



HARVARD EDUCATION LETTER

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Building on What We Know

**A retiring school administrator reflects on the
conversations we *ought* to be having**

by Laura Cooper

Dear Colleagues,

After 15 years at Evanston Township High School (ETHS), my sadness at leaving is lightened by the knowledge that the school is in the hands of remarkable administrators and teacher leaders. I am writing with the hope that my reflections on the last 25 years of my career as a public school administrator will support your work to transform ETHS. Some of what we do every day—helping a student whose mother died, building a partnership with a parent whose daughter is failing, updating the biology curriculum to reflect new knowledge—is similar to what good teachers and leaders have always done. In other ways our work is and must be fundamentally different.

The work is based on a new definition of the “good” high school. Twenty-five years ago Evanston Township High School exemplified the “good” school. “Goodness,” defined as “excellence,” was measured by the stellar achievements of a school’s most accomplished students. ETHS still meets this traditional standard of excellence: A high percentage of graduates go to prestigious colleges and have earned Intel honors, Scholastic Writing awards, and national rankings for math, debate, and science teams. Teachers have received Fulbrights, Grammy Awards, Golden Apples, and university honors.

Today, however, the definition of a “good” school focuses on equity as well as excellence. At ETHS, we agree with our colleagues in the Minority Student

Achievement Network (MSAN) that a school “should be considered excellent only when students of all racial and ethnic groups are achieving at high levels” and that a student’s ethnicity or socioeconomic level should not be the primary predictor of school success. Today a

“good” school is one that ensures that all students—black, Latino, white, English Language Learners, and low-income—are leaving high school prepared for college and career. ETHS disaggregated student achievement data long before NCLB, acknowledged the significant gaps in achievement between student groups, and resolved to get different results. We have begun to make gains in ACT scores for all groups of students and have increased the percentage of black and Latino students in Advanced Placement (AP), but I am leaving you with unfinished work—

the transformation of ETHS into an equitable and excellent school.

As we make the significant instructional, structural, and cultural changes that undergird this hard-won progress, however, our work is often slowed or even derailed by debate and dissension. Debate and difficult conversations are a part of change, but not all debates are valuable. My advice for the future is: Do not waste time debating what we already know from research and practice. Instead, focus on figuring out *how* to best use this knowledge to achieve better results for all of our students while accelerating the growth of students who enter high school needing to “catch up.”



Here are five areas where we should continue to build on what we know instead of getting bogged down in old debates:

Knowledge Base of Teaching and Learning

Twenty-five years ago we routinely engaged in debates about whether teaching was an art or a science, arguing whether good teachers were “born” or “made.” Today, that debate is overshadowed by a powerful knowledge base on teaching and learning. We know that good instruction matters and that we won’t get different student results without changing instruction. At ETHS, Jon Saphier’s *The Skillful Teacher* guides our work, reminding us that teaching is a highly intellectual and complex task—not a recipe of prescribed steps—and that teachers’ instructional strategies should match the needs of students. As you move forward, rather than engaging in conversations about why students won’t learn when we teach the way we have always taught, focus instead on how to continuously broaden the instructional repertoires of all teachers so that, for instance, they have many ways to build personal relationships with students, activate students’ prior knowledge, and check for understanding during and after instruction.

Malleability of Intelligence

Good teachers have always known that expectations matter. Carol Dweck’s research has shown that students with a growth mindset based on the belief that intelligence is malleable tend to persist longer with challenging tasks and are more resilient in the face of setbacks. Whether through our Academic Youth Development (AYD) intervention in algebra (see “Motivating Achievement in Algebra,” *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2009) or our schoolwide work on “effective effort,” we know that by explicitly teaching about the malleability of intelligence, about attributing successes and failures to hard work, and about how to use effective learning strategies, we can increase student confidence, motivation, persistence, and sense of control over learning. And this affects achievement. Instead of talking about what students’ can’t do or aren’t doing, we need to monitor our beliefs about intelligence. We also need to figure out how to convey our belief in their capacity—even when they have given up on themselves. Then, and only then, can we engage them in learning how to “get smart.”

This issue takes on added significance in a racially diverse school like ours, because beliefs about intelligence are closely connected with beliefs about race. Some of our black and Latino students, particularly students who have struggled academically prior to high school, mistakenly conclude that they just aren’t “smart” enough. In order to counter this pervasive negative message, we need to

connect our work on effective effort with understanding the impact of racism in our school.

