



# School Reform and Second Generation Discrimination:

## Toward the Development of Equitable Schools

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**Dr. Noguera served as a keynote speaker at the 2007 AVID Center/College Board National Conference. A noted professor and researcher, Dr. Noguera is not only an engaging speaker, but writer as well. The following is a recent piece he wrote on equity in education.**

The pursuit of greater equality with respect to educational outcomes and long-term results is what equity, as practiced or at least aspired to in the context of schools, is largely about. As schools and districts struggle with efforts to raise student achievement and reduce disparities in student outcomes, it is clear that many educators and the broader public remain divided and confused about what it means to place equity at the center of reform efforts and what it might take to move in the direction of equality in results. Most of this opposition is due to the perception that any effort to promote the educational interests of disadvantaged students will come at the expense of the most privileged. Since the most privileged students tend to have the most powerful parents, in most places the pursuit of equity loses out.

Although public schools are by far the most accessible institutions in the United States and in fact constitute the only form of public entitlement to which all children regardless of their status have guaranteed access, they remain profoundly unequal. With respect to funding, the quality of facilities, personnel and resources, schools throughout the US are characterized by what Jonathan Kozol has called *Savage Inequalities*. Despite several lawsuits, this issue

remains largely unresolved and there is little evidence that political leaders at either the federal or state level have much interest in pursuing this issue. In fact, despite all of the attention to standards, no state government has adopted the basic opportunity to learn standards, similar to standards for highways or utilities, for which it can be held accountable.

In his new book *Shame of the Nation* (2005), Kozol reminds us yet again that despite past struggles over bussing and de-segregation there is considerable silence about the persistence of racial segregation in American education. Yet, silence among policy makers has not eliminated the salience of race as a source of controversy in educational policy. Instead, as attention has shifted away from efforts to de-segregate schools, a number of “second generation” discrimination issues have risen to the surface (Meier, Stewart, England 1989). These second generation issues, which are in some ways a by-product of the Brown decision, represent a new front in the effort to promote racial justice in education. Unlike the first generation forms of discrimination where the issues were literally black and white, the second-generation issues are typically more complicated. The inability of schools to address these

issues has completely undermined efforts to promote racial justice in education, the very efforts that were theoretically the primary justification for the Brown decision.

Tracking and other forms of so-called ability grouping are typically cited as an example of a second generation discrimination issue. Tracking also tends to limit the ability of students of color to enroll in rigorous courses such as Algebra that lead to college (Oakes 1985), and despite numerous studies demonstrating its harmful effects upon student achievement and attainment, tracking continues to be practiced widely throughout the United States. Even at a time when students are expected to meet common standards, because of tracking they are generally educated under different and unequal circumstances.

Likewise, the various ways in which students are labeled and sorted as a result of testing practices, also constitutes another form of second-generation discrimination. The disproportionate number of minority students who are categorized as learning disabled and placed into special education programs is often cited as one of the methods school districts employ to remove and isolate students from the academic mainstream (Orfield and Losen 2002).

In many school districts bi-lingual education and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs also have a re-segregating effect (Noguera 2001). It is not uncommon to find students who are identified as English language learners assigned to remedial classes that are staffed by unqualified teachers. The prevalence of such practices is also a reflection of the widespread bias against immigrants, who often lack the skills and ability to serve as effective advocates for their children.

Finally, there is also a tendency within many school districts to subject minority students, particularly low-income African American males, to disproportionate amounts of punishment. Based ostensibly upon their desire to maintain a safe and orderly environment, a number of school districts engage in disciplinary practices that result in large numbers of minority students being suspended and expelled from school (Noguera 2003). Following the school shootings that occurred in the late 1990s at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and other locations, several states and school districts adopted Zero Tolerance laws. Ironically, these laws have resulted in large numbers of poor minority students being targeted for punishment even though the shootings occurred in affluent, white suburban communities. School discipline is an equity issue because in most places the neediest students are disproportionately targeted for punishment, and exclusion from the classroom, a practice that generally exacerbates learning deficiencies, is the primary form of punishment utilized.

In addition to these important forms of second-generation discrimination, there is also the matter of the unmet non-academic needs of poor children. In a society where one fifth of all children come from families whose household incomes fall below the poverty level, large numbers of children arrive at school poorly nourished and lacking access

to basic health and social services. In his book *Class and Schools* (2004), Richard Rothstein points out that we could make headway in closing the achievement gap without ever touching schools if we simply insured that all children who needed them had access to eye glasses, dental care, and had lead paint removed from their homes. Yet, there is presently no national effort underway to address the basic needs of poor children in a comprehensive manner, and despite compelling evidence that providing children with quality early childhood learning experiences provides benefits that extend across their life time, there is no effort to significantly expand preschool either.

In the absence of federal and state leadership to support the needs of poor children and families, schools that serve large concentrations of poor students must adopt partnerships with external agencies that enable them to meet student needs. In most areas, churches, community based organizations and local governments have resources and expertise that schools could utilize to meet student needs. Several schools have found ways to get social workers, dentists, doctors and nurses to make regular visits to their schools.

Schools that work closely with community agencies also gain access to adult mentors, tutors and role models, who can provide support to students in need. This is particularly important in schools where the majority of teachers are from race and class backgrounds that differ significantly from their students. While such schools should make efforts to recruit a diverse teaching and administrative staff, they can also utilize adults based in the community who have greater familiarity with the background and culture of the students they serve. Many of these adults have greater insight into the challenges students face outside of school, and their life experiences often provide them with a form of “moral authority” that is often absent in many schools.

Pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be an upstream struggle that is fraught with difficulty because our nation remains so unequal. We must recognize that the sources of inequity typically lie outside of schools – in parent education and income, in community access to jobs and resources. Closing these gaps are much more difficult and in the absence of a national effort to pursue equity in other areas, it is unlikely that schools will succeed on their own. Still, the effort to promote equity is consistent with the basic promise of American public education – that schools should function as equalizers of opportunity (Sizer 1984). No matter how difficult and elusive, the goal of equity remains one that schools must pursue if they are to remain viable as public institutions.

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