Victoria Bishop circled the room, quietly making sure her 5th graders’ code included functionals and conditionals, the two computer science concepts embedded in the day’s lesson.

Bishop is 23. She’s not yet through her first year at South Fayette. Already, she’s developed a solid knowledge of Scratch, the kid-friendly programming language her students are using. She’s learned to design classroom projects that cultivate in her students everything from computational thinking strategies to narrative storytelling skills.

In addition to her classroom duties, she’s helping lead a districtwide “Python incubator.” The high-level programming language powers Instagram and is used to test microchips at Intel. Soon, Bishop will be working to integrate it into South Fayette’s 6th grade curriculum.

A year ago, she was teaching art and music at a local Catholic school.

What if Bishop had been told then what she’d be doing now?

“I would’ve said you’re crazy,” she said.

In the past decade, the “digital divide” in America’s public schools has shifted. Classrooms in nearly every corner of the country have been flooded with devices and software. High-speed internet connectivity has expanded dramatically. Undoubtedly, there are still big disparities in the technologies available to the have and the have-nots.

But in places like Pittsburgh’s southwestern suburbs, where some local school districts are engaged in a kind of ed-tech arms race, just offering kids the latest-model laptop isn’t enough. Instead, what distinguishes the most innovative schools is what students and teachers do with the technology they have. Parents want their children prepared to shape the future, not get steamrolled by it. To make that happen, schools like South Fayette Intermediate try to surround teachers like Bishop with supports and learning opportunities, so they can continually find new and powerful ways to integrate technology into their classrooms.

For most districts, it’s a huge challenge.

There’s widespread agreement that teachers aren’t coming out of college well-prepared to navigate this new digital environment. And for teachers already in the workforce, professional development hasn’t kept up with the pace of technological change. The percent of 4th grade students whose teachers say they’ve received training on how to integrate computers into their classroom instruction has remained flat since 2009, according to a new Education Week Research Center analysis of survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Inequities are also persistent. Teachers in high-poverty schools are consistently less likely than their counterparts to say they’ve received technology-integration training, the Education Week Research Center analysis found. The gap isn’t getting any smaller.

In Pennsylvania, home to a wide digital-training divide between its high- and
low-poverty schools, the numbers tell part of the story. But to really understand the disparities in how schools help teachers learn to integrate classroom technology, it helps to compare a district like South Fayette, where 80 percent of students are white and just 13 percent are poor, to a district like nearby Sto-Rox, which is 33 percent white and 77 percent poor.

South Fayette shines as a model of what experts say works best.

District leadership has a clear vision for how teaching and learning with technology should look: “Computational thinking,” “human-centered design,” “innovation mindset”—the district’s intermediate school is literally built to reflect its embrace of such concepts. Each floor is laid out around a large central room that is specifically outfitted for groups of students to work together on projects like producing videos and programming robots.

Formal professional development at South Fayette also goes well beyond in-service days. The intermediate school, for example, has a dedicated STEAM—short for science, technology, engineering, arts, and math—teacher, Shad Wachter. He works alongside other teachers to design lessons, teach classes, and troubleshoot problems. South Fayette staff members also have access to some of the best minds in the region: The district is partnering with Carnegie Mellon University to help develop its new computer science curriculum and train its teachers.

Before her video-game-development lesson started, Bishop, Wachter, and another teacher talked about their careers. Again and again, the conversation touched on themes like trust and collaboration.

Eighth-year Superintendent Billie Rondinelli was listening in. She’s a demanding leader, 100 percent serious about making sure her students are “globally competitive.” She spent the morning making rounds on an injured ankle that some of her staff feared was broken. She took off her glasses, wiped her eyes, and apologized for the display of emotion.

“It’s just a bit overwhelming to hear,” she said. “We’ve worked so hard to build this.”

A day earlier and 10 miles away, a very different conversation unfolded at Sto-Rox High School, nestled in the heart of the once-bustling steel town of McKees Rocks.

Superintendent Frank Dalmas and Principal Tim Beck find the idea of comparing their district to South Fayette almost laughable.

A few days earlier, the Pittsburgh Business Times released its annual rankings of 103 school districts in Allegheny County. South Fayette was No. 1. Sto-Rox was No. 102.

Again and again, Dalmas and Beck steer the conversation about classroom technology back to two broader topics: lack of resources and problems in the community they serve.

For a decade, Sto-Rox has been bleeding students. The district now sends more than 20 percent of its annual budget to charter schools to cover the costs of educating students who fled in search of better options.

Dalmas talks up one of the partnerships he’s most proud of. He’s given the local police keys to the school, and he had the building’s stairwells painted in color-coded patterns to make it easier for them to respond to emergencies.

How do the superintendent and principal see their students’ futures?

“Our responsibility is to prepare kids for the next phase of their lives,” Dalmas said. “Whether that be fast food, retail, or a warehouse.”

When the conversation eventually turned back to training teachers to use classroom technology, there was much less to say.

That’s not surprising, said Naomi Harm, the CEO of the Innovative Educator Consulting Network, which works with schools around the country on technology integration.

“When a lot of things are broken, how do you prioritize and fix what’s most important?” Harm asked.

Professional development for technology rarely rises to the top of the triage list. That’s been the experience of Joe Krajcovic, now in his 13th year of teaching at Sto-Rox.

Krajcovic’s life-science classroom feels frozen in time. Students from years past have covered the walls with a random assortment of murals: Woody Woodpecker, a box of Special K cereal, Earth as a melting ice cream cone.

On this day, the most evident technology was the smartphones that occupied the attention of several of the teens. One young woman sat off by herself, staring out the window, listening to music.

Krajcovic introduced the day’s lab.

“So basically we’re going to be blowing up marshmallows in the microwave?” a student asked.

After the lab ended, Krajcovic sat down to talk. When it comes to technology-related professional development, he says the same things as the experts: Vision, resources, support, and relationships make for a school culture that supports continuous learning.

Asked if those things are in place in Sto-Rox, Krajcovic folded his hands.

Obvious problems with the district’s technology setup are an immediate first barrier. Depending on whom you ask, Sto-Rox has somewhere between 30 to 60 Chromebooks for its 1,300 students. The devices sat unused for more than a year. Until recently, the district didn’t have consistent Wi-Fi.

