

'Our Time' for All: A CALL TO ACTION FOR EQUITY

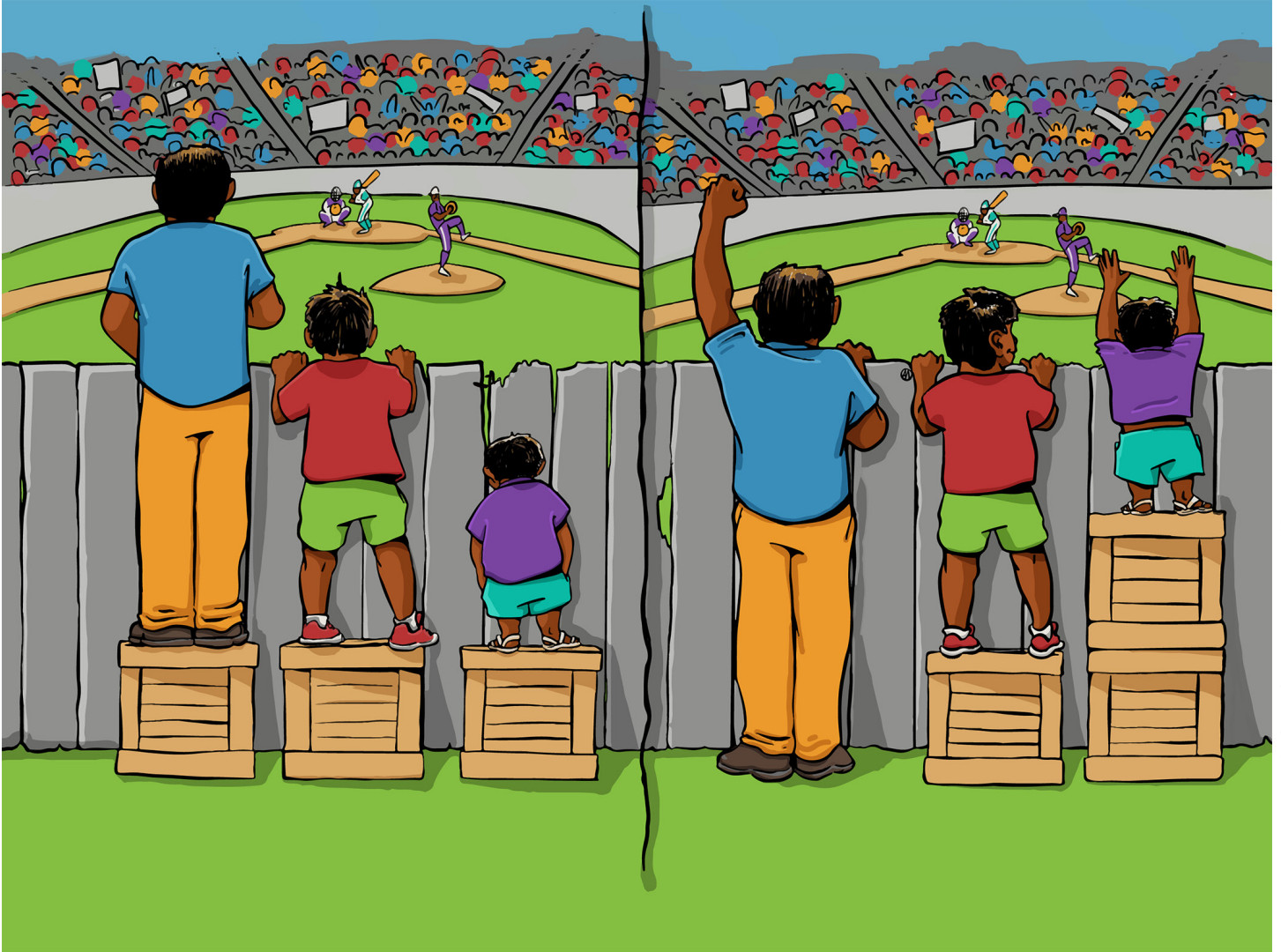


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Unleashing the Power of Partnership for Learning



