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EDUCATION

Disruptive Students Hurt High Achievers Most

NOV 3, 2015 10:01 AM EST

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Low-income strivers -- impoverished families who follow the rules and work hard to climb the ladder to the middle class -- may be the most underserved population in America today.

In few realms is that more evident than education reform. For 20 years, national policies have focused largely on the lowest-performing students, often to the detriment of their higher-achieving, low-income peers. Recently, many cities -- including Chicago, Philadelphia and Syracuse, New York -- have made a goal of reducing the number of school suspensions and other tough-love approaches to school discipline, with little concern for the impact on the kids who come to school ready to follow the rules. These efforts have received vocal support from the federal Department of Education. Policymakers and educators say they are doing this in the name of equity. But when everyone in a school is harmed by some students' unruly behavior, it's a strange notion of fairness indeed.

Imagine that we wanted to prioritize the needs of low-income students who demonstrated the aptitude to achieve at high levels and a willingness to work hard -- the kids with the best shot to use a solid education to put poverty behind. What might we do?

First, we would put in place "universal screening" tests to look for gifted students in early elementary schools. We would ask all schools, including those with a high percentage of poor students, to identify at least 10 percent of their students for special programs, and then allow these kids the opportunity to spend part of their day learning with other high-achieving peers, and to go faster or deeper into the curriculum. A recent study by David Card of the University of California at Berkeley and Laura Giuliano of the University of Miami demonstrated that this sort of approach is particularly effective for high-achieving, low-income students.

By middle school, we would embrace tracking so that poor, bright students had access to the same challenging courses that affluent high achievers regularly enjoy, and that are essential if young people are going to get on a trajectory for success in Advanced Placement classes in high school and at more selective colleges.

Finally, we would ensure that schools were safe and orderly places to be -- balancing the educational needs of disruptive students with the equally valuable needs of their rule-abiding peers.

Yet in most cities we do very few of these things. This is in large part because many progressives are convinced that any sort of tracking is classist and racist, and amounts to giving up on certain kids, and they have worked to ban it. (Ironically, political leaders in the poorest neighborhoods themselves are asking for more schools for the gifted and talented.) Most accountability systems still work on getting low-performing students up to basic proficiency in reading and math, rather than pushing schools to help all students get as far as they can.

Meanwhile, discipline “reforms” are focused overwhelmingly on reducing punishments, often with little attention to the potential downside for learning in the classroom. Yet as common sense -- and solid research -- tells us, that downside is real. For instance, a study by the group Public Agenda found that 85 percent of teachers and 73 percent of parents felt the “school experience of most students suffers at the expense of a few chronic offenders.” A study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research showed that when disruptive students from New Orleans landed in Houston schools after Katrina, they “increased native absenteeism and disciplinary problems.”

Frustrated that the traditional public schools aren’t willing to prioritize their children’s needs, many low-income strivers have turned to high-quality charter schools instead. But now those are under attack, too. In recent weeks, the "PBS Newshour" and "New York Times" had highly critical coverage of Success Academies, charter schools in New York City that have shown excellent results in improving student performance. The reports focused on the academies' suspending students aggressively and removing those who are chronic disrupters. There were similar controversies over the relatively high rates of suspensions and expulsions at charters in Chicago and Washington in recent years.

The casual observer might wonder: What’s wrong with that approach? Why not ensure that schools are safe places to be? If the Success Academies and schools like it didn’t exist, many of those hard-working, high-achieving students would be in chaotic, low-performing public schools. Why don’t their

needs count?

Our public schools are intended to help all students achieve their potential. By all means, we need to find ways to better serve disruptive students, who are often dealing with horrendous situations at home. (Often, specialized alternative schools are the best option.) Trying to boost the performance of the lowest-achieving kids is also the right thing to do; kids who grow up to be illiterate or innumerate have little hope for success in our knowledge economy.

But the bulk of the attention can't go just to the toughest cases. Poor children who are ready to learn, follow the rules, and work hard deserve resources and opportunities to flourish. If the public school system is unwilling or unable to provide them, then charter schools should be allowed and encouraged to do so, even if that means cracking down on the students who ruin it for the rest.

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