

Every Child Included: The Systemic Discovery

Meet the Urgency of Education through Secondary Public Schools

By J. Bert Freeman

I think we are still in a society that seeks to find those that are already the best or willing to be the best. We find them. We recognize them. We set ourselves and our programs up to make them a part of *our* success. It is easy to pay attention to the students who seem to want to learn. As parents, as teachers and as other participants in the educational process, we do that very well. We often do that at the expense of including every student.

In my article “Every Child Included”, I emphasized the urgency of accelerating the academic achievement and increasing the qualifications for post-secondary success of African-American, Hispanic and Low Income students in secondary schools (Grades 6-12). It was also stated that there must be a significant increase in the emphasis on mathematics.

Across the country, there are many programs that operate outside of the school day for helping African American, Hispanic and Low Income students to be college-bound. In the most successful programs, students must have grade point averages that equate to a B or at least a high C to enroll. Among students who participate in many of those programs, close to 90% go to college. That rate is nearly two times higher than national averages among those populations, even among students who have qualifications for higher education.

Those programs are also limited in the number of students they can accommodate. They are great and they must continue. However, I think that it also uncovers an elusive systemic element that perhaps has always been a part of our societies. We are a part of a system that selects the best at the expense of the rest. Hence, there are millions of lower performing students and many who are perceived to have low desire that are below everyone’s radar. In many of our cities that totals perhaps 60 to 80% of the African American, Hispanic and Low Income Students in our secondary public schools. We can change that.

In 2013, for example, 95% of the graduating seniors of the Harlem Childrens’ Zone Promise Charter School were accepted in college. The student population was overwhelmingly African American, Hispanic and Low Income. The entire school and its faculty are set up every year to increase the qualifications for post-secondary education and success for every student.

That may be the difference between greatness and mediocrity in our schools and school systems. We all must get beyond selecting *only* those students who we think want to learn or those who are easy to teach, particularly in the middle schools. Great teachers find ways to teach every student anyway. Great schools find ways to teach every student anyway. That is the difference between a world class school and the rest. It can also be the difference between a world class community and the rest.

It is easy and important to have organizations that choose the underrepresented students who will assure that the outcomes will make the organization look great. As much attention as state testing systems have gotten, they tell a story; they actually show that we need to set ourselves up for the

next level of effort. We already know how to systemically select students for programs to look good. Now we must set the programs up for *all of our students* to look good, for all of our students to perform, for all of our students to discover and develop their capabilities and talents. Here are a few suggestions that work:

- Equip mentors to also be academic advisors.
- In elementary schools, make it easy for grade level teams to talk to each other and share information.
- In secondary schools, make it easy for content teams to talk to each other and share information.
- Increase focus on improving the academic performance of the students most in need of improvement.
- Engage students in their own learning.
- Teach to the standards instead of teaching to the test(s) – most students who pass the tests have yet to be taught to the tests.

It is okay to identify talent and potential that stands out. It is also important to allow that talent to develop itself and to grow. However, under today's circumstances the education of the children in our public schools requires a 'next level of effort'. It requires teachers and administrators to go beyond their own limits. It requires them to be the drivers of this systemic change. Rather than determining whether a student wants to learn, teach him or her anyway. Some teachers already operate at that level of effort.

One year, upon examining mathematics outcomes from course grades and state tests for one school district, we found a significant summative increase in mathematics performance in two of three middle schools compared to the previous year. Each of the schools incorporated computer assisted processes to work with their students who were most in need of improvement. In the two schools with the notable increases, the computer assisted math programs *required* interaction between teacher and student. Both schools used the same product. The other school used a different product in which the teacher had a minimal roll. The research tells us that an active adult role in a student's achievement contributes significantly to a student's success.

Two essential actions must take place simultaneously. We must: 1) Accelerate the academic achievement of children most in need of improvement; 2) Accelerate the *systemic* know-how of our educators and community organizations to function at that new level every day, at the inclusion of every student rather than at the expense of any student.

Let us take every opportunity, to address this urgency that has existed for years. This applies to all students from pre-school to 12th grade. Since the graduations of today's secondary school students are imminent during the next few years, they require immediate attention. As parents, teachers and administrators we can make sure that every student in our children's classrooms gets the education he/she requires. Then, ***as a parent I will know*** that if you educate every student at that level of excellence, you are educating *my* child at that level of excellence.

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