Personalized Learning: Ensuring Equal Access to the Best Possible Education

THE PROMISE OF ACT 77

It should be a great time to be in a Vermont school. Learning opportunities for Vermont students are more abundant than ever before. Those opportunities are also more aligned with brain research, guided by the latest scientific knowledge on the way people learn. Right now, Vermont schools are aiming high, reaching toward new levels of success and satisfaction for every student. In that effort, two goals stand out as most important: quality (the best possible education) and equity (fair and equal opportunity for all). In 2013, a new law called Act 77 made the focus on quality and equity official. This law sets out a compelling vision of change—but it also carries a hidden risk. Unless we address that risk, the promise of great Vermont schools cannot be fulfilled.

To pursue quality, Act 77 asks schools to help students personalize their learning with varied options. Rather than a single route to graduation for everyone, schools should provide “flexible pathways” suited to the interests and talents of individual students. The law promotes both student voice and student choice. It says schools should trust young people to be partners in designing their own educational plans. Act 77 also emphasizes equity. It says all students, without exception, should have the opportunity to pursue flexible pathways and achieve their highest possible potential.

Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength in our nation.

—John F. Kennedy

THE PROBLEM OF ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Over time, if this vision becomes reality, it could solve a stubborn problem in our schools. This is the issue of “achievement gaps,” meaning differences in academic achievement related to non-academic influences such as family income, race, and gender. In America, we want to believe that these influences do not determine how well someone does in school. Educational success should result from a person’s intellectual potential, motivation, and effort. This seems especially true when we recognize that intelligence takes many forms. As a student in the Governor’s Institutes of Vermont put it: “I learned that everyone has some amazing ability if you just give them a chance.”

We also know that believing in your own potential—what we call a “growth mindset”—can be a powerful force in learning. When you understand that the brain is like a muscle and grows with use, you can pursue opportunities with confidence and hope. Brain research shows that if you believe you can learn, you will. Recognizing this, it seems even more unfair that factors like wealth or gender or skin color could get in the way. Caring about equity means believing that everyone should have a fair chance to succeed, no matter how they look or what their family background may be.

Yet achievement gaps do show up for students in Vermont (and around the country). Family income is one example. As a group, students living in families with higher incomes typically do better on academic tests than those living in low-income families. (It's important to recognize the "group" aspect; there are always individual exceptions, but large sets of data show this trend.) The achievement difference becomes clear when we compare students who are similar in all ways except family background. If you live in poverty, even though you have the same personal potential for learning and work just as hard as a wealthier student, you are less likely to achieve at the same level. The reason for this achievement gap is not variation in intelligence or effort. Instead, a major cause is the access to learning opportunities more money can provide. In early childhood, for example, some children attend structured daycare and preschool activities because their families can afford fees and transportation. Other families cannot.

There are also achievement gaps associated with gender. For instance, more boys than girls enroll in technical studies like computer sciences. Gender gaps often persist through unconscious bias or stereotypes about groups: beliefs that girls "aren't good at math" or that boys "can't sit still to concentrate." Assumptions like these affect both the messages adults give young people and the ways students think about themselves. They can get in the way of a growth mindset and limit personal choices: "Only girls like poetry; I can't write that stuff"..."Boys are better at building robots. I'm not going to try it."

Racial and ethnic stereotyping is another form of harmful bias. As Nina Lam, a Chinese-Iranian-American student, says in a poem for the Young Writers Project, it's hard to grow up looking different in "mostly-white Vermont." She writes of her wish that instead of "...assumptions about my intelligence/I think that I'd just like to blend in for once/ And be any other person." Groups such as African-Americans and Latinos, who must cope with a long history of unfair stereotypes about inferior intelligence, face an added burden called "stereotype threat." They feel a higher level of stress and fear of failure in school, even when their actual academic skills match those of white students.

While gender and racial differences tend to be visible right away, negative assumptions may also develop about less obvious characteristics. A student with older brothers and sisters may find that people expect him to be a certain way because of his siblings. A student who is the first in her family to consider college may wonder if she's really "college material" when none of her relatives or friends have gone there. A student taking all AP classes may really want to try a forestry course, but worries that it's only for kids who can't succeed in "regular classes." Teachers, counselors, and parents may encourage such perceptions with a sincere belief that they're serving students' best interests. When that happens, pathways get cut off rather than opened. Achievement gaps—inequalities driven by different access rather than different learning potential—are the result.

