

Pivoting From Standards- to Supports-Based Reform

In his second inaugural address, President Barack Obama returned repeatedly to the theme of "we the people" and the ever-more-inclusive nature of that "we" in our nation.

Sadly, despite centuries of progress, there still exists a segment of that "we" that has been disconnected from the rest—it is a segment composed of our low-income children and black and Latino students who disproportionately struggle in underresourced school districts, are pushed out of the classroom by harsh discipline policies, and are systematically denied a fair and substantive opportunity to learn.

These disadvantages manifest themselves in achievement gaps, in lower test scores and graduation rates. Yet the root cause of every achievement gap is an opportunity gap in access to high-quality educational resources. Addressing the opportunity gap has to become a federal domestic priority. For this reason, President Obama must make a link between the needs of the [22 percent](#) of children now living in poverty and honoring our first task of a functioning democracy: ensuring an open society and educated citizenry.

In the past decade, federal and state education policies have focused primarily on efforts to raise standards, improve assessments, and evaluate teachers. While each of these issues warrants attention in the landscape of education policy, they are not effective drivers toward significantly changing the conditions for students across the country.

Now is the time to focus on providing the necessary supports to better engage young, low-income black and Latino students and truly close those gaps. Having high standards is important, but they are not "game changers" or systemic policy solutions. In fact, [data confirm](#) that overreliance on testing and standards as the driving basis for reform has created a climate in which teachers' ability to exercise their craft and implement student-centered learning methods has been drastically curtailed.

The standards-based reform agenda has made it virtually impossible for educators to give all students the varied attention and resources needed to engage them in a meaningful learning process.

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Parents want real supports for their students, not just more punishing standards and tests. For a child who is academically drowning, moving the shoreline further away is no way to teach them how to swim. Rather, parents want a lifeline of supports that help students learn, grow, and reach the shore.

And polling backs this up. In a 2012 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup national opinion poll of parents, ["Public Education: A Nation Divided,"](#) parents were asked to identify the main issue that public schools in their community must address. Overwhelmingly, they bypassed issues of teachers or safety and chose their schools' "lack of financial supports." When asked about policymakers' recent move toward national common-core standards in education, parents rightfully responded that standards would make schooling more consistent, but almost half said they did not see standards as sufficient to change the quality of their schools or improve them at all.

Like these parents, we believe common-core state standards are a good tool, but not the vehicle capable of generating systemic change. More is needed than a standards-based movement. This polling data makes a clear case for policymakers to pivot toward what we call a supports-based reform agenda.

Standards-based reform creates an inherent system of winners and losers by raising the bar and assessing who makes the cut. Supports-based reforms provide and strategically align the needed resources so each student has the opportunity to reach that bar—and surpass it.

These supportive resources take the form of guaranteeing access to high-quality early education for all students; mandatory kindergarten with assurances that all students are achieving at grade level by 3rd grade; recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers, along with supplying the training and resources those teachers need to provide more learning time and deeper learning approaches; access to student-centered learning and personalized academic, social, and health plans to keep all students on a college path; and equitable resources and policies so that all students remain in engaging, high-quality educational settings.

The United States must change course and answer the educational crisis confronting all students, especially low-income black and Latino students. (Latinos represent our nation's fastest-growing demographic.) Our policymakers, starting with President Obama, must lead with a supports-based reform agenda focused on creating the learning environments and conditions in which all children will have an opportunity to learn and succeed.

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