

Before the achievement gap comes the opportunity gap

by Peter Fortenbaugh

Palo Alto school Superintendent Kevin Skelly raised an important issue with his comments on the difficulty in closing the “achievement gap” in schools.

I see this issue every day, first-hand. In the morning and evening I am the parent of two children in the Palo Alto school district. During the day I am executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs in East Palo Alto, eastern Menlo Park and Redwood City, neighborhoods where two-thirds of the students are not graduating from high school.

Dr. Skelly is right when he says that schools alone cannot close the achievement gap. We must look beyond the schools, teachers and curriculum. We first need to understand the different worlds in which students grow up in and the different opportunities available to them.

We first need to reduce the “opportunity gap.”

Where I live, most of the children take three years of preschool to prepare for kindergarten. Their parents are college educated, often with advanced degrees, and highly engaged with school. They are surrounded by positive role models.

Where I work, kindergarten is the first exposure to organized instruction for many students. Their parents may be recent immigrants, often with only elementary-school education, who work several jobs to pay rent and struggle to navigate the complexities of



the educational system. They come from cultures where parents are not expected to engage with schools. Their children lack a clear path to success; they cannot simply follow in the footsteps of those before them.

After school, my sons and their friends participate in enriching programs such as sports, music, art, science and chess. They receive assistance with homework. They have a quiet room in which to study. In the summer, their love of learning is enhanced through inspiring camps and travel. Students on the wrong side of the opportunity gap too often end up watching TV, taking care of younger siblings, or just hanging out. They often don't get adequate exercise and their health suffers. Often, three families live in one house without a private space to study.

For some teens, gangs and guns exist in a pretend world, cool to see on TV. For other teens, gangs and guns are too real, having claimed an older brother — they are a daily temptation to resist.

Academic expectations vary tremendously. For many kids, attending college is a given. They have teams of advisers, coaches and consultants to prepare them. Others are told college is impossible because it is too expensive. No one monitors their classes and grades to ensure they will have the opportunity to attend college. While some learn about the differences between Stanford and Cal, others learn why spending time in jail is better than being locked up in prison. And while some worry about SATs and APs, others worry about CPS and POs (Child Protective Services and parole officers).

As long as this opportunity gap exists, the achievement gap will, too. We cannot expect teachers to be miracle workers by playing all

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the roles of educator, coach, tutor, big brother and mentor.

We need to view our youth holistically and address the challenges many of them face outside the classroom.

All kids need to feel a sense of belonging. They all need to learn how to learn.

They need to be surrounded by peers who appreciate the importance of education, to be part of a reinforcing community of learners. They need to maintain the attitude of “I can” that all children begin with. And this is only possible through positive relationships.

This is where community organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula are playing critical roles. We are partnering with schools to extend the learning day. We are aligning our after-school instruction with the school-day curriculum; our enrichment programs reinforce what students learn during the school day. We provide students with the opportunities that many families take for granted.

Most importantly, we give young people the chance to develop positive relationships with

role models who instill constructive attitudes and life skills. Consistently caring adults connect with kids and teach them how school is relevant to their lives. They don't lecture; they influence over time through stable and trusting relationships.

And we are engaging families in education. We help families navigate the complicated educational system and involve them at school.

If we truly want to close the achievement gap, we need to address social-policy issues beyond education. We need to invest in programs that partner with schools to provide opportunities for all of our students after school and during summers.

It is impossible, we are finding out, to reduce the achievement gap while the opportunity gap is increasing. ■

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