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## Increasing Equitable Education for Public Schools

*When schools are replete with both academic and co-curricular opportunities for students to perform their best as well as explore their interests, student success is visibly increased. Lack of opportunities for student growth, both in and out of the classroom, contributes to decreased graduation rates, lower test scores, and higher dropout rates. Adequate funding from both the state and federal governments as well as a strong support system between parents and educators are what schools need to acquire the means to foster student success.*

### Scope of the Problem

Despite being amongst the nation’s highest spenders on education, New York State has suffered consistently from wide disparity in educational funding between affluent and financially needy districts. Under the New York State Constitution, the state is obligated to provide all students with a “sound basic education”(Friedfel 2013,2).

Frequently it is the poorer districts that also have higher need because they contain more economically disadvantaged students and a higher percentage of English Language Learners. This problem stems from the fact that the poor school districts have the greatest need, but the least resources. In the 2013-2014 academic year, per capita spending for high-need students was on average \$5,828 less than spending on low-need students.

### Funding Policy

In response to a series of court cases ranging from the 1990’s through the early 2000’s, New York adopted the State Education Budget and Reform Act of 2007 which consolidated 30 aid programs into Foundation Aid (Friedfel 2013, 2). Since it was founded in 2007 Foundation Aid has increased significantly, despite delays in increased funding caused by the Great Recession. For the 2016-2017 academic year, Foundation Aid makes up \$16.5 billion out of the total school aid which comes to \$24.3 billion (Friedfel 2013, 2). The goal of Foundation

Aid is to make up for the differences in funding that exists between affluent school districts, and more needy districts. Local spending makes up over 50% of all education spending, and despite additional funding being provided by the state, significant disparity still exists between the amount of spending for schools in wealthy districts compared to poorer districts (Cunningham, Van Alstyne, and Tatum 2017, 9).

Foundation Aid is calculated by the following formula “(Foundation Amount x Pupil Need Index x Regional Cost Index) – Expected Local Contribution = Foundation Aid per Pupil.



### Best Practices

This best practices section is compiled research of what schools are doing or should be doing to increase test scores and graduation rate and reduced measures such as suspensions. These practices have been shown to be the most beneficial for public schools with low income, minority students in order to offer equitable education.

#### *Afterschool and Summer Learning*

Expanding time for learning has been shown to have highly positive effects on students, especially students

attending high-poverty, low performing schools. For over 15 million school-aged children in 2009, after school meant being on their own and only 8.4 million K-12 children participated in afterschool programs (Vandell, 2013). Initiatives have been taken to increase the number of afterschool and summer learning opportunities for students due to the positive impacts it can have on student development. Not only are students kept safe through after school and summer programs because they are no longer on their own, these programs also increase the student's academic and social learning. Findings from Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project have shown that after school programs can improve test scores, improve grades, increase attendance, increase engagement in learning, and lower dropout rates (Baker 2013). One example of this is Highlander Charter School in Rhode Island which saw a 20% greater proficiency in math and literacy for those who participated in afterschool programming (Baker 2013). This is because expanded learning time allows for students to reach a



higher learning potential without minimizing other activities. This increased time also allows for teachers to be productive in planning curriculum, collaborating with one another, and developing professional training (Miller 2014). With more schools in need taking the initiative to add afterschool or summer learning, students are

provided with safety in potentially dangerous areas and are given well planned areas for learning that can close the achievement gap.

#### *Diverse Learning Opportunities (AP/IB, Vocational)*

Allowing for students to have a vast array of learning opportunities can positively impact the way a student learns. Looking at Schools of Opportunity, researchers have found that schools that were once in fear of failing or had extreme achievement gaps, were now pushing towards success by offering engaging classes to all students. Schools across the United States had

implemented the addition of International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, as well as Advanced Placement (AP) courses, that have challenging coursework and rigid assessments. Rather than believe the students were not capable of such demanding work, schools implemented these classes and saw a vast improvement. Researchers noted that in troubled schools enrollment doubled, performance improved,



achievement gaps closed, and students became more engaged (LaCour et.al. 2017). This impact shows that if all students are given these opportunities the students and overall success of the school will increase. Some schools struggle to offer excelled programs such as IB classes due to the fees involved. Candidates for IB programs must pay \$4,000 and an annual fee that can be upwards of \$10,000. These prices make it difficult for schools with low funding to offer such opportunities to students. If more funding was allocated to underfunded districts, these programs could be introduced and potentially increase performance, reduce achievement gaps, and improve overall engagement of the school.

