Pedro Noguera urges principals to lead the quest for equity by advocating for all of their students and being resourceful in meeting students’ needs.
Pedro Noguera, who is a nationally recognized voice on urban school reform, race and education, and student achievement, is a passionate crusader for achieving excellence through equity. “We see the need to return to the roots of courage in our quest to defend and advance the well-being of the weakest in our community,” the New York University professor writes in his latest book, *Excellence through Equity*, which is poised to have a significant impact on the field. NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly recently interviewed Noguera about the principal’s role in achieving true equity and closing the achievement gap.

**GAIL CONNELLY:** We know that so many of the issues that plague the American school system stem from larger societywide policy issues. Using broad strokes, what are the key factors that you think are preventing true equity and the closing of the achievement gaps in our nation’s schools?

**PEDRO NOGUERA:** We have the highest child poverty rate found amongst all advanced democratic nations of the world. Almost 20 percent of kids are in poverty. In fact, right now 50 percent of kids in all public schools qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Many of those kids come to school with unmet needs—lack of stable housing, good nutrition, and health care. These needs impact learning. We’re not doing enough as a nation to address those needs.

Secondly, we are also one of only a few countries in the world that funds schools serving poor kids in a way that usually results in them not having adequate resources. Affluent communities rely on local property taxes at a much higher level than schools in poor communities. That translates into money available for teachers, for facilities, for resources. And money matters. We are reinforcing the inequities within schools because we have such an inequitable funding system.

**CONNELLY:** For the past several years, we’ve been hearing about the “new minority majority.” How does this shift affect schools in teaching and learning?

**NOGUERA:** This has been coming for a while now. We’ve seen many communities experience demographic change, but many of them have not changed anything about their teaching and curriculum to address it. Put most simply, schools have to be organized to meet the needs of their kids. If you don’t understand the culture, if you don’t understand the language, if you don’t understand how those kids learn when they are not with you, then you are going to struggle as a school in meeting their needs. Sadly, many schools haven’t made any adjustments. They haven’t trained their staff, they haven’t engaged in what now is called culturally responsive teaching and culturally responsive practices. Those schools are struggling because they’re still operating under a different mindset.

**CONNELLY:** We know systemic issues like school funding inequities, poverty, and homelessness impact achieving true equity. They are frequently beyond the control of school principals. You’ve argued that educators need to become “guardians of equity.” What do you mean by that, and what does that mean for principals?
NOGUERA: Equity is about giving kids what they need to be successful. It means giving them the academic and social supports that they need. Principals who are focused on equity will make sure that the teachers have the resources and the training needed to meet the needs of their kids. They will bring in partners, like social workers or psychologists, so that the needs of the kids are being addressed. So being a “guardian for equity” means being an advocate for your children, being resourceful to meet the needs of your kids, and building strong ties with the community and your parents so that they, in turn, see the school as an asset and resource for the community.

CONNELLY: It’s not the sole prerogative of principals, but principals need to have a better understanding of how to engage those within the school community who can help to achieve that goal.

NOGUERA: The sad truth is principals just can’t wait for help to come. More often than not, help doesn’t come. And so the best principals are resourceful. They are finding ways to get resources into their schools, and building partnerships that are needed for their kids.

CONNELLY: In the new PDK/Gallup poll that disaggregates data by race, most parents say they believe there is too much testing, but black parents place more value on the results. How can parent perceptions of testing and the new standards inform this conversation about equity and increased achievement?

NOGUERA: I think all parents want evidence that their kids are learning, and that their learning needs are being met. Black parents very often have been in schools where that hasn’t been the case. Therefore, many feel as though these standardized tests are a way of making sure that there is some evidence. The problem is that the evidence is very weak. It’s not really being used to ensure that we address the needs of our kids. So I think there is a lot of work to be done. We’ve put too much emphasis on assessment, and not enough emphasis on teaching and learning. That is where we should be focused: how to make sure that all children receive high-quality instruction from highly effective teachers.

