



Commissioner's

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Comments

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Eliminating the Opportunity Gap

There are a lot of dedicated and passionate people working to educate our children in the Commonwealth. Education is not an easy job, at times I would say it is one of the toughest jobs around. Kids come to us with a diversity of needs, even greater than the diversity we see in our classrooms. Yet, educators rise to that challenge each day to try to level the playing field for all our students.

Despite the improvement we have seen, we, as a state, still have a lot of work to do. We have a significant achievement gap that needs to be addressed. In this blog, I'd like to look at a root cause of the achievement gap – something I call the opportunity gap.

There is a ton of quality education research that shows that students presented with rigorous opportunities to learn rise to the occasion. While our intentions may be good, sometimes students are not afforded those opportunities for one reason or another, none of which serves the child. We may mistake a child's lack of preparedness for lack of ability. We confuse course content and course names. And too often, our attempt at rigor gives way to an educational rigor mortis.

Our students come to us at many different levels of preparedness and sometimes that is mistaken for ability. One example is mathematics. Math and science actually are two subjects that we have convinced ourselves we can get better at by doing less. Nationally, struggling math students often are given less math content over a longer period of time. What they wind up doing is more "drill and kill" to prepare for tests. That, in my opinion, is the worst thing to do. Experience shows time and time again that struggling students excel when presented with challenging and interest-driven projects or instruction. We often take this approach with our advanced students. But we must challenge our less advanced students as well. We can narrow the opportunity gap and help close the achievement gap by ensuring that every student is provided with a rich learning environment.

On the issue of content vs. course names, we turn once again to mathematics. In several national studies, we discovered that a course named Algebra I contained content as vast as the number of schools in which it was taught. Even across states with the same standards, course content varies widely. We tend to have Algebra I, Algebra I lite, and Algebra I low carb. Well, this type of low carb is not healthy and diminishes students' opportunities to learn. To be clear, I am not saying that every course should be the same. In fact, quality standards-based education is big on standards and short on standardization. Teachers should have the freedom to meet students where they are and engage their interest, but also hold them to a high standard. When this doesn't happen, in my opinion, it is a major contributor to the opportunity gap.

Finally, the idea of rigor must be part of this discussion. The research on how students learn has made clear that worksheets don't stimulate learning and development. So-called rigor often leads to apathy and a lack of motivation – you might call it rigor mortis – when a child is disconnected from his or her learning. Rich engagement through applying knowledge generates opportunities to learn and experiences on which a child can build. But when a student

lacks those experiences and it is not addressed in the classroom, then an opportunity gap is created which leads to a greater gap in achievement. So, I think a key way to close the opportunity gap is with quality instruction.

To ensure all students have the same opportunities, it will take all of us in the education community working together to make a difference for our children. I am excited about the challenge and for what we can do for the children of the Commonwealth to eliminate the educational opportunity gap and close the achievement gap once and for all.