That problem has since been fixed. But now a dozen or so of the school’s interactive whiteboards are out of commission. The adapters that connect them to the school’s network have gone bad. Each would cost about $35 to replace. It’s late in the school year, and money is tight. Maybe next year.

The school’s best hope for new technology now rests with Dontez Ford, a former standout athlete at Sto-Rox who recently signed with the NFL’s Detroit Lions. Ford has been leading a campaign to raise money to buy more Chromebooks for his alma mater.

The people at Sto-Rox care, Krajcovic concluded. But the question that will always get the most attention is how to keep the school from running out of money.

It’s not as though such challenges are new. Education Week has covered the digital divide in Pittsburgh since at least 2001. Then, we reported on how city school students were still using Tandy 100s with floppy disks.

A decade ago, the Pennsylvania education department tried to address the inequities. State officials came up with $60 million a year for a program called Classrooms for the Future. They provided new computers to every high school in the state and hired nearly 500 coaches to provide in-class technology support for teachers.

Pennsylvania ended the program in 2011, following budget cuts.

As Krajcovic headed out of his classroom, he was stopped by a woman holding a clipboard. She was from the state education department. She wanted to check whether he had the school’s anti-bullying policy posted on his wall. He didn’t.

Krajcovic shrugged.

“To survive in this environment, you have to be able to adapt to the challenges,” he said.
Few people have thought more about the future of learning, how to support teachers using new technology, and the persistent inequality in western Pennsylvania’s schools than Gregg S. Behr.

Behr is the executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Grable Foundation. He’s also the heart of the region’s Remake Learning initiative. The sprawling network of schools, museums, libraries, after-school programs, and businesses has become a national model for how to support STEM, STEAM, maker education, computer science, and other “modern learning” approaches.

In one form or another, much of Grable’s money goes to teacher professional development. Behr’s approach is to seed and nurture a community of educators who can inspire each other, share ideas and figure out common problems together.

This year’s Grable-funded Remake Learning Days, for example, featured dozens of free meet-ups and workshops for Pittsburgh-area teachers, covering everything from next-generation digital storytelling to Laser Cutting 101. Behr has a 67-page file with example after example of outside-the-box professional-development opportunities in the region.

“There needs to be a network that teachers can plug into,” he explained.

Slowly, that network has become accessible to places like Sto-Rox.

Over the past year, for example, Superintendent Dalmas and Principal Beck have latched on to STEAM as a strategy that might help staunch the flow of students to charters.

A $20,000 grant from Grable paid for the school’s first 3D printers, some video equipment, and a computer-controlled router to upgrade its shops.

Beck and his staff wrote the grant application with the help of a colleague in the neighboring Montour district, a leader in the Remake Learning community. “He told us the magic words to put in,” Beck said.

That same guy from Montour also called Beck to suggest he send one of his teachers to something called Agency by Design. Beck hadn’t heard of the group and didn’t have time to check it out. But he trusted the Remake Learning network. So he sent first-year Sto-Rox science teacher Anthony Martini to take part.

The benefits are starting to show.

Inside Martini’s Inquiry Science class, students work on a project that entails building bridges out of cardboard. Right now, they’re doing preliminary research using Chromebooks that Martini has managed to commandeering. Their assignment is likely to expand; an earlier class project on volcanoes evolved into a massive effort in which students had to construct entire metropolises, assume the roles of various city officials, and draft plans for everything from emergency evacuations to crisis communications.

After class, Martini said, his goal is to get his students excited about asking “how” and “why” again.

“I was a bad student. I can’t sit still, I can’t take tests, I can’t do any of that,” he said. “But I’ve done a lot of things in my life, and I’m resourceful. I try to bring that experience into education.”

Martini could talk all day about Agency by Design, a small network of local teachers who are experimenting with new ways to assess students that is consistent with hands-on, maker education. He’s active in Remake Learning, and he has a growing network of teacher colleagues he swaps ideas with via social media.

The Sto-Rox administration has been “awesome,” Martini said, offering nothing but encouragement for his efforts to engage in outside professional learning opportunities.

Does he get that same support inside the school?

Martini pauses.

“We’re in a transitional stage,” he said.

When it comes to training teachers to integrate classroom technology, it’s not hard to spot what’s missing at Sto-Rox.

Resources, for one. The 5th graders at South Fayette have ready access to computers and neatly arranged shelves of iPods and robotics equipment and art supplies. The maker corner of Martini’s high school science room is a jumble of salvaged PVC pipe, glass jars, and scrap wood, plus some Lego robotics kits he found sitting unused in the middle school.

But it’s more than money. At Sto-Rox,
there appears to be no clear vision from the top about what learning should look like and why. There’s limited time for teachers to formally collaborate. There’s not a schoolwide culture that leads staff to push each other to be constantly finding more powerful uses of classroom technology. And there’s little of the stability that low-poverty schools often take for granted. For all his foundation’s focus on equity, Behr said, $13 million a year in grants is nowhere near enough to address the full extent of such gaps or the racism and poverty that lead some students to get far fewer opportunities than others.

At the end of the day in Sto-Rox, Principal Beck was about to offer his final thoughts. He was quickly interrupted.

A staff member had been alerted to a Facebook threat made against a former student who likes to show up outside the building after school.

Afraid that Sto-Rox students might get caught up in a shooting, the administration decided to dismiss classes 15 minutes early.

The doors were opened. Alarms blared. Beck tugged on his green Sto-Rox baseball cap and grabbed a walkie-talkie. Outside, a police cruiser slowly circled the building.

Fortunately, nothing happened. But 7th period was cut short again.

“South Fayette doesn’t have to deal with this stuff,” Beck said.

Why does the technology-training divide matter? At many schools like Sto-Rox, new models of hands-on, tech-infused, project-based learning are not seen as a way to fundamentally transform students’ lives and future prospects.

“STEAM is important,” Dalmas, the superintendent, said. “But we also have to get our kids prepared to go and work at a 9-to-5 job right out of high school.”