Vocational classes can have a similar effect for students. Many students are not “typical learners” and are forced into the rigorous and standardized methods of public schools. Rather than teach students in one, traditional way research shows that offering students different choices can create an overall improvement in student success. Vocational programs allow for students to take a different path while still earning a high school diploma and these students are more prepared for either the workforce or a college education (Bidwell 2014). In school districts where some students struggle to maintain engagement in a regular classroom setting the vocational pathway provides a hands-on learning environment that can prepare them for the workforce. Not every student necessarily wants to go onto college but vocational classes allow for them to be able to learn a trade that can

be used once they graduate high school (Bidwell 2014). Implementing vocational pathways can increase a school's graduation rate and lower dropout rates because students who may not have found success in a typical classroom setting are now engaging in a rich learning environment where they are passing all of their classes.

### *Mediation/Restorative Justice*

Restorative justice practices are increasingly popular amongst schools. Restorative justice is a way of dealing with punishments in schools in a more wholesome manner. Most restorative justice programs listen to students' needs and attempt to reconcile with them rather than simply divvy out a punishment of suspension or detention. Restorative justice is also used to reconcile issues between students that allows for effective mediation and creates a better school atmosphere.

Furthermore, restorative justice allows for students who would have missed class time to not fall behind in work. Typical zero-tolerance policies that reprimand with suspensions become exclusionary and remove students from the learning environment (LaCour et.al. 2017). A 2016 study of different schools utilizing restorative justice practices highlighted the benefits of such a program. It was found that schools with restorative justice programs saw a decrease in suspensions, some by 84% in their first year, a decrease in violent or serious offenses and a decrease in recidivism rates among students who completed the program (Fronius et.al. 2016). School attendance also increases due to restorative justice with absenteeism decreasing by 50% and tardiness decreasing by 64% (Fronius et.al. 2016). There was an academic impact as well from restorative justice practices. Those with the program saw a cumulative graduation rate increase of 60% compared to those without the program only increasing 7% (Fronius et.al. 2016). Restorative justice practices keep students engaged in the classroom while handling incidences of misconduct in an effective manner that benefit the students and overall school.

### *Community Schools*

A community school is a partnership between a school and the community, which integrates a focus on

academics with health and social services for youth and community development (IEL, n.d). Community schools are not a new practice, but they have recently become more prevalent in the effort to reduce the opportunity gap in education. This model of education goes beyond the conventional school model by collaborating with the community to provide more resources to schools.

Collaboration between the schools and the community leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities because actors are working together to address common issues. (IEL, n.d).

Community schools focus on intellectual growth of students, but also the social, emotional, and physical development. Also, compared to traditional schools they expand their target population by reaching students,

families, and community members. Schools and community partners expand education to outside the classroom by providing substantial after-school's programming. Community sponsored extracurricular programming is essential to the

community school model because they address the systemic barriers to learning and development. Commonly provided programs include case management, primary health clinics, youth development programs, family resource centers, early childhood development programs, referral systems, after-school programs, and school reform initiatives. Research has shown that extracurricular participation and involvement in organized activities have positive outcomes on adolescents and specifically participation in programming aimed at future GPA, college enrollment, and positive attitudes toward schools particularly benefit students that are at-risk for school dropout or failure. (Houser 2016). The programming that occurs within the community school model differs from the same type of after-school programs that are school-sponsored because they are missing the link between the student and the community. The goal is to achieve academic success, while creating long-lasting relationship between the students and other community members. Also, research has shown that more students are likely to engage in programs offered by schools when they are community-sponsored



programming compared to school-sponsored programming (Houser 2016). Human, curricular and infrastructure resources are often distributed unevenly between school systems, which created an opportunity gap between affluent districts and poorer neighborhoods. For example, schools with larger poor and minority populations, usually in urban settings, experience overpopulated classrooms, fewer well-trained, properly-credentialed and experienced teachers, and less overall resources than schools with higher socioeconomic status (Darden and Cavendish 2012). Therefore, when faced with inequitable funding, community schools are a best practice because they focus on utilizing resources. They create advantageous relationship with community partners in order to provide more opportunities for students.

#### *Senior Internships: WISE*

Seniors at top high schools in Westchester County, such as Rye and Scarsdale, have been given the opportunity to pursue their interests in a field of their choosing throughout, or at the conclusion of, their academic year through WISE Individualized Senior



Experience. WISE Services (WISE Individualized Senior Experience, Inc.) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that was established in 1991 to assist schools in developing WISE programs that are specified to their local needs (WISE Services, 2014). Students are guided by mentor-teachers to design specific projects that cater to their career or personal interests and goals. Students typically partner with organizations within their communities or beyond, and may work on projects that range from academically-related to business-oriented to creative (Schechter Westchester, 2015). WISE enables seniors to apply their formal classroom learning to a real-world environment, and offers them a taste of what life is like after high school. In addition, allowing seniors to participate in internships after they have applied to college and may be less inclined to be as meticulous with

their schoolwork keeps morale up and gives students a chance to demonstrate responsibility in a new way.

