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Disrupting Inequity
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Closing Opportunity and Cultural Competency Gaps

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Our public schools are a microcosm of the communities, institutions, and cultures in which they are situated. Many school practices and policies merely replicate similar practices and policies of society. Unfortunately, in a society stratified by race, income, and language, this mirroring of societal norms too often results in systemic inequities that create roadblocks to success for students of color—particularly black, Latino, and English language learner students. Although every school has dedicated teachers and administrators who individually strive to create classrooms that embrace every student they encounter, these well-meaning individual efforts will not translate into an equitable school when placed within a larger educational system that is not culturally sensitive. Disrupting inequity needs to start with district- and schoolwide examination of the systemic and cultural barriers to equity.

A 2014 study on black and Latino males in the Boston Public Schools (BPS), conducted by the Center for Collaborative Education in partnership with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, demonstrates how making data public can provide the fuel and impetus for disrupting inequity. Our study analyzed four years of student-level data (2009–2012), including program enrollment and student outcomes. We paired this research with a 2015 study that looked at the practices in four schools where black and Latino males were performing incrementally better than their peers in other district schools. With the two studies working in tandem, we were able to not only identify inequities but also provide a set of recommendations to challenge current inequitable practices and policies.

Opportunity Gaps

BPS, like most urban school districts, creates tiered opportunities for students to advance through the system to graduation. For example, in 3rd grade, all students take a standardized test on English language arts and math. Top scorers get invited to enroll in advanced work classes that span from 4th through 6th grade and provide accelerated curriculum and higher teacher expectations. In 6th grade, students have the opportunity to take a standardized test that determines entry into the district's three elite high schools that span from 7th through 12th grade. Massachusetts also sets a course sequence ("MassCore") for high school students who wish to be considered for admission to a four-year state university.

In all three opportunity gates—advanced work, elite high schools, and MassCore completion—our research identified that black and Latino male students were underrepresented. We also found a disproportionate number of black and Latino males placed in substantially separate special education settings, which are generally characterized by a less rigorous curriculum. Standardized tests have been found to be culturally

biased, and placement in a course or special education track is often influenced by the unconscious biases of guidance counselors and teachers. Ultimately, culturally biased selection and placement processes determine student pathways, leading to disparities in access to educational opportunities, engagement, and achievement.

Cultural Competency Gaps

The four schools in which black and Latino males were faring incrementally better on academic measures compared to other district schools had many of the hallmarks of good schools: high student expectations, collaborative professional learning communities, and differentiated instruction. However, no school had universal practices to ensure that educators knew their students well—that is, their backgrounds, cultures, stories, and assets. We found no attempts to systematically design a schoolwide curriculum that recognized and valued students' cultures. Instead, researchers at these schools encountered culturally agnostic practices, such as claims of "color blindness" or assertions that "we view and treat all students the same." One school, in which approximately one-third of the students were Latino, held a Cinco de Mayo celebration, even though there were no students of Mexican descent.

Addressing cultural competency gaps is particularly crucial in our increasingly diverse classrooms. Black and Latino are umbrella terms that can mask a wide variety of languages, cultures, values, and assets. In our study, we found that the fastest growing black groups were African and Afro-Caribbean, and the fastest growing Latino groups were Latino Caribbean and Central and South American. Unless we know our students, we cannot begin to gain their trust and engage in the joint venture of learning.

The Key to Disrupting Inequity

Since the release of our research, BPS has taken our recommendations and incorporated essential strategies into its strategic plan to fight the growing achievement gap in its schools. For example, in response to the findings around inequitable access to the 4th through 6th grade Advanced Work Class (AWC) program, which is a gateway to enrollment in the city's elite 7th through 12th grade examination schools, the district has launched a pilot program called Excellence for All in 13 elementary schools. In these schools, all 4th through 6th grade students will receive rigorous learning opportunities similar to what students receive within AWC. The goal of this pilot is to eventually expand to all BPS schools serving grades 4 through 6. Other responsive reforms include an increased emphasis on providing culturally and linguistically sustaining curriculum and instructional practices across all grades and making sure that every high school has a MassCORE sequence of courses that enables all graduates to meet state college and university minimum requirements.

If we are to create truly equitable schools that graduate each and every one of our students and prepare them for college, career, and participation in a more socially just world, tackling the systemic barriers, such as opportunity gaps and lack of cultural competency in schools, is essential. Indeed, it is the first and most important step we need to take.

Tackling systemic and cultural barriers can start at many points, including

- A study group of teachers who examine the curriculum sequence, tracks, and requirements for all high school students and develop recommendations to remove pathways of low expectations.

- The expansion of programs with selective enrollment to include all students.

- The aggressive recruitment of black and Latino students into Advanced Placement courses and the establishment of a plethora of academic support programs for students enrolled in these courses.

- The adoption of rich, curriculum-embedded performance assessments that enable students to demonstrate what they know and can do in diverse ways.

- A facultywide commitment to participate in cultural competency professional development.

Peer observation in classrooms that provides feedback to colleagues on using culturally responsive practices.

Starting an equity initiative only takes a committed few educators, parents/guardians, and others within the larger school community. However, an intentional focus on creating systems and cultures that embrace *each* student will eventually demand the buy-in of the entire school community and society as a whole.

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