In places like South Fayette, meanwhile, everyone seems to recognize that for today’s children, fluency with technology and algorithms and computer code will be crucial to unlocking future opportunities. As a result, the entire district is organized to take maximum advantage of every professional learning opportunity it can find. For its students, the benefits compound over time.

A whirlwind tour of South Fayette concluded in a conference room at the high school, where the district’s director of technology and innovation assembled a group of standout students.

These kids already know Python, the computer-programming language. They taught themselves.

Last summer, the district tapped them to share what they know with South Fayette staff.

“Really, teachers should act more as facilitators,” Parv Shrivastava, 14, said matter-of-factly. “It allows students to be more creative and explore the content, and it helps with knowledge retention.”

Shrivastava is in 9th grade. He just took the most rigorous Advanced Placement computer science course available.

Next, he wants to teach himself about machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Sitting in the back corner of the conference room, South Fayette teacher Brian Garlick shook his head and laughed.

Garlick started at the district two decades ago, teaching wood shop and metal shop.

In 2002-03, when South Fayette opened its new high school, he took over the new technology education lab. It started with computer-aided design software and computer-controlled machine equipment, then evolved to include 3D printers, circuitry, and robotics.

Now, Garlick said, he’s in the midst of another major transition. Next year, South Fayette High will open a new “fab lab” full of the latest prototyping equipment. He’s been tapped to run it.

To prepare, Garlick said, he plans on spending the summer learning to write code. In order to help his students build the apps and underwater robots and other technologies they’re interested in, he’ll need to become more comfortable with programming Arduino microcontrollers and small Raspberry Pi computers.

It’s a long way from drill presses and table saws.

But as Garlick pondered the third steep climb of his career-long learning curve with classroom technology, he sounded more energized than exhausted.

“I better get my ass in gear,” Garlick said, “or these kids are going to blow right by me.”

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Published May 12, 2017 in Education Week’s Teacher Beat Blog

Teaching Teachers to Address Race And Equity in the Classroom

By Brenda Iasevoli

Fifth graders crowd around their teacher’s desk to glimpse John Trumbull’s “Declaration of Independence.” The painting depicts the Declaration’s authors presenting a draft of the document to Congress. The teacher asks the students to describe what they see.

“Well, everyone’s white,” one student says.

“Yes,” the teacher responds, and then moves on with the lesson.

Researchers at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education point to this classroom scenario to demonstrate the need for instruction that delves unafraid into issues of race and equity. The Double Check professional development program, led by education professor Catherine Bradshaw and operating in 30 middle schools in Maryland, aims to foster classroom environments where students feel acknowledged and understood. The idea is that teachers should learn to “double check” themselves: stop, and think things through. What’s at the root of a student’s behavior? What’s behind that comment? When the student pointed out there were only white people in the painting—an intuitively insightful observation—the teacher might have acknowledged the observation and explored it, rather than dismissing it.

“Teachers are comfortable saying something to the effect of: ‘You’re right. They are all white. Why do you think that is the case?’” said Bradshaw, and it’s the goal of Double Check to help teachers get there. The teacher should have encouraged discussion through further questioning of the class, Bradshaw said. They
might have even taken up issues of gender, since there are no females in the painting either, and the teacher could ask, “Who else isn’t there?”

None of this is easy, admits Bradshaw, who said teachers are already juggling differentiating lesson plans for different learners, classroom management, and other issues. “While it is hard for us to plan for the unexpected, what we want to do is give teachers the skills and the confidence to tackle these moments,” Bradshaw told Education Week. “It’s scary. The lesson could go in a very bad direction. But the teacher could have leveraged the student’s comment on the painting if she had the right training.”

Double Check’s coaches aim to get teachers and principals out of what Bradshaw calls the “special occasion teaching” mindset, where race is taught only during Black History Month, or women’s accomplishments only during Women’s History Month. The principal who observed the lesson on the Declaration of Independence painting had written “N/A” on the teacher-observation form under “anything related to culture.” It did occur to the principal afterwards, when she was discussing the lesson with Double Check staff, that the student’s comment raised the opportunity to talk about race.

Yet talking freely about difficult issues requires a safe space and a healthy teacher-student relationship. Statistics show students of color are referred to the principal and punished at higher rates than white students, Bradshaw points out. Double Check’s coaches help teachers to cultivate productive classroom behaviors. Sandra Hardee, a Double Check coach, works with teachers to promote positive behaviors by helping teachers to build relationships with students and to praise students when they make the right choices, like raising their hands instead of calling out.

Hardee said teachers come to understand that they don’t have to tackle a bunch of goals at once. Achieving just one goal can have many impacts. “Student engagement, more participation, better classroom management—it’s going to happen when the students feel more comfortable and when they trust the teacher,” she told Education Week.

With funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, the Double Check program is undergoing a four-year study examining nearly 6,000 teachers’ attitudes and practices and more than 13,000 middle school students’ perceptions of school climate and equity. The study is also evaluating student behavior and academic performance following a one-year participation in the program. Data from previous Double Check studies have shown a reduction in black, male students being referred to the principal when they have teachers who received the Double Check training.

Bradshaw stresses the need for training on equitable practices woven into teacher preparation, professional development, licensing, and accreditation. School districts often provide PD on equity and culture annually. Yet, according to Bradshaw, there is no data to show these efforts are working. She hopes the Double Check study will fill that gap. Still, much more work needs to be done. “It’s not a quick fix, here’s the Band-Aid, you’re culturally proficient now,” she said.

Published November 16, 2016 in Education Week

Positive Climates May Shrink Achievement Gaps

Analysis of multiple studies finds link

By Evie Blad

Schools where students feel safe, engaged, and connected to their teachers are also schools that have narrower achievement gaps between low-income children and their wealthier peers.

A research analysis found correlations between improved school climates and narrower achievement gaps between students in different socioeconomic groups.

Authors of the analysis, published this month in the Review of Educational Research, examined 78 school-climate-research studies published between 2000 and 2015 to detect trends.

All but one of those studies found a relationship between improved school climate and student achievement.

