

What Is 'Excellence for All'?



Meeting Kids Where They Are—Not Where We Wish They Were

By Jack Schneider

Precious, in all likelihood, is not going to college.

This runs contrary to the aims of the dominant players in modern school reform, who, whether they are in government, school districts, or philanthropic organizations, routinely employ the phrase “excellence for all” in justifying their expenditures. The theory of change among the educational entrepreneurs, it seems, is simple: Find what works and make it available to all students. As Teach For America’s chief executive officer, Wendy Kopp, has said of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan: “He just wants to find and scale the ideas that work, period.”

Getting all students, and particularly the neediest students, into the kind of schools that their more privileged peers attend is a great goal. And it’s one that’s difficult to oppose. Who, after all, is going to take a stand against an aim like excellence for all? Consider how preposterous the linguistic alternatives sound: Excellence for some? Mediocrity for all? Hardly a rallying cry.

Not surprisingly, ambitious politicians and philanthropists have dedicated unprecedented resources to efforts to transform the nation’s lowest-performing schools into college-preparatory academies. Put Precious in the right school, the thinking goes, and she’ll thrive. Sounds great. But what if the right school doesn’t look like reformers thought it would?

The “Precious” in question, of course, is fictitious. The protagonist of the much-lauded film that bears her name, she is mired in poverty, pregnant with her second child, and abused both physically and emotionally. She’d be a caricature if it weren’t for the fact that so many of us who have worked with underserved students know someone just like her.

Fortunately for Precious, she ends up in the right school. And it changes her life. She connects with an inspiring teacher, develops supportive relationships with her classmates, and begins to see a light at the end of the tunnel. The story is a familiar one in recent films.

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What isn't familiar is the fact that when we leave her, Precious is not bound for college. She isn't enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, and she doesn't make the transition from rap to Shakespeare, as in other films. The bulk of her schoolwork seems to consist of writing in her journal, which, unlike journals from other movies, does not end up being picked up by a publisher.

So what's a reformer to make of this? Is she still in the wrong school?

Maybe. Or, maybe the problem is narrowly defining what a good school does.

Different kids have different needs, and schools need to pursue particular strategies for particular students. Today's ambitious reformers don't want to hear that. They want "scalable" solutions that will transform all students into future college grads. And they want to believe that by making the neediest schools look more like high-performing schools, they will produce equal outcomes. Yet that isn't so. And failing to recognize that means missing out on a host of opportunities to help kids in need.

Precious is obviously a distinct character with extreme disadvantages. But that only further clarifies the fact that how kids do in school is shaped by far more than school itself. And that means meeting kids where they *are* rather than where we wish they were. Even if it means putting Precious in a class that looks markedly different from the classes that school reformers love to hype.

As the history of such efforts reveals, that's a complicated proposition. In the first several decades of the 20th century, as a wider cross section of Americans began attending high school, reformers worked to create separate tracks for students of different abilities. In 1944, for instance, the Educational Policies Commission argued that "differences in intelligence and aptitude will exist," and that such differences required "different educational procedures, content, and standards of speed and achievement."

More often than not, the ones tracked into vocational programs were students of color and students from working-class backgrounds. Meanwhile, their more privileged counterparts were tracked into "academic" courses. Not surprisingly, there was resistance to such inequitable distribution of opportunity—resistance that continued to increase over the course of the century and eventually produced real change.

But it also helped foster the idea that all students need the same kind of school experience. And that isn't necessarily true. Much as reformers would love to believe that all they have to do is find an answer and then take that answer to scale, the reality is that there is no one answer. Kids are different, for a variety of reasons, and ignoring those differences means failing to meet their real needs.



As one [new study](#) shows, responsibly recognizing those differences can drive achievement for all kids involved. Looking particularly at Massachusetts middle schools, most of which have abandoned the practice of tracking, the Brookings Institution's Tom Loveless found something surprising. Schools that tracked students had significantly more math pupils performing at the "advanced" and "proficient" levels, and fewer students at the "needs improvement" and "failing"

levels. And the opposite was true of schools that had “un-tracked.” In short, students did better when they were in classes tailored to their needs.

Is an approach like tracking good or bad? The answer, frustratingly, is both. And the same is true for all approaches that propose to school students differently. Treating kids differently can reproduce inequity by reinforcing socioeconomic disparities. And we have come a long way in recognizing that. But treating all students the same can have a troublingly similar result. It can mean ignoring what many students need the most, in favor of a rigid approach rooted in magical thinking.

Struggling schools need help; there’s no question about that. But promoting equity in education is not as simple as finding levers to make those schools look like college-prep academies. It’s messy, challenging, difficult work, and it varies school by school, class by class, student by student.

We are in the midst of a national push to discover “models of excellence” in education that might be taken to scale in order to provide all students with equal opportunity. And as well-intended as that push is, we might do well to remember that models of excellence come in all shapes and sizes. Some of them fit girls like Precious. And those are successful schools in their own right. Jack Schneider, a former high school history teacher in Pennsylvania, is a doctoral student in the history of education, at Stanford University. His research focuses on equity and school reform.

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