

Bridging the Excellence Gap

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One of the rules of changing systems or systems analysis is that when you introduce a new system, it will probably be necessary to deal with unintended consequences.

A new drug may solve one problem but its unintended side effects can be disastrous. The Hindenburg dirigible was to be the greatest flying machine ever but no one realized one spark would turn it into a bomb.

Mind the (Other) Gap! The Growing Excellence Gap in K-12 Education (Jonathan A. Plucker, Nathan Burroughs, Ft Ruiting Song, Center on Education Policy, 2010.) takes note of an unintended consequence of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era that was created with the best intentions to bring every child up to rising standards of achievement. A bit of progress was made for underachieving students over time but our best and brightest have paid a price. How could that be?

Picture the normal classroom where there are a variety of students with varying ethnicities, language barriers, and ability levels. The teacher is preparing the students for the upcoming test. While the best students already know all the answers, many others struggle. Class time is spent trying to help the struggling students bring up their scores. The brightest or gifted are bored and left unchallenged. So, they perform at the expected minimal level but nowhere near their potential.

On a personal level, one of my grandsons had read the first volume of the Harry Potter books before entering first grade. Yet, he had to take the kindergarten reading test with apologies from his teacher. You say so what? I say, there has to be a better way.

In one study reviewed by the investigators in this article, *Mind the (Other) Gap! The Growing Excellence Gap in K-12 Education*, consider this: "Reardon (2008) examined the Black-White academic gaps among initially high- and low-achieving students. In

a longitudinal study, he found that even though both Black and White students initially had the same reading and math skills when entering kindergarten, Black students tended to fall well behind their White peers in later grades. In addition, the Black-White gaps grew faster among students who were initially above the mean of reading and math skills than those below the mean. Reardon suggests that Black high-achievers may be attending schools with less challenging learning experiences and fewer resources" (p. 2).

Consider this additional finding: "There is some limited evidence that NCLB's focus on minimum competency has played a role in the growing excellence gap. In an analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data before and after NCLB was enacted, Loveless (2008) found that since 2000, low-achieving students have made solid progress, while the progress of high-achieving students has been modest. According to Farkas and Duffett (2008), the federal accountability system has resulted in schools and teachers placing greater emphasis on low-achieving students than on high-achievers, as 'a full 40 percent of teachers say that the content and curriculum of honors and accelerated classes is 'too often watered down and lacking rigor.'" (p.3)

When doing an analysis of NAEP scores, the authors concluded that some shrinking scores were "due to decreasing performance among top-achieving subgroups." (p. 4)

In the proposed Obama changes to the No Child Left Behind Act in the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a new emphasis will be made to get every student ready for college and careers by 2020. Thus the focus changes from inching up minimal standards toward a continuum of excellence. The question is whether the change made with a stroke of a pen will have the intended effect.

Will Smith (*The Pursuit of Happiness*, Columbia Pictures, 2006), the successful actor, admitted that during his school years he had to curtail evidence of his ability because of cultural pressures not to perform. This along with many other expressions from individuals suggests that there are many factors contributing to underperforming in brilliant kids and teens.

Robert Marzano (2010) has suggested rubrics and grades should be shifted. In one example, he creates a rubric from 0-4 with 3 being the expected level of achievement and above 3 being a mark toward excellence. In such a scenario, learners are challenged to strive for excellence rather than acceptable levels. (For a list of recommendations related to the gifted, read Rebecca Odoardi's article in the February 2010 issue of *Teacher Librarian*.)

For teacher-librarians, however, there are some commonsense recommendations that would engage the best and the brightest as they pass through our learning commons programs. Here is our starter list to consider and you can add to it.

- See that the best readers have all the books and other reading materials that will both satisfy and challenge them.
- Have book clubs for these kids, secret if need be, and certainly online where they can discuss what they read on more sophisticated terms. Perhaps the reading clubs need to cross classroom

and school lines in order to find peers with like interests and sophistication.

- Do not just expect the gifted student to do more work; it is all about sophistication level and excellence.

- Feed interests, hobbies, expertise, avocations, and anything else that smacks of a push beyond the minimum.

- During research projects, notice those who are just doing the minimum to get by—those who only regurgitate material without a great deal of effort. Challenge their critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, technology prowess, and ability to deal with complex texts accompanied by complex discussions.

- Know these young people personally. Let them know you have high expectations and you are their mentor and cheerleader. Help them take command of their own learning rather than being satisfied with high grades and little effort. Help them

discover what true excellence really is and feels like.

- Help the hopeless realize they can overcome just like so many have done before them. There are role models out there worth emulating.

But, should we decide to just cater to the best and brightest? NO. Our attack and stance is to push every single learner beyond minimal expectations. The NCLB message may have the unintended consequence of “dumbing down” expectations for our best, but, we need to see every child on a continuum toward global competitiveness. Some say it cannot be done because one emphasis distracts attention from another emphasis. Perhaps this is why the classroom teacher desperately needs a teacher-librarian as a co-teacher. It is another reason why two heads can be better than one.

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