“Our analysis of more than 15 years’ worth of research shows that schools do matter and can do much to improve academic outcomes,” study co-author Ron Avi Astor, a professor of social work and education at the University of Southern California, said in a statement.
“Our findings suggest that by promoting a positive climate, schools can allow greater equality in educational opportunities, decrease socioeconomic inequalities, and enable more social mobility,” he continued.

In one notable finding, researchers detected no correlation between school climate and a school’s socioeconomic levels. This suggests that positive school climates are possible, even in schools with high-need, low-income student populations, the authors write.

Although the studies included in the analysis used inconsistent definitions for school climate, the authors generally define it as “positive teacher-student relationships, sense of safety, and student connectedness to and engagement in school.”

Schools take a variety of actions to improve school climate, from implementing stronger anti-bullying policies to setting up procedures to ensure that discipline is used consistently among all racial and ethnic groups.

Among the authors’ findings: A positive school climate can weaken the effects of low family income on achievement.

“About 13 percent of the studies found that climate has a moderating influence on the relationship between background characteristics and academic achievement,” the analysis says. “For example, some studies indicated that positive climate decreases the correlation between [socioeconomic] background and academic achievement, whereas negative school climate increases this correlation, primarily among students with lower [socioeconomic] backgrounds.”

“Positive school climate has the potential to break the negative influences that stem from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and to mitigate risk factors that threaten academic achievement,” co-author Ruth Berkowitz, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Haifa, Israel, said in a statement.

**Improving Research**

The authors also suggest ways to improve school climate research.

One problem is that inconsistent definitions of school climate and methods of measurement across studies make it difficult to draw conclusions from their collective results.

A uniform, consistent definition; consistent forms of measurement; and more rigorous, longitudinal research would help strengthen findings and show the strength of school climate improvements’ effects on classroom achievement, they said.

In addition, research should incorporate multiple measures of success, weighing the input of teachers, staff, and others beyond students, who remain the narrow focus of much school climate research, the analysis says. Consistent, reliable research will be more and more necessary as states and schools increasingly incorporate school climate into their accountability and improvement strategies, the authors write.

Schools may increase their focus on climate because the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new federal education law, requires states to incorporate at least one “other indicator” into their accountability systems in addition to such traditional measures as student-test scores.

The law lists a few examples of those other indicators, including school safety, student engagement, and school climate.

“There is a tangible, immediate need to construct a common definition and reliable climate measurements that can be translated into practice and policy guidelines,” USC’s Astor said. “In the absence of a clear and uniform definition and measurement of school climate, the ability of researchers and stakeholders to evaluate school climate growth over time is restricted.”

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**Too Few ELL Students Land in Gifted Classes**

By Sarah D. Sparks and Alex Harwin

Linnea Van Eman, the gifted education coordinator for the Tulsa school district, sees too many gifted students who simply don’t have the language skills to show what they can do.

The 36,000-student Oklahoma district has been pushing hard to bring more students from traditionally underrepresented groups—and English-language learners in particular—into its gifted program. Using a combination of more-diverse testing, greater parent outreach, and closer observation, Van Eman and her teachers are working to fill equity gaps in the district’s advanced programs.

“Any child who can translate for their parents and is decoding in two languages all the time, that’s huge,” Van Eman said.
“We need to push back against this perception that giftedness has to look a certain way.”

Beginning next school year, the Every Student Succeeds Act, the main federal education law, requires states and districts to report the number of their students performing at the advanced academic level, not just those who are academically proficient and below, and to include advanced-achievement data for specific student groups, including English-language learners.

Oklahoma is one of the most expansive states in the country when it comes to gifted education, with 14 percent of its K-12 students participating in advanced academic programs. Yet federal data suggest that it, like most states, is still behind the curve when it comes to identifying and nurturing diverse students at the highest academic levels, and English-learners are among the groups most frequently overlooked.

An analysis by the Education Week Research Center found that while nearly 1 in 10 U.S. students is learning English as a second language, this group represents less than 3 percent of the students in gifted and talented education nationwide. That’s only 101,000 of the more than 3.4 million students in gifted programs.

“A lot of the programs we test for [in gifted education] are language-based,” said Dina Brulles, a gifted education coordinator at Paradise Valley, a well-off district outside Phoenix, and a consultant with the National Association for Gifted Children. “We can see they make good connections, have insights, ... but the school is often still looking at them as being not linguistically up to par, and they want to treat them through a deficit model rather than looking at these kids’ strengths.”

By the Numbers

Gifted education generally includes the 3 percent to 5 percent highest-scoring students on academic tests, as well as those who show significant leadership, creativity, or strengths in particular subjects. But programs vary significantly from state to state. According to a study by the Education Commission of the States conducted last November, 37 states define giftedness, and only 32 require districts to identify and serve gifted students.

Education Week found that 7 percent of K-12 students participate in gifted programs, according to the U.S. Department of Education’s most recent federal civil rights data, which were collected in 2014. But individual states differ considerably

Behind the Data on Gifted/ELL Students

Nearly 1 in 10 students in U.S. schools is an English-learner, and they make up a slightly higher percentage of students in schools that offer gifted education programs. But in a new analysis, Education Week found fewer than 3 percent of students in gifted programs nationwide is still learning English. Here’s how we approached the analysis.

What is gifted education?

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s office for civil rights, gifted programs are special educational opportunities that take place during regular school hours for students “endowed with a high degree of mental ability or who demonstrate unusual physical coordination, creativity, interest, or talent.” They include enriched curriculum or an accelerated pace through individual classes or grades; while they can be at any K-12 grade, they are focused on K-8, and OCR also collects separate data on participation in advanced high school coursework, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes, which is not counted as part of gifted programs.

Where do the data on English-learners and giftedness come from?

The Education Week Research Center used 2013-14 data from the Education Department’s Civil Rights Data Collection. We focused our analysis on data related to overall school characteristics, language-acquisition status, and enrollment.

What is the Civil Rights Data Collection?

Every two years since 1968, the Education Department has collected information on demographics and educational opportunities for students of different genders, races, English-proficiency levels, and disabilities. Every public school in the country is required to respond to the survey. These data are used both for enforcement of federal civil rights laws and for research to improve education for these students. The data we analyzed are from the 2013-14 school years; the Education Department is collecting 2015-16 data now. You can find more information on the Civil Rights Data Collection on our Frequently Asked Questions page online.

