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Rebuilding the Ladder of Educational Opportunity

National Network
of State Teachers of the Year

"If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them."
President Harry S. Truman (1947)

"If the rungs on the ladder are getting further apart —which they are, with growing income inequality —then it may become a lot harder to climb that ladder."
Isabel Sawhill, Center on Children and Families, Brookings Institution (Ydstie, 2012)

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Introduction and Terminology

President Truman spoke the words above more than 70 years ago. In the intervening period, the gaps between the rungs on the ladder of educational opportunity have not shrunk. Due to World War II and the Great Depression, economic inequality—a major factor in educational opportunity gaps—was already at a low point in the 1940s and has widened dramatically since that time (Desilver, 2013).

Throughout this report, we will refer to "opportunity gaps." This is distinct from achievement gaps. Achievement gaps are sizable and persistent differences in academic outcomes between different groups of students, and they receive the lion's share of ink in the education literature. The groups of students compared include those defined by race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, English learner status, geographic location, and disability status, among others. Achievement gaps are all about outcomes; the results of the educational system, with metrics like standardized test scores, grades, course-taking, and graduation rates. These gaps and measures are focused on activities that have been completed by students, with success measured against one or more criteria. The focus on achievement gaps has been amplified by government-mandated reporting of assessment results. For example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) required finer-grained data disaggregation and resulted in extensive resources expended on closing the achievement gaps thus illuminated, largely to limited effect (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Reardon, Greenberg, Kalogrides, Shores, & Valentino, 2013).

In this report, we shift our focus instead to opportunity gaps. By this, we mean:

> "…the term opportunity gap refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students." (2013, The Glossary of Education Reform)

The term opportunity gap holds a different focus than achievement gap, looking towards the inputs of the system rather than the outputs. This study represents a search for real-world solutions to address the opportunity gaps in their many guises and at the numerous root causes. Researchers focus on opportunity gaps as a categorization of disparities in inputs that are known to impact educational attainment and achievement, such as time spent reading, number of vocabulary words heard at home, attending a quality pre-school, and access to qualified, effective educators. The opportunity gaps illuminate the impact of inequities in resources and access on children's lives and their educational experiences. These differences can limit their acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for post-secondary life and the ability to contribute to the communities in which they live. In this report, we will describe themes that emerged in discussions with teachers, schools, and districts who have been effective addressing opportunity gaps and improving outcomes for students, not just in school, but in the rest of their lives.

The target of inference of this work is on the input side of the education system; the things that students arrive at school with, not solely how they leave. Issues that students arrive at schools with are exacerbated when students encounter low expectations, prejudice, and discrimination. Marginalized students may not have the same access to highly-qualified teachers, obtain fewer recommendations to advanced courses, and receive disproportionately frequent discipline referrals. Schools also can act as sites where opportunity gaps widen due to differential resources with which to face the challenges brought by the students (The Saguaro Seminar, 2016). Even the youngest students do not arrive at educational institutions as blank slates. They have—or lack—personal experiences, household and community resources, cultural exposure, background knowledge, technology access, societal and family expectations, and positive attitudes and beliefs about the value of education. Variability on all these factors and more exists from the time children are born, and the impact is far-reaching throughout their lives. As long as societal inequities remain, so will opportunity gaps. That does not mean that all students cannot be supported to reach their maxi-

mum potential as scholars, citizens, and members of a thriving society. It is complex and challenging work but overcoming these initial disadvantages can be done—in fact, it is being done in each of the settings profiled herein.

This study is a collaboration between the Kellogg Foundation, the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY), RTI International, and Clowder Consulting. We sampled urban and rural schools in a variety of geographical settings, grade levels, and types of schools. The common thread among these diverse schools is that each has on staff an outstanding teacher leader who has been recognized as a State Teacher of the Year (STOY) and has devoted him or herself to counteracting the opportunity gaps faced by the students he or she serves.