With two-thirds of the differences in standardized test scores attributable to outside of school factors, the simple scientific fact is that test score gaps measure the health of our society more than the quality of our schools.

—Vermont State Board of Education, August 2016

THE RISK OF INCREASING GAPS

Vermont's new vision for quality and equity in its educational system is intended to reduce achievement gaps. As schools change to match the vision, the gaps should grow smaller and even disappear. Translating intentions into action, though, is always the risky part. If the ideas that drive Act 77 aren't carried out in actions across the state, the gaps could actually grow instead of decreasing.

The greatest risk is that new systems designed to raise quality could end up serving only one group of students: those who are already successful. These students are the ones who know how to advocate for themselves and have confidence in their skills. They may have families who advocate for them, too, and encourage them to try new things. High-achieving students with strong growth mindsets and strong adult support can benefit a great deal from the new opportunities of the Flexible Pathways law.

Other students, though, may hesitate to pursue the same options. For instance, enrolling in a college course is a flexible pathway option, but what if only students with cars and money for gas can afford to drive to the college? Digital learning is another option, but consider the challenges of succeeding in the absence of a home computer. If parents don't speak English, filling out special permission forms may be a barrier. This kind of disadvantage can remain hidden. It's what Vermont educator Jason Finley calls an "equity trap," a pitfall on the route to fair treatment and opportunity for everyone.

A CALL TO ACTION

To succeed in promoting genuine equity, schools need to understand the extra challenges for students who lack economic resources, struggle with social bias, or face other barriers to opportunity. Schools need to include strategies for meeting these challenges as they design new systems in response to Act 77. They need to ensure that the necessary supports are there to make options truly open to all. At the same time, the people in school communities—teachers, administrators, board members, parents, coaches, students themselves—need to step up as allies. Each of us can play a key role in being guardians and advocates for equity.

It really boils down to this, that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.

— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Stereotypes and biases are deeply engrained in our culture and embedded in our individual perceptions of the world. We can counter them through continuous reflection and dialogue. We need ways to talk openly and frequently about equity, holding courageous conversations both in our peer groups and across the generations. Ultimately, we need to tackle the larger issues that create achievement gaps: addressing widespread poverty, reducing income disparity, challenging biases based on gender, race, and a host of other factors, and offering a wide variety of resources so that families thrive in supportive communities. When that happens, it will be a truly great time in Vermont schools. Vermont youth will step into the world empowered, ready to follow their dreams and contribute their talents to a rapidly changing world.

It is time we commit, across all agencies and at all levels, to attacking the underlying challenges of poverty, despair, addiction, and inequity that undermine school performance, rather than blaming the schools that strive to overcome these very manifestations of our greater social troubles.

—Vermont State Board of Education, August 2016

How can we ensure equity in school improvement efforts?

All students understand and believe in their capacity as learners and become advocates for themselves.

Young people often come to believe negative societal messages or stereotypes about their capacity to learn. These messages can be echoed in family and school settings in both obvious and subtle ways. When you don't believe in your learning potential, why try something new or take risks in learning? When you have given up hope in pursuing your dreams, why advocate for yourself? Yet we know through current brain research that all young people can literally grow their intelligence in the same way muscles are strengthened—with practice, support, and time. Individuals who believe in their learning capacity, and understand how they learn best, are more hopeful, more motivated, and better able to self-advocate in pursuit of their life goals. They have the ability to shape how they learn.

Equity in access to new educational opportunities will require that all students believe in their learning capacity and are effective learners.

All students help their peers break down negative stereotypes and encourage each other in the pursuit of learning.