Race and Ethnicity

Never forget that, at ETHS, high-achieving black and Latino as well as white students routinely complete challenging tasks and earn high grades and test scores. Celebrate and communicate this good news. Likewise, do not forget that many black and Latino students are *not yet* at that level. When trying to explain *why* this is the case, we often identify poverty as the root cause. While acknowledging that many factors—including socioeconomic status—affect learning, we also know that race and ethnicity matter. A recent analysis by McKinsey & Company illustrates the NAEP data to show that race has a powerful impact on student outcomes.

Rather than debating the causes of underachievement, we need to stop talking *around* the issues of race. People like Beverly Daniel Tatum and Glenn Singleton have provided us the rationale, tools, and resources to learn how to talk honestly about race and ethnicity. Developing our skills and tapping our courage to have these conversations will give us a shared equity lens through which to examine our decisions about what to teach, how to teach, how to work together, and how to restructure our policies and practices as a school.

Professional Community

Twenty-five years ago Roland Barth argued that relationships between the “grownups” have a lot to do with a school’s effectiveness. This wisdom from his years as a principal has now been documented in the research of Judith Warren-Little, Fred Newmann, and others. We know that student achievement is positively impacted when a school’s professional community is characterized by a shared commitment to improving the learning of all students, collaborative work to achieve that purpose, and sense of collective responsibility for success and failure.

Sometimes we get bogged down in debating who has the right philosophy or approach. Sometimes teachers blame administrators, administrators blame teachers, or we blame last year’s teachers for not doing their part. We need to move beyond blame and learn to work together in many small groups—course-level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), department teams, and administrative-teacher teams. In PLCs we need to do the nitty-gritty work of matching instruction to our students’ needs by setting course-specific goals, examining data including student work, and developing interventions to meet those goals. In departments we need to clarify what “teacher autonomy” is and what it isn’t and not let it get in the way of creating common, high-quality curricula and assessments.

Strengthening the relationships between the “grown-ups” depends on professional development aimed at changing beliefs and instructional behaviors. Darling-Hammond et al.’s

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recent analysis of the link between professional development and student achievement reminds us that professional development needs to be collaborative, embedded, and connected to changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. There is never enough time or money to create the perfect program, but instead of complaining about limited professional development time and funds, we need to focus on how to embed professional learning in our PLCs, departmental work on common curriculum, and the supervision and evaluation process.

Access to a Rigorous Curriculum

Research on the negative consequences of tracking garnered a great deal of attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At that time ETHS, like most high schools, focused on implementing reformed curriculum and instruction *within* tracked systems. But a few brave schools, like Rockville Center, N.Y., demonstrated that by ensuring that all students in grades K–10 experience a rigorous curriculum, achievement increased dramatically.

We have been inspired by these examples to restructure some core courses so that a broad range of students has access to the most rigorous curriculum. In implementing our restructured ninth-grade humanities program, for example, we are learning that students who previously would not have been placed in honors-level classes are responding positively to increased academic expectations and scaffolded instructional support. Similarly, our work in expanding AP courses provides more students with access to a rigorous curriculum. Today more than one-third of our black and Latino seniors are in one or more AP courses, while three-quarters of our white seniors continue to take AP.

In order to increase achievement, we need to stop debating whether or not students have the knowledge and skills to qualify for an honors or AP class; instead, we should work together to debate how to explicitly teach students how to be successful in these classes and how to align our courses to begin this preparation in ninth grade.

Using Knowledge for Equity and Excellence

Reflecting on the last 25 years reminds us that we know what we need to know to become a “good” school, a school known for equity as well as excellence. But getting there is not easy work; there are no road maps to follow. As you engage in passionate discussions and work through disagreements, focus not on *whether* to use the knowledge we have gained but on *how* to use this knowledge.

Remember the three key messages about expectations we send to students:

1. This work is really important.
2. You have (or can develop) the capacity.
3. I won't give up on you.

I hope that you will share these messages with each other in the midst of the inevitable debates to come. I will be cheering you on.



Laura Cooper recently retired as the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction at Evanston (IL) Township High School.

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For Further Information



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