

Make Equity the Expectation

10 suggestions for heading off failure in urban public schools

By Eugene Butler Jr.



As a 26-year veteran of education, I know that policymakers, school boards, and community stakeholders tend to have low expectations for students in urban schools. But the same individuals to whom site educators look for advocacy and resources are the ones placing obstacles in the path of success.

All schools are not created equal, and not all stakeholders have the same agenda. The cornerstone to providing a quality, equitable education is to meet the individual needs of learners. But before we can create a cradle-to-college path, we must first nurture the baby. Narrowing the achievement gap begins with strong early childhood education programs.

High-quality early childhood programs coupled with educators who have high learning expectations for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender can lead to more positive academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for all learners, David L. Kirp writes in *The Widest Achievement Gap*. But if you research underachieving and mediocre high schools, you'll find that their elementary and middle feeder schools have similar academic, conduct, and attendance data.

It frustrates me to hear community stakeholders say that teachers and administrators in these schools “just don't care” about the kids. I served in a range of school settings, and I can honestly say that many teachers at low-performing and inner-city schools could teach circles around many of those in highly successful schools.

Some teachers who transferred into my schools from nonurban, high-performing schools were less-than-effective educators. Most

were not well-versed in strategies intended to improve academic outcomes, since most of their previous students arrived at school with solid support systems in place. Their skill sets were often limited when it came to engaging minority students, reluctant learners, and exceptional and special-needs students.

In “Deepening Culturally Responsive Understandings Within a Teacher Preparation Program: It’s a Process,” Donna Sobel, Cindy Gutierrez, Shelley Zion, and Wanda Blanchett argue that due to “disproportionality and the growing diversity of the nation’s K–12 student population, it is of paramount importance that classroom teachers be prepared to critically examine, reflect on, and respond to practices for learners with diverse needs and from diverse backgrounds.”

This suggests the following questions: Why are so many students who are attending urban schools performing below grade-level proficiency? Is failure really not an option? And finally, how do we narrow and ultimately eliminate the achievement gap between minority students and their white peers?

Dropouts Trend Downward

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 2016–2017 school-year-adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high schools was 84.6 percent, with 91.2 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders, 88.6 percent of whites, 80 percent of Hispanics, 77.8 percent of African Americans/blacks, and 72.4 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students meeting the criteria to earn a diploma or equivalent.

That represents a trend in the right direction for dropout data, but national and local graduation rates indicate that current approaches might not provide an equitable education for all learners. Urban school educators must rely heavily on force multipliers to make an intentional effort to address the gap.

Throwing money blindly at the problem is not the answer. There is no evidenced-based approach to solving this dilemma, but the 10 recommendations below might serve as a granular-level start:

1. Conduct a forensic autopsy of grade-level curricula. To meet all scholars’ needs, differentiated instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy must be embedded in the curriculum.
2. Conduct monthly forums to solicit ideas and feedback from educators and parents in every local school district. Scholars’ needs are unique and community-specific.
3. Mandate implicit bias training for all educators, staff, and school resource officers and offer voluntary implicit bias training for school board members.
4. Target and apply for federal grants under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to meet the needs of students with unstable housing.
5. House at least one parent resource/outreach center at a school in every feeder pattern that provides student uniforms, other clothing, food pantry items, and classes for parents.
6. Employ a minimum of one school psychologist and one social

Failure in America’s urban public schools is not only an option, but all too often, an expectation.

worker at every school, depending on enrollment. Teachers and administrators are not equipped or trained to provide appropriate Tier III support for the mental health concerns exhibited in today’s schools.

7. Train all educators and staff members in restorative discipline practices.
8. Establish SAT/PSAT/ACT prep elective courses at K–8, middle, and high schools, as well as college preparatory courses.
9. Require higher-order science and mathematics coursework at every elementary, middle, and high school to prepare students for a rigorous college curriculum.
10. Establish career and technical education and industry certification programs beginning with sixth-graders in urban schools, such as robotics, coding, computer-generated imagery (CGI), and culinary arts programs.

Equitable strategies can help boost local graduation rates—and end the tendency for urban schools to fail the kids they teach. **P**

Eugene Butler Jr. has served as assistant superintendent in the Tucson (Arizona) Unified School District and in various roles with Miami-Dade County (Florida) Public Schools.