How did you analyze gaps in schools’ gifted education programs?

We focused our research on the majority of schools nationwide where students are enrolled in gifted and talented programs. This analysis did not include juvenile justice facilities, but did include schools serving all grade levels. We also compared enrollment of English-learners in schools that reported providing gifted education to their enrollment at schools that do not have gifted programs.

There’s newer or different information on gifted education available from my state, district, or school. Why not use that?

We used 2013-14 data because it’s the most recent data that allow us to conduct a comparative examination of gifted education across the nation as a whole. The Civil Rights Data Collection does not include information on state laws related to gifted education in schools, and state definitions of gifted education may differ from that used by the federal government. For data that seemed questionable, Education Week also asked state education department officials to review the data and supply any corrections or changes that could be supported by additional evidence. Additionally, the CRDC rounds some student counts to protect individuals from being identified, which may also may affect the results.

-SARAH D. SPARKS
in how and how many students are identified as intellectually advanced: Kentucky and Maryland lead with 16 percent of their students in gifted programs, while states such as Rhode Island and Vermont reported less than 1 percent. A few states, including Connecticut and Maine, cap the percentage of students who can take part in gifted programs.

Some studies suggest that children who grow up bilingual have greater cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills than monolingual children, but English-learners in the United States often don’t get a chance to show their skills. Nationwide in 2014, within schools that have gifted programs, English-learners were underrepresented by more than 5 percent, with gaps between the share of students who are English-learners and the percentage of ELLs in gifted education that were as large as 19 percent in California and 18 percent in Nevada.

ELLs are underrepresented in gifted programs in 49 states and the District of Columbia. While they are not technically underrepresented in West Virginia, only 1 in 100 students in the state had limited English skills, and less than 1 in 100 of those English-learners actually attended a school that offered gifted education in the first place, the Education Week analysis found.

In a University of Connecticut study of gifted identification in three states, researchers found that a student’s high achievement on state tests didn’t always guarantee them a slot in gifted education. “As students’ achievement increases, their chance of being identified as gifted increases, but much slower if you are an English-language learner, poor or from an underrepresented minority than if you are non-ELL and white or Asian,” said D. Betsy McCoach, a co-author of the study and a professor of education measurement and evaluation. “Districts make policies [on gifted education], but those policies don’t necessarily translate to equal opportunities across schools in those districts.”

In Oklahoma, ELLs made up 7 percent of the population at schools that offered gifted programs in 2014 but only 2 percent of gifted enrollment. Tulsa had double the percentage of English-learners but only 2 percent in gifted programs.

Five years ago, Tulsa, like most districts, relied on teacher or parent referrals, confirmed by an IQ test, to identify academically gifted students. In the city’s mostly Hispanic Mitchell Elementary School, Principal Lyda Wilbur said that meant only 4 students were identified as gifted that year—none of them English-learners.

“Intuitively, it feels like having teachers and other stakeholders provide nominations is a way of broadening the pool, but that’s not what it does at all; it narrows the pool tremendously,” said Matthew McBee, a gifted education researcher and an assistant professor of experimental psychology at East Tennessee State University.

In 2016, McBee and Michael Matthews, the program director for the academically and intellectually gifted graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, co-authored a study that found school systems that relied on teachers and parents to nominate students to be tested for giftedness missed more than 60 percent of gifted students, compared with systems that screened all students at least once.

“We know we have gifted students in our building—it’s a matter of finding them,” Wilbur said.

That frustration drove the district to overhaul its gifted education from top to bottom. Tulsa now requires every 2nd grader to take the CogAT, a four-part test of verbal and nonverbal ability; and in schools like Mitchell, gifted and ELL teachers have partnered to translate the test for students who do not speak English well enough to read it. The district also added other tests, including the Naglieri Nonverbal Ability Test, which was developed specifically to identify potentially talented children with lower-level English-language skills.

Starting next year, Tulsa will also target English-learners who show faster-than-average growth on the state English-language-proficiency test. According to Matthews, that’s a strategy that shows strong potential as a way of identifying gifted students, as they often learn languages more quickly than other students.

The district still asks teachers and parents to recommend students with potential, but they have become more systematic. For example, twice a year Mitchell asks all parents to fill out behavioral checklists in English or Spanish on their child, which are used to scout potentially talented students who hadn’t shown up on the screening tests. “We triangulate all our tests and data and say, ‘Who is not being recommended? Why is this child not on our radar?’” Wilbur said.

Seeing Past Language

At McClure Elementary, where today 1 in 4 students is an English-learner, and at Marshall Elementary, where the English-learner ratio is 1-to-5, gifted facilitator Patrice O’Dea has been working with ELL teachers to start identifying English-learners even earlier than 2nd grade. First graders who show promise but do not necessarily have perfect grades join an “explorers club” that works on science- and technology-related group projects in school for a few hours a week during the year, while O’Dea observes.

“In math and science, they catch on to the concepts really fast,” she said. “I might explain something four or six times for a regular kid. For gifted, I explain once, and they get it.”

That’s common, according to Rachael Mun, a gifted-education researcher at the University of North Texas. “If you look at individual domains [to identify gifted students], you would capture a lot more [English-learner] students, particularly if you could bypass some of the language barriers we put up,” Mun said. “If you have students who are gifted in math or science, ... you should really be working to serve them in that area, while still working on the areas where they aren’t as advanced.”

O’Dea recalled one 1st grade English-learner from a high-poverty, Hispanic and Native American background.

“She was one I did not identify right away; she just was quiet, very reserved, so she didn’t stand out,” O’Dea recalled. After two years in the explorers club, the girl regularly led her classmates in projects and eventually tested into the gifted program.

“Her ability to articulate thoughts and ideas to others her age, is just going gangbusters,” O’Dea said.

The increased outreach has infused more life into the district’s gifted program overall. After Tulsa’s gifted enrollment fell from more than 5,400 in 2014 to 4,100 in 2016, in keeping with falling overall enrollment, it had risen again to 4,500 by this spring. For the first time this year, every elementary and middle school had at least a part-time gifted education instructor, Van Eman said.