#### *Scientific Research*

The Westchester Science & Engineering Fair (WESEF) is an annual forum that allows students across the county's high schools to showcase their scientific research. At participating schools, including Somers, Scarsdale, and Rye, students work under the supervision of a faculty member to complete an independent study in science. WESEF is the localized version of the Intel International Science Fair, and sends its top competitors to Intel's event (WESEF, 2017). Allowing students to work on individual research projects throughout their time in high school affords them opportunities to explore their interests and gain invaluable experience in field research, preparing them well for undergraduate-level research in college.

## School Initiatives

New York State public schools have implemented a variety of programs that are among the best practices listed. Highlighted are some of those schools who were originally underperforming, low socioeconomic based but are now beginning to thrive in areas such as increased test scores, increased graduation rate, decreased suspensions and decreased dropout rates. These schools exemplify how the best practices can be put into action and make positive changes to a school that needs it.

In 2016, New Rochelle High School's graduation rate increased by 8%, going from 78% to 86%. This increase can be attributed to the school's implementation of several new programs. One program pairs at-risk youth with counselors who mentor them and provide both educational and home life guidance. Another program is the *My Brother's Keeper Initiative* that connects young men of color with resources such as mentoring, support networks, and job skills so they can succeed in high school, higher education, and in their future career paths. This program is a new initiative but already has the potential to decrease the graduation gap between students of different ethnicities. New Rochelle also partnered with the Guidance Center of Westchester to offer more job and vocational training, college readiness, and tutoring. This allows for students to have choices for different pathways to success, whether they are choosing to go to college or

are preparing for a career. The high school also added an extended day program that allows students to take night classes. This extended day program helps students to graduate on time and increase their overall grades. (Dougan and Lapomme 2017).

The Syracuse City School District has been implementing programs that create additional opportunities for their students, as well. For the graduating class of 2017, Syracuse reported that it had eliminated the gap between black and white students' graduation rates. The gap was closed by decreasing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates of black students. Overall, dropout rates have decreased and graduation rates have increased to 64%. Part of this success was attributed to new pathways students can take to succeed. Syracuse has a network of 23 vocational programs offered and implemented the "4+1" option. The "4+1" option allows for students to swap out one of their social studies regents exams with a test in career and technical education through a vocational class. This flexibility allows for more students to be tested on what they are learning and potentially receive a higher score because of it. Another program is the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection Program that was funded through the My Brother's Keeper Initiative. It helps students prepare for college and a career through mentoring, tutoring, and part-time employment. Of the 202 students enrolled in the program last year, 195 graduated. The district has also began implementing restorative justice practices including overhauling their code of conduct, providing alternatives to suspensions that include peace circles and allowing for different strategies to curb discipline issues over all. These restorative justice initiatives have reduced suspensions by 50% (McMahon 2017).

Utica's School District is one of the poorest in New York State, but Thomas R. Proctor High School has developed programs to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. The Young Scholars program in Utica assists students from disadvantaged backgrounds, starting in seventh grade to high school graduation. The program is customized for each student, depending on their needs and includes academic tutoring, opportunities for community service, social work, and taking students on college visits. The program is designed to prepare students for college and helping them not only obtain the

grades but also helps them apply for colleges. The program currently has a 93% graduation rate and 86% have gone on to college. This program is funded mostly through grants from the state's Liberty Partnership Program and Utica City School District along with smaller private donations, but it is in jeopardy of losing these grants due to funding cuts. Right now this program is free to students and plays a vital role in preparing them for a college education (Kealy 2015).

Public schools in Buffalo, NY have embarked on *The New Education Bargain*, designed around the principle that "an equal and high quality education is every child's civil right" (Office for Strategic Alignment and Innovation, n.d.). The New Education Bargain aims to provide opportunities through hard work, commitment and collaborations between educators, students, and parents. This new initiative focuses on a rigorous early elementary education, strong community schools, new innovative high schools, extending learning excellence to all students, providing services for the neediest children and families, and new relationships with teachers. One aspect of *The New Education Bargain* in Buffalo Public Schools is converting the public schools into community schools. Community schools have a strong presence in the community; there is a partnership between the school and other community resources. The Buffalo Public School system specifically has implemented academic and instructional technology, after-school and Saturday programs, parents centers for adult education and student and family support services (Office for Strategic Alignment and Innovation, n.d.). Integrating the student's education into a community setting early on leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. The end goals for the Buffalo School system include: children being ready to enter school, students attending school consistently, students actively involved in learning about their community, families involved in their children's education, schools that are engaged with families and communities, academic success, physical, social and emotional health of students, students being able to live and learn in a safe, supportive, and stable environment, and communities that are a desirable place to live.

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### Community Policy Institute

The Community Policy Institute builds capacity surrounding policy within the Capital Region. We provide researched-based policy information to our community partners who use the information to modify best practices and advocate for policies that will further the development and effectiveness of direct community engagement.

This brief was produced by CPI Undergraduate Fellows, community experts, and faculty.

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