



Book Review: *Excellence Through Equity*

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

Doesn't equity in our schools mean that standards must be lowered so that students who are economically deprived or have disabilities can achieve at a higher level? Are we leaving our brightest students behind when we attempt to challenge our "slower" students with more difficult courses and higher expectations?

The answer to both these questions is clearly "no" if we carefully explore *Excellence Through Equity*, edited by two well-known education experts, Alan Blankstein and Pedro Noguera (and including a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu discussing equity and South Africa).

According to Blankstein and Noguera, the pursuit of equity has been "subverted by the assumption that there must be winners and losers" in our educational system. With our nation (and State) having such large achievement gaps, often quantified by results on exams such as the ACT, "policy makers have largely ignored the issues of growing poverty and inequality". However, there is an alternative: "to recognize that equity and excellence are not at odds and that the highest level of excellence will actually be obtained *through* the pursuit of equity."

The authors write that "societal progress is contingent upon expanding opportunities for all... in certain crucial aspects of life, the advancement of a small group cannot be achieved or *sustained* unless the larger population, including the most vulnerable, is allowed to share in the benefits." The "have nots" need not slow down the those who come to school having had better experiences and more opportunities. Parts of the book deal specifically with this issue and how administrators and board members had to deal with parents and others who believed that the turn towards equity would hurt their children.

In many cases, the excellent students did even better in more diverse classrooms.

Except for some other editorial discussion of the issues facing our schools and society, the book is a series of chapters written by others, for example, superintendents and principals, describing successes they have had in their schools. The varied "authors" provide evidence that excellence through equity can work. They give lots of examples of what they did. Results are pretty uniform in being excellent, but they provide different ways of getting, or attempting to get, to both equity and excellence.

The authors describe their “Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student”:

- Getting to your core—“people need to know why what they’re doing is worth the effort and how it connects to their personal and collective mission and values” in order to succeed and sustain change.
- Making organizational meaning—to bring all stakeholders toward common visions and goals, you need cohesion in schools that are otherwise fragmented.
- Ensuring constancy and consistency of purpose—changing the status quo needs both constancy and consistency.
- Facing the facts and your fears—in some of the schools described in the book, there were great disparities in achievement that had to be faced;
- Building sustainable relationships—“fostering trust and buy-in is critical to creating common ground with all stakeholders.

Among the issues discussed in the different chapters are:

- personalized learning;
- equitable ways to teach science to “emergent” bilinguals and immigrant youth and “how *meaning* for students who are often marginalized brought about unprecedented results”;
- Massachusetts’ journey to equity and excellence, written by its former Secretary of Education Paul Reville;
- detracking (there is much discussion on this subject that showed that successful detracking ‘raises all boats’); and,
- empowering students and teachers.

As noted above, the individual authors described what they faced and how they succeeded in some detail. Board members will find many chapters very interesting and they will be exposed to new thinking on some of these current, relevant issues.

This is very worthwhile book for those looking to ensure equity and excellence in their districts, and who isn’t? There are many good lessons here and I encourage Board Members and Superintendents to read it.