In Mitchell, the program has grown from fewer than 20 students in 2014 to more than 50 today, with a majority of them English-learners.

The future of gifted education in general is uncertain, though. Most states are still in the early stages of reaching for equity in gifted education. President Donald Trump rolled back Obama administration regulations fleshing out how states should implement the federal education law’s accountability changes, and his fiscal 2018 budget proposal would eliminate $12 million in federal gifted education grants.
Ready to improve educational equity for K-12 students? Pair your curriculum with educational technology and watch the achievement gaps narrow.

In an ideal world, equity in public education means that education opportunities are tailored to each students’ needs. Low-income students, minority students and other vulnerable populations can sometimes face unique barriers and require different kinds of support. When equity is present, students are treated to fairer societies, more expansive opportunities, and the ability to successfully compete for jobs.

As a guiding principle, equity sets a high standard for how students’ educational opportunities across the nation ought to be provided. Equity is achieved when all students have access to and receive the resources they need for post-graduation success.

But we’re not living in an ideal world. Compared with the richest children, the poorest children are four times more likely to be out of school and five times more likely not to complete primary education. And while the situation is most acute in the developing world, growing inequalities are also present in wealthier countries, compounded mainly by disparities in access to high-quality learning technologies, increasing globalization and circumstances related to international migration.

When it comes to educational equity, structural barriers, including inequitable funding systems, impede progress and present the highest hurdles, according to the Department of Education (DOE). “While one might expect schools in low-income communities to receive extra resources, the reverse is often true; a DOE study found that 45 percent of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than was typical for other schools in their district.”

The problem doesn’t end at the K-12 level. Traditionally under-served students, including minorities and low-income students, attend and complete college at far lower rates than their peers. These students are suspended, expelled, and drop out at higher rates, and are less likely to have access to strong teachers and challenging curricula. A recent study of the Advanced Placement exam in computer science found that in 11 states, no African-American students took the exam; in eight states, no Hispanic students participated.
The Great Equalizer

Technology is a great facilitator of educational equity, regardless of a student’s individual challenges (i.e. socioeconomic, background.) A powerful tool for transforming learning, technology can help:

- Affirm and advance relationships between educators and students
- Provide access to multiple sources of high-quality content
- Introduce learning methods that promote active learning and collaboration
- Shrink long-standing equity and accessibility gaps and,
- Adapt learning experiences to meet the needs of all learners.

Curriculum’s Critical Role

Districts are using learning management systems (LMS) like itslearning to reduce the equity gap. In addition to standards-aligned high-quality resources, itslearning provides teachers and districts the data they need to assess each student’s progress and take immediate steps to support learning and ensure mastery.

The itslearning LMS includes a digital library that contains high-quality, standards-aligned open educational resources (OER). This provides curriculum experts and teachers the ability to design curriculum and lesson plans that can be used to personalize or differentiate content; whether the learning is occurring at school, in a blended, or virtual environment. This ability to individualize, differentiate and personalize is a key driver to improving student outcomes across all ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses.
Closing Achievement Gaps

In 2014, Houston Independent School District (HISD), leaders implemented a district-wide system, called “the HUB”. Powered by itslearning, the HUB is a robust digital ecosystem where students and teachers can access exemplar courses and standards-aligned digital resources. It also acts as a digital community where they can create, communicate and collaborate.

As an LMS, learning object repository (LOR), and a curriculum management system, the HUB brings together all learning content and tools in a way that allows students, teachers, and parents to access content, communicate, collaborate, produce, view assignments, provide assessments aligned to standards, review data to respond to needs and ensure mastery.

“The HUB contains digital resources from more than 30 different publishers, all searchable by keywords and learning standards,” says Beatriz Arnillas, HISD’s former director of IT, Education Technology and a senior educational advisor with itslearning.

“A student or a teacher can go to the digital library, put in a keyword and cross-reference the keyword with a standard and receive a variety of results from different sources and object types,” she continues, “just like you would do in Google but the results are highly curated materials that are meta-tagged to learning standards.”

The LMS has produced solid results in HISD, according to Arnillas. The district’s score improvements include data from cohort one for all students, including Hispanic, African American, and economically-disadvantaged pupils. In an early pilot, schools using the HUB in a 1:1 learning environment showed impressive improvements:

1. 90% of schools who participated in the early HUB pilot had an increase in the number of students with passing English scores and,
2. 55% of schools had an increase in math scores, even as the STAAR test became more rigorous over the test periods.

Education equity is a complicated issue, but as we continue to see correlations between technology access and student performance, we can’t deny the important role that it plays. Too many students are disadvantaged due to circumstances beyond their control, but given the right technology in the classroom, districts can begin to narrow achievement gaps and increase opportunities for each student.

REFERENCES:


About itslearning

With a passion for improving teaching and learning through technology, itslearning lives at the heart of education. In fact, the itslearning platform is the first LMS in the K-12 marketplace to offer educators content accessible from the cloud, including 2 million free and open resources, searchable, tagged with rich metadata, and ready to use. Established in 1999, itslearning is headquartered in Boston, MA and Bergen, Norway and serves more than 7 million users worldwide.

For more information, visit: itslearning.com

itslearning.com
To Achieve Equity in My Classroom, I Had to Check My Own Bias at the Door

By Karen Vogelsang

Equity. Regardless of the education circles in which you travel, it is likely this topic has arisen in your conversations about school funding, curriculum resources, accountability, discipline policies or access to highly effective teachers. We hear equity so often, in fact, that we often assume everyone knows what we mean by the term.

Too often educators confuse equality—every student has access to the same resources—with equity. To distinguish between the two terms, try looking at it from the viewpoint of a parent.

Most parents practice equity with their children: they give their children what they need because the needs of their children are not the same. As a parent, I didn’t treat my two boys the same way because they were two different individuals with different interests and aspirations. My younger son loved gymnastics so we invested a great deal of time and money to support his passion for many years. My older son was more artistic and loved to read. The time and financial resources we invested weren’t equal; however, we were equitable because we provided opportunities for them based on their interests.