Sample and Methodology

In this study, we used a mixed-methods, multiple case study design to develop a deep understanding of what effective teachers do to help reduce opportunity gaps for their students.

Sample
We identified eight schools in which a State Teacher of the Year (STOY) does remarkable work in reducing opportunity gaps faced by his or her students. The sites were selected from a larger group identified by NNSTOY, to represent variability in regions of the United States, school sizes, and urbanicity (see Appendix A for a description of the sample of teachers and schools).

Data Collection
We gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to deepen our understanding of how these teachers, schools, and communities were addressing the opportunity gaps of their students. For the quantitative data, we obtained descriptive data from and about each school and district to characterize each site. In addition, we requested documents from the school related to policies, practices, and/or initiatives designed to reduce opportunity gaps for students. The data and document request list appears in Appendix B.

For the qualitative data, we used several strategies to gain a comprehensive view. The STOYs were interviewed by phone prior to a visit to their school. This discussion focused on the school context, the perceived opportunity gaps their students experience, the work they were doing to address and reduce those gaps, the challenges they faced, and how they measured success. During the site visit, we captured video that illustrates key practices. We also interviewed the administrator during our visit to the school, asking similar questions about opportunity gaps and mitigation, as well as what resources they provided to their faculty, and what kind of training they offered and received, in addressing opportunity gaps for their students. We wanted to include the perspective of other faculty members in addition to the STOY. To do this, we held one or two focus groups at each school, ranging in size from 6-12 teachers, discussing similar topics. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The interview protocols are included in Appendix B.

During the site visit, we observed instruction in the classroom of each STOY and, when the school

permitted, the classrooms of other teachers as well. For each session, we used an informal observation tool (included in Appendix B) to document instructional context and practices aligned with the research literature on opportunity gaps. The researchers conducting the classroom observations had extensive experience, either as teachers (including a STOY) or as classroom observers.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in the study are:

1. How do high performing teachers identify opportunity gaps for their students?

2. What practices do high performing teachers and their schools address the opportunity gaps?

3. What community and parental engagement practices do high performing teachers and their schools use to diminish opportunity gaps?

The findings are organized and presented as they align to each question, including some direct quotes from our conversations with the teachers and leaders. There are, of course, some themes and ideas that cross more than one question. These are described as part of the findings for each relevant question above.

Findings: Identify the Gaps

The first research question has to do with how teachers and schools recognize and characterize opportunity gaps in their students. The findings are presented in four subcategories in this section on identifying opportunity gaps.

The obvious: Look around, official data sources

Schools in the United States collect massive amounts of data for a variety of reasons. Much of it is required by the district, the state, or the federal government, and often there are laws regulating what is collected and how it is disseminated. Data of these types include such things as residential address of the students, parent or guardian contact information, gender, race, ethnicity, and economic status as a basis for determining eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) programs. Also included are the location of the school, grade span, location type (urban, suburban, rural), student enrollment, faculty size, faculty qualifications and licensure status, salary schedules, student-teacher ratio, number of students classified as English-language learners (ELL) and students with disabilities. Visit any district website and you will find school lists, office locations, transportation information, course lists, curricula, governance information such as superintendent and school board members and how to contact them, state testing information and standards, ratings and

accountability data, athletics, safety, lunch menus—the list goes on and on. It's rather startling just how much data is required to be collected and available!

Data is also collected on the surrounding communities. Poverty rates, race and ethnic composition of the neighborhood, types of housing (rental or owned; multi- or single-family), home ownership rates, home prices, homelessness rates, types and numbers of community businesses and employers, resident education levels, resident income levels, transportation options, crime rates, public safety incidents, local employment rates, and much more.

The problem with all these data often is not a lack of access, although in some cases the information can be hard to locate. Instead, it tends to be the overwhelming amount of detail from numerous sources. Digesting it takes time, effort, and resources. It is difficult to translate all that is available into coherent, useful, actionable information. But all these sources contribute to a teacher's ability to identify opportunity gaps faced by their students. Low socioeconomic status, high unemployment and poverty rates, and homelessness in the community are all indicators that at least some students in the school likely suffer from poverty; food insecurity; homelessness; limited cultural exposure; and lack of access to material resources like books, computers, and the internet. Knowing that it exists and knowing which students face specific issues is more complex. But gaining a solid baseline knowledge of the major issues in the school community is a good place to start.

