

Foreword: A Strategy to Challenge Inequality

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This book has a message that is as simple as it is welcome: All our schools can organize themselves so that they work for all students. They can be places where all students learn to use their skills in reading, writing, and mathematics to understand and apply enduring ideas in the disciplines. They can become settings that launch all students into the world of postsecondary education and provide them with the learning that allows them to succeed once they get there. All schools can reform themselves to become such places.

The reality that this book confronts and seeks to change is that our schools are not always places where all students experience equal opportunity for success. Instead of expanding opportunity to embrace all students, our schools have sometimes unwittingly but far too often assumed the task of selecting some students to experience the best public education has to offer, allowing others little more than the “leftovers.” And this distribution of the most meaningful learning opportunities to those students who already enjoy the greatest advantages in society has both individual and social consequences.

Whereas some students come to think of themselves as “scholars” whose futures are tied to further education, others learn that “school is not for me” and reject their schooling as forcefully as their schools exclude them from the settings that might persuade them otherwise. Dividing the “haves” and the “have nots” further denies all students the experience of full participation in a community of learners that mirrors the real world. In socially diverse schools, this division plays out along economic and racial lines, allowing stereotypes to become entrenched and making it risky for African American, Latino, and Native American students in particular to succeed academically.

The good news is that some schools are ready for reform. No longer content to “get over,” these schools share with Ruth Johnson a distinct understanding that schools’ own practices often work to squander the talents of young people and that these practices must change. They understand that it is their responsibility to ensure that the time that so many students—especially those who are poor, African

American, Latino, Native American, or our country's newcomers—spend in schools is not wasted. Educators in these schools are already deeply disturbed about the differential treatment students receive at the hands of traditional practice. For those with the will to tackle the thorny issues of low expectations and unequal access to knowledge in their schools and districts, this book provides a strategy to challenge and redress such inequality.

The strategy that Ruth Johnson proposes involves each school and district in a process of self-examination informed by careful analysis of data that describe how opportunities to learn are allocated to all students. What can such a data-based self-assessment do? First, data highlight the gaps between rhetoric and reality. If the school's banners proclaim "All Children Can Learn," a strategy of breaking data down by race and by grade can reveal the extent to which the school's most meaningful learning opportunities realize this belief. Second, data can point to the steps that must be taken to close those gaps. If the school brags that it is preparing all students for postsecondary education, a self-examination can describe how many more students must enroll in the courses that directly lead to success in such settings. Finally, the process of compiling and reflecting on schoolwide data can bond teachers together in a common understanding that they are part of a larger team of professionals responsible for creating a culture of high achievement for all students. Such a process underscores that the success of the whole school depends on making each and every classroom a place where all students experience powerful learning.

For some readers, the benefits of using school data to mobilize efforts to equalize access to valued knowledge and to boost achievement will be obvious. Why, then, are so many schools reluctant to use data to examine their own practice? In part, the job of running a school, which encompasses tasks that are routine and those that are unpredictable, simply leaves little extra time for gathering and analyzing the data that can help schools move toward more potent practice. What's more, the data schools have about their own performance are often limited to standardized test scores compiled long after the test's administration and passed on to the schools themselves only after they are reported in the local newspapers.

Indeed it is frequently "outsiders"—state officials or university researchers, for example—who first gather the data, and other "outsiders"—the local Chamber of Commerce or politicians with an ax to grind—who then use the data, often for purposes that serve neither schools nor their students well. As a result, many educators have come to think of data—whether couched in terms of the numbers of students passing standardized tests or student survey information gathered to determine how students view their teachers and classrooms—as the stuff that bureaucrats in faraway offices use to beat up on schools. In many communities, published reports of student achievement defined by annual test score successes boost the price of real estate. In other communities, such data become the rationale for a steady disinvestment in public education. More recently, policymakers have moved to use selected data in high-stakes accountability schemes to "reward" schools for test score improvements and to "punish" those that do not post gains.

No wonder teachers become cynical about using data to scrutinize their own practices and chart their own course for improved academic effectiveness. Not only do they have little control over which data to collect, they have little say in how the data will be used. Without the time, resources, or experience to make the data work for them and their students, many educators shrug off reports of "indicators" of performance as just one more way to put down schools. Given these circumstances,

then, what does motivate educators to collect data on what happens to students in their school, then analyze and apply the data to clarify the steps necessary for improving student achievement?

This book suggests some answers and offers an alternative way to think about using data on schooling. First, imagine an approach that organizes data to describe not only “student outcomes” but also the context of schooling and, in particular, the conditions that Jeannie Oakes of the University of California at Los Angeles highlights as essential for students’ achievement: access to meaningful content, press for achievement, and professional teaching practices. Then imagine that this information collection process is harnessed to a commitment to energizing everyone in the school to promote achievement for all students. This is the approach that Ruth Johnson lays out for us.

It is a practical approach, one that Ruth Johnson has used to jump-start schools and districts on the road to equitable reform. But as practical as this model is, it is more than a process for change in individual schools. As the steps outlined in the following pages reveal, this process also represents a new model of accountability for professional practice, one that offers lessons to policymakers as well as practitioners. Distinct from a top-down bureaucratic approach to managing data, this model puts schools themselves in charge of the data collection process. It focuses on gathering data not simply on student “outcomes” but also on the context of teaching and learning, and in particular, it highlights data that describe patterns of student access to knowledge and opportunity to learn. Finally, it compels schools to explain their practices in light of the data they gather and then to use their findings to extend their most challenging opportunities to learn to all students.

In the end, this book, like the data schools work with, is a means to the end of improved student achievement. *Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap* needs to reach every tracked and resegregated school in the country, as well as the various school reform groups. Ruth Johnson invites schools to use data as a lens through which to examine counterproductive and unequal school practices and to remedy those inequalities. She guides schools and districts in developing the skills they need for reform that is focused on the creation of a culture of high standards and equity. Without such a focus, no reforms will ever take. Informed by years of experience, Ruth Johnson sets forward a broad strategy for schools to use and a set of tools to make that strategy work. Finding the resolve to put those tools to use to benefit all students, however, is up to the rest of us.

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