

# College Readiness for All: What's the Alternative?

Questions are not typically commonplace during a keynote address, but the woman in the audience just couldn't hold back. During a speech I gave in Chicago about the importance of promoting college readiness in elementary school, it was clear that something I said must have touched a nerve. "Aren't you disenfranchising our kids?" one woman yelled from the back of the room.

She continued: "Many students without U.S. citizenship will finish high school just to find out they are not allowed to attend public universities. Poor students will do the same and realize they don't have the funds to go to college. What about them?" It was quiet and I was stumped. After about 30 seconds of listening to a still room, I offered the only words I could think to share: "What's the alternative?"

## Everyone Deserves the Opportunity

From the time I started as a fourth-grade teacher 13 years ago to the time I became principal of Los Penasquitos Elementary School in San Diego, I have witnessed our diverse Title I school conquer challenges that no one could have ever imagined—challenges like the one the woman posed to me that memorable day.

How do we encourage every student, especially those living in poverty, to pursue an education that does not end until they graduate from college? Before we could answer that question, my staff and I first had to ask ourselves why this mission of college readiness was so important. I was fortunate to witness an answer to the "why" several years ago.

Early one August morning, as I watched students arrive on campus for the first day of the school year, I noticed one little boy who trotted alongside his mom, who was carrying a tiny baby bundled on her back as is the custom in their Mixteco culture. I followed the boy, little Aquileo, into the room as he

dangled a plastic butcher's bag—the only semblance of a backpack his family could find for his very first day of school. Just as my heart began to sink for this little guy, I watched him stand next to his peers and give every bit of his attention to his new teacher. His eyes were wide open with anticipation and the smile on his face was a clear indication that he valued this experience. It was as if he knew that his future was beginning at that very moment.

In that instant, Aquileo's face exemplified the purpose of our college-readiness initiative, which today is known as the No Excuses University. You see, students like little Aquileo and his parents live challenging existences that are focused on basic necessities. College readiness is not even on their radar. Knowing this, the staff members at each of the 30 No Excuses Universities across the country understand that they must be the ones to introduce this concept into a child's life.

## HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author argues that educators should not disenfranchise their students, but instead should promote college readiness for all—even those labeled "at-risk." Do you agree that many educators' assumptions about, and the labels given to, young students impede their ability to be effective in the classroom?

Let your colleagues know what you think by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on "Speaking Out."

## Stop Making Assumptions!

This brings me back to the woman in the audience. For years, most of us have been guilty of making unjust assumptions about the students who walk through the doors of our classrooms. Children who live in generational poverty are seen as perfect candidates for low-skilled work in the future. Non-English-speaking children especially are assumed to have very little chance of filling professions that might some day provide financial and social stability for their families. Minority students are often burdened by the perception that their best will never be good enough, and therefore they must accept a lesser place in society.

What is worse is that these assumptions are branded on children as they enter kindergarten. It is these unspoken and all-too-common assumptions that must be challenged, and why we must take bold risks to do things differently. However, many people who think like my audience member are reluctant to take such risks because:

*They do not understand the true meaning of "college readiness."* College readiness is not the belief that every student will go to college. It is the idea that every student deserves the *opportunity* to be educated in a way that prepares him or her for college.

*They subscribe to the theory of "perfection before participation."* Many educators fall into what I call the "perfection before participation" trap, which encourages them to participate only in educational endeavors that are perfect in every way. When a new program or model is not perfect in their eyes, they eagerly find flaws. In the end, their lack of participation is not based on reflective evaluation but rather convenient excuse-making.

*They do not embrace a "value-added" philosophy.* Too many times, educators subscribe to an "all or nothing" mentality. Changing the overall results of your school is not done with one sweeping initiative; it is done by finding many little ways to add value to the educational lives of individual students. This same idea applies when it comes to promoting college readiness. No matter the long-

term outcome, a student who is taught with a college-readiness focus is better equipped academically than one who has not been given that same preparation.

*They behave like fortunetellers.* The thought that the promotion of “college readiness for all” would disenfranchise students is the epitome of a misguided assumption. While people rarely say it out loud, they often make assumptions clearly indicating that it would be better not to offer false hope to children by talking about a future that includes college. By doing so, they behave like unsolicited fortunetellers, predicting the future of a 5-year-old based on the color of his or her skin, socioeconomic level, or native language. Because we lack the ability to truly predict the future, we have no choice but to believe in every student’s potential to experience higher education.

As I reflect back to that keynote address in Chicago, I realize that woman in the audience, and others who think like her, would have loved for me to offer the perfect solution for getting

students out of poverty and into college. Or perhaps she would have been glad if I had no answers at all, for then she could continue to feel better about not meeting the needs of challenging students. But the fact is that the business of promoting college readiness is not a perfect science, especially when you are starting in kindergarten.

True, we may not be able to remove all of the roadblocks on the path to college for our most needy children,

but there’s no evidence that our efforts would hinder their academic potential. Our students depend on us to make the dream of college a reality. What’s the alternative? For little Aquileo, and those like him, there is none. □

**Damen Lopez**, founder of the No Excuses University concept, is principal of Los Penasquitos Elementary School in San Diego. His e-mail address is [damen@turnaroundschools.com](mailto:damen@turnaroundschools.com).



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