CONNELLY: What about cultural competency for educators, especially as they overlap with student issues like discipline? What should principals do to inform not just themselves, but the staffs they lead?

NOGUERA: They have to make sure their staff is not operating from a deficit perspective that is only focused on what the kids can’t do and thinking somehow the kids are broken or somehow culturally deprived. What we know from the research is that if you see culture as a resource and draw upon families’ fundamental knowledge and bring that into the classroom, you can help kids be more confident, more competent academically, and therefore more resilient. That’s what we should be working on. Culturally competent teachers get to know their families, get to know the children, and get to understand both the challenges that they face as well as the culture of students so that they can use it as a resource.

CONNELLY: Let’s take this conversation to teacher quality and staffing. What needs to change in this area to truly make a difference in closing that achievement gap?

NOGUERA: At the policy level, we need to do so much more around issues of poverty, around inequities in funding, around building capacities in schools. Our policies don’t do that. Our policies rely on pressure and threats. It’s driving lots of good people out of education, which really worries me. At the school level, we really need to be focused on making sure that the right conditions are in place for teaching and learning, that teachers feel supported, that there is good instructional leadership and guidance on what is good instruction, that teachers are not isolated from each other, and that there is good collaboration taking place. Those are the things we know lead to higher levels of achievement and higher levels of performance for all children.

CONNELLY: What would you say to those who might be inclined to criticize parents given that their involvement is one of the key ways to improve student achievement?

NOGUERA: Listen, we have to work with parents. That is the bottom line. All the research shows that when parents are reinforcing the learning at home, kids do better academically. That’s about

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building trust. Parents have to believe that we want what’s best for their children. And that can’t just be rhetoric, they have to actually feel it. If they feel it, they are more likely to do their part and to work with educators. I really encourage principals to see parents as an asset that can help them in meeting the needs of their children.

CONNELLY: We know that we can’t start early enough with our nation’s children to give them the best possible chance for success in school and in life—we at NAESP are focused on aligning pre-K through grade 3, and providing a continuum of learning. What are your thoughts on the best ways to achieve the promise of early learning?

NOGUERA: I think the best ways are really high-quality early childhood education by well-trained teachers with a well-developed curriculum that is aligned with what we’re going to do in K-5. When those things come together, what we see is that early childhood education can create an excellent foundation and result in much higher gains for kids. Learning during infancy sets the stage for learning throughout a child’s life. Unfortunately, in most schools, you don’t see highly trained teachers teaching in early childhood. The curriculum is either non-existent or too regimented and therefore it’s not developing the social skills simultaneous to the academic skills. As a result, we’re not seeing the benefits there that we should.

CONNELLY: You’ll be speaking to us this summer at NAESP’s 2016 Best Practices for Better Schools™ Conference & Exposition, July 6-8, at the Gaylord National Harbor near our nation’s capital. What can principals expect to hear from you?

NOGUERA: I will talk a lot about what educational leaders can do to build the capacity of their schools and staffs to meet student needs. The point I want to make is that capacity-building is ongoing work. It’s not something you do once. It is just like understanding the importance of school culture. Culture is the milieu in which we work. It’s the relationships. It’s the attitude. It’s the values. It’s the kind of thing that great leaders are attentive to because without that kind of attention, too often kids don’t get the kind of learning opportunities that they need.

CONNELLY: We are excited to have you as one of our key presenters for the conference. Until then, what advice would you offer principals for how to prioritize their attention in order to make sure they are addressing the needs of every single child in their schools?

NOGUERA: Principals have to have very clear priorities, and teaching and learning has to be right there at the top. But we also have to be aware that our kids need a well-rounded education that includes arts and music; that we need to be working with parents; and that we need to be attentive to the morale of our staff. If teachers are not feeling good about themselves and aren’t feeling good about their work, they are not going to give the best to the kids. So, there is a lot I think a principal has to do. That is why it’s not a job for just anybody. You need really high caliber people who have great commitment and vision to do this work well.

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