Peers can be powerful messengers of negative stereotypes about each other's perceived worth and potential. Young people are used to the labels that get attached to groups at school: jocks, geeks, the art crowd, and so forth. It's easy to make assumptions about people in such groups without ever knowing them as individuals: "Those are the smart kids... Those are the slackers." With support and guidance, though, young people can learn to question assumptions and break down stereotypes. By "turning up the volume" on internal messages that feed stereotypes, all people—youth and adults—can learn to control them. When we become aware of internal biases, we can reduce the negative impact our assumptions have on others. We can also take the next steps, speaking up as allies and advocates. Quality schools are those that engage everyone in building a sense of community, caring, and shared responsibility for all members.

Equity in access to new educational opportunities will require that all students believe in the worth and potential of each and every one of their peers, creating a new cultural norm.

All teachers and educational leaders believe in the learning potential of all learners and support the pursuit of varied opportunities.

Research has established a strong link between the teacher's expectations of a student and the student's performance. It is clear that students will perform to a teacher's expectations, whether high or low. When adults give up on students, students give up on themselves. Conversely, when teachers believe in every student's capacity and convey that confidence, they help students break free of their own self-limiting beliefs. With that freedom, students become partners in shaping their education, exploring personal interests and mapping out pathways that

make sense to them. In order to support full access to individual pathways, adults in schools need to work against resource barriers as well, seeking ways to provide transportation, technology, academic interventions, and other services for students who require them. At the same time, teachers themselves will need support: professional development, time, and encouragement to examine their practices and collaborate with colleagues on continuous improvement.

Equity in access to personalized learning opportunities depends on educators’ awareness of their own biases and consistent advocacy for all students.

All parents believe in their children’s capacity to learn and support them in exploring new pathways.

Parents want the very best for their children, but they too are subject to negative societal pressures and biases. Their own educational experiences and family circumstances may produce a bias against certain pathways: “College is only for rich people”... “People in our family don’t work with their hands.” Directly or indirectly, parents may be passing on messages that restrict their children’s expectations and choices. When parents let go of preconceived ideas, they can help young people name their own interests and dreams. To support their children through the personalized learning process, parents can first of all listen—and then advocate. This may include working with school personnel to overcome access barriers such as transportation, making sure that resources are available even when the family cannot provide them.

Equity in access to new educational opportunities depends on parents keeping open minds to understand their children’s goals, and advocating for individual pathways with attention to resource support.

All school boards and administrators work to provide resources and monitor key variables in access to opportunities.

School boards and administrators are guardians of the quality and equity goals in Act 77. Putting the law into action requires creative use of resources, including personnel skills, time, and money. Supporting costs associated with equal access, such as specialized professional development, transportation, and technology, may require thoughtful trade-offs that make equity a priority. In addition, boards and administrators must take responsibility for monitoring progress. This means tracking key markers, such as socioeconomic status, gender, and race, for student enrollment in various pathways, as well as data on attendance, disciplinary actions, and post-graduate plans. A rubric such as the Equity Dimension of the Global Best Practices framework could help guide the monitoring effort. Whatever tools they use, school leaders should work to create a permanent institutional lens that oversees and protects equitable access to all educational pathways.

Equity in access to new educational opportunities will require school leaders to become champions for equity, freeing resources and following progress.

All schools and communities build bridges to provide a rich array of learning options available to all students.

Research has clearly shown that relevance—linking learning to personal interests—increases engagement and success in school. For many students, especially as they grow older, the most compelling learning experiences will take place beyond school walls. For this reason, strong school-community collaboration is essential to realizing the full potential of Act 77’s flexible pathways vision. Creating a range of community- and work-based learning opportunities will require community members to step up as partners in helping young people meet academic goals. It will also require that educators work closely with those community mentors, understanding the challenges they face in taking on a new role.

Equity in access to new educational opportunities depends on schools’ efforts to reach out to community members as partners, and the community’s willingness to respond with meaningful connections, creating new opportunities for students.

If we are serious about closing achievement gaps, we will have to move beyond the simplistic rhetoric of “It’s the family,” or “It’s the schools,” or “It’s poverty”—or “It’s stereotyping,” for that matter. Serious analyses make it clear that all of these factors matter. Unless we learn to think complexly about the problem, then surely we will continue to fail our big test, which is to find a way for all children to thrive in school.

—*Joshua Aronson, researcher at New York University*

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