Equity in education today is more than just the availability of an education; it’s recognizing the fact that some students require more support than others to reach their academic potential. In schools, we achieve educational equity when all (not some) of our students receive the resources they need to reach their academic potential, graduate prepared to pursue their hopes and dreams and be a productive member of their community.

Unfortunately, that’s not what’s really happening in many of our schools. One of the most glaring examples is funding. In 2015, the Education Trust analyzed funding inequity and found that per-pupil revenues in high-poverty districts were $2,200 less overall than in low-poverty districts.

To achieve educational equity, we must begin by eliminating bias. We can’t pretend it doesn’t exist. I lost count of how often I heard the phrase “These kids can’t...” You can fill in the blank with myriad responses such as “read complex text, solve multi-step math problems, or participate in hands-on science experiments because they might not behave!”

We must stop making generalizations about students based on factors such as their ethnicity, gender, race, family background, school location, religion and socioeconomic status. And we need to call out our colleagues when they do. Educators can create equitable environments by believing in every student we teach and insisting that other teachers do the same. We have to communicate high expectations in a student-centered classroom and work closely with families and communities. When we do this, the impact on our students’ academic and emotional growth is powerful.

I had an “aha” moment when I heard Josh Parker, 2012 Maryland Teacher of the Year, in a video that is part of Courageous Conversations About Race In Schools. In “What is Equity?” Parker says we must find “…what fits the people in my room?” His observation reminded me of when I had to find the answer to that question after leaving my comfortable suburban Memphis classroom to teach in a high-poverty school.

As a middle-class, middle-aged white woman, I thought I understood what the life of a child living in poverty was like. I was wrong! I believed that if I was the sage on the stage with effective classroom management skills and knew my content well, my students would learn and they’d be prepared for the next grade. I was woefully unprepared!

I had no idea about the challenges my students were facing. One student, Angelo, was late every morning. He came into school dragging his backpack behind him, unmotivated about anything to do with school. I couldn’t get mom on the phone, so I made assumptions that she didn’t care that he was missing so much instructional time! Over time, however, I learned that Angelo was good in math, so I started to challenge him. I believed in him and held him to higher expectations. Before long, he began to soar—academically and emotionally. He was still coming to school late, but he was motivated and excited about learning.

A few months into the school year Angelo shared that his mom worked two jobs, and he was responsible for getting his two little sisters to school every morning. Rather than making him fit my way of teaching, I had to find what fit Angelo. He, along with many other students, taught me that I must really take the time to learn about the daily lives of my students and what motivates them. I had to create a student-centered classroom culture that promoted trust and safety; our classroom had to be a judgement free zone for Angelo to share.

Equitable funding is critical; it helps provide the resources each and every child needs to be successful. But it costs absolutely nothing to believe in the potential of our students and hold them to high expectations. When we do this without judgment, they will rise to those beliefs and expectations. I’ve watched my students over the years do just that! I learned to find what fit the people in my classroom, which is what we all must do if we want to see equity in our schools.

Karen Vogelsang is the 2015 Tennessee State Teacher of the Year and a member of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year. She teaches 4th grade at Winridge Elementary in Memphis, Tenn.
Schools Have an Equity Problem. What Should We Do About It?

State education leaders will redefine K-12 policy under ESSA

By Danielle Gonzales and Ross Wiener

What is educational equity, whereby all students have equal access to opportunities for a high-quality education? What does it look like when it's successful, and what does it take to achieve it? These questions have been driving our work at the Aspen Institute's Education & Society Program for the past several years, and even more so for the last 18 months, as the result of a shift in the federal role in public education and concerns from the state leaders with whom we work.

For most of the last half-century, the role of the federal government has been to protect “the education of disadvantaged children,” as articulated in the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The bipartisan passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, in 2015, maintains several components of earlier versions of the ESEA, but it also gives more flexibility and responsibility to state leaders to define accountability and determine the interventions and supports for underperforming schools.

Just as our federal education laws have changed and evolved, so too have our nation’s demographics. It is significant that the federal role is downsized just as economic inequality is at its highest and mobility from poverty is at its lowest since the ESEA was enacted.

In 1960, 85.7 percent of public school students were white. Today, according to estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics, the majority of public school students are students of color. More than half of public school students also qualify for subsidized meals because of low family income. In 2014, 20 percent of school-age children were in families living in poverty, and children of color are more than twice as likely as their white counterparts to be poor. By any objective measure, inside and outside schools, public education has not served these students adequately or equitably.

These challenges have an effect on students’ academics. The 2015 average reading scores of black and Latino U.S. students on the Program for International Student Assessment fall below the U.S. average and are comparable with some developing countries. And in 2013, students from high-income families were eight times more likely to have a bachelor’s degree by age 24 than their peers from low-income families, according to a 2015 report from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

Much has changed even since the passage of ESSA. The last year brought not only a new president and a new U.S. secretary of education, but also a documented increase in racial tension and hate crimes, several high-profile police shootings, and a number of state legislative bodies that have or are considering “bathroom bills” affecting transgender individuals’ ability to use the bathroom that matches their identity.

And the stubborn persistence of disparities in student opportunities and outcomes remains.

What would true education equity look like? One thing is certain: State leaders would need to play a key role. Even before ESSA was enacted, states had primary authority for education as enshrined in each state's constitution. As the federal role recedes, this generation of state education leaders will write a crucial chapter, with profound implications for equity and broader implications for our country and society. They will redefine state education policy, as federal rules become less prescriptive and federal political cover shrinks.

Defining a clear state role in educational equity is not a small task. To do this, we must get past talking about and around equity and address it directly. This is among the first recommendations in our recent report, “Leading for Equity,”
which was published in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers, or CCSSO, in February. To develop this report, which identifies 10 priority areas and 68 discrete actions state leaders can take to address inequity, we interviewed dozens of education leaders at the school, community, district, state, and national levels, who represent broad demographic and political diversity.

We asked school leaders to define and describe equity and inequity in their own terms. There was no one answer. Equity is weighted student-funding formulas; students having the social capital to have someone review their college applications; and students having school access to recreational facilities and health care. Equity is having people of color represented in political office and in the leadership of education reform organizations.

Inequity, education leaders told us, is reflected in the presence of inexperienced or ineffective teachers or a revolving door of substitutes in the classrooms of low-income students and students of color.

Inequity is kids of color not having access to rigorous, relevant, and culturally sustaining curricula or advanced courses. We heard about dangerous schools and dilapidated facilities, computers, books, and gym equipment. Many described a patent unfairness inside our public institutions which they defined as immoral, demeaning of our democratic values, and ultimately undermining of our shared economic prosperity and growth.

There was also disagreement. We heard from some leaders who thought a focus on students of color and low-income students was detrimental to the universal mission of public education. We heard support for charters, choice, and vouchers; and we heard concern that those policies can drain resources from traditional public schools.

And then we asked for ideas about how to upend inequity. To facilitate these discussions, we used a common definition of equity, used by the National Equity Project: “Educational equity means that each child receives what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential.” We agree: Equity is about giving every student what they need, not giving every student the same.

In thinking about this work, it is also important to acknowledge that our schools and administrative offices are full of committed and hard-working leaders giving it everything they’ve got. We need them to continue that. We also need to support them.

We are excited to have been a part of these conversations so far and look forward to continuing the dialogue, so that together we can make sure that every student truly succeeds in education and in life. We hope to encourage a larger conversation—one that includes more voices. It’s true that ESSA provides opportunities for us to try new approaches to getting equity right, but it is not enough. We all must do more.

Danielle Gonzales is the assistant director for policy at the Washington-based Aspen Institute’s Education & Society Program. Ross Wiener is the institute’s vice president and the executive director of its Education & Society Program.

COMMENTARY
Published October 26, 2017 in Education Week Teacher’s Teacher-Leader Voices Blog

What We’ve Learned Teaching Teacher Candidates About Equity

By Jemelleh Coes and Taryrn Brown

Recently I wrote two pieces about the importance of educators holding each other accountable for attending to issues of equity and justice. We are, after all, teaching the future leaders of our nation. In my current work in teacher education, I am also helping to prepare future educators to teach with justice in mind. For too many of them, our program has provided their first experience thinking in justice-oriented ways. Their responses range the full spectrum: Some feel angry and defensive; others are frustrated or confused; and some react with enlightenment and excitement.

Recently I asked my colleague Taryrn Brown, a fellow teacher educator, to join me in illustrating what we encounter while helping to prepare teacher candidates, especially those who come from an educational background where equity and justice was not a focus of their K-12 learning. What follows are comments made about equity by teacher candidates in our classes, along with our reflections on the context and significance of each.

“It is not the teacher’s responsibility to bring culture into the classroom; That is more of a parent issue.”

Context: This was said in response to a teaching scenario where a teacher could see that a student was attempting to abandon her cultural identity in order to fit into the school context (changing their name, dissociating themselves from food and customs related to the culture, etc.). While the teacher in the scenario did not blatantly verbalize any hierarchi-
“Well, my teacher did it.”

Context: This was said during a discussion about religion and schools. One future educator implied that his previous teachers had situated their Christian faith in classroom activities as the superior and/or true religion, even going as far as leading students in prayer.

Significance: Because the future educator witnessed these actions by his teacher, he deems very inappropriate and illegal behavior as appropriate. As educators, we are teaching students so much more than that which is written in a lesson plan. In fact, it can be argued that students learn more from our behavior and interactions than anything else. When we engage in illegal and exclusive practices, we give permission for future educators (and students) to do the same.

How to help: Model the behavior you would want future educators to practice. Refrain from similar illegal activities.

“It’s Black people’s fault that they have bad schools.”

Context: Statistics about graduation rates, school discipline, and academic achievement were shared as part of a case study for a district that is largely zoned by race and economic status. The future educators were asked look at the details of the district provided in the case study and consider what options were available for improvement. In a fit of frustration, the future educator blamed the Black people in the community for challenges experienced by Black-majority schools, citing that his own school was good because his community was supportive.

Significance: The future educator immediately casts blame on the people of the community without considering the multitude of factors that contribute to school success. The selective consciousness of this future educator was fueled by his experience. If educators are not challenging students to think beyond their own experiences, they prepare them to fall into the trap of critical thinking avoidance, a behavior that only serves to perpetuate inequity.

How to help: Give students the opportunity to think critically about systems and learn about the experiences of people who are different than they are.

“Math and science are objective. Those subjects don’t have anything to do with equity or justice.”

Context: This was said in response to a teaching scenario in which the teacher education students were participating in class reflection time. During this time, the students were asked to think about how topics of equity and justice could be infused into their future classrooms. The teacher education students felt that the objectiveness of math and science limited their ability to incorporate different content and materials.

Significance: The future teacher educator is reluctant to incorporate issues of equity and justice in their future classrooms because they lack exposure to the ways in which this can be done. IT CAN BE DONE. And it should be done regularly in their K-12 classrooms so that the concept is not foreign when students are asked to call upon this type of thinking in their future classes.

How to help: Make sure your lessons incorporate topics related to justice and equity in every subject, including math and science.

“I’ve never heard of any of this stuff before. I can’t believe I am only hearing about it now.”

Context: This was said in response to a moment of reflection during a group processing activity in which future educators were discussing their personal experiences connected to their learning for the day. The topic was gender inequity. The dominant curriculum that is present in most public schools often limits opportunities for students to engage in justice-oriented thinking. Those who were exposed to learning about issues of equity and justice shared their frustrations that other students lacked awareness of critical issues, especially of populations that have been marginalized.

Significance: Future educators are frustrated that they have not been adequately prepared for discussing issues related to justice, but they are excited to begin learning about it. Without significant opportunity to explore issues of equity and justice, future educators miss opportunities for growth and development. They are excited to learn about how to teach in ways that directly impact society, but they feel like they are at a disadvantage because they have so much foundational learning to catch up on.

How to help: Talk about equity and justice because there are students who want to confront those issues head on. There are also students who have little idea that those issues exist. Do not leave them in the dark and unprepared.

As teacher educators, we work diligently to open their worlds to new ideas and new ways of thinking. But what we really need is for our K-12 partners to start the pipeline of justice-oriented thinking long before they get to us.
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