The less obvious: Ask! Talk to teachers and students, use surveys

> **"Data doesn't lie."**

Teachers have access to all publicly-available data, of course, as well as some internal sources that are not. Teachers can review student's prior grade and discipline records, check attendance records, read. Individualized Education Program (IEP) documents. They also may discuss previous experiences with faculty members who have taught the same students. And of course, teachers work and sometimes live in the school neighborhood or district. They see the obvious signs of prosperity or poverty as they travel to and from school. Their own children may attend the school where they teach, giving them additional insights into how the system looks from a student's and parent's perspective.

Many schools conduct surveys to evaluate their services and discover offerings that may be needed or desired. These surveys differ by the respondent and purpose, but include:

- Student surveys most commonly fall into two large classes: perception of teaching and the school, and interest and needs inventories. Student perception surveys can be very useful indicators of the quality of instruction, student's sense of support and caring from their teachers, and student's impression of the safety and adequacy of the school building, supplies, and environment. Interest and needs inventories more directly address aspects of the opportunity gaps, probing for data about student's long-term goals, plans, and dreams, and what they need to achieve them. When properly designed and with high response rates, strong indicators of the student experience of the school can be obtained.

- Faculty surveys are frequently focused on the work experience, asking about salary, benefits, professional development and training, administrative support, supplies, and technology.

Some include questions on the adult perspective on school safety. It is uncommon for opportunity gap factors to be the subject, but there is no reason not to add them.

- Parent surveys, done well, can provide insights into both difficulties in student's home lives and subjects that parents want the school to address or support them. Response rates may be depressed by some of the same opportunity gaps affecting students, such as English language facility, lack of fixed address to receive mail, and lack of technology access to respond to online invitations. Creative solutions like making translations or interpreters available or using mobile apps for communication may help improve access and response data. Another source of information from parents is inviting them to the school. If you can get them there, you can ask them what they need. Getting them there can be a challenge in its own right. In communities where adults work jobs with unpredictable schedules, evening/night shifts, or hold multiple jobs, parent-teacher conferences or family back-to-school nights may not draw much participation. Suspicion of the motives of government agencies are not unusual, especially in communities with large immigrant populations, and may further depress parental responses. Additionally, a lack of trust between families and schools in some communities may prevent parents from wanting to attend school events or share information.
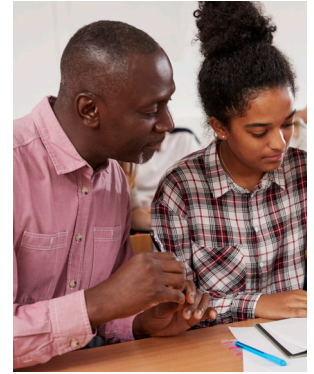
> "They [teachers] can do that through surveys; they can do that through talking to their last year teacher. They can look at their record on file in the office to see what information could be there. They can talk to the guidance counselor. And then I would suggest just having a conversation with each and every one of your students, calling them over to your desk and just asking some general questions and just trying to find out who they are as people."

The most accessible source of information, and yet quite possibly the most challenging to access, is the students themselves. They are right there: in the classroom, in the hallways, at a club meeting, being tutored, at practice, eating lunch, in detention. Nonetheless, it is difficult to make the time and space to have a real conversation, to connect. Privacy is needed for some topics: children are embarrassed to admit to "failings" in their lives, to socially undesirable conditions like food insecurity, bullying, uncertain housing, illiteracy, depression, or undocumented immigration status. These conversations are hard for everyone. And schools are hectic places, full of other people and on tight schedules. Nonetheless, the students are the richest, most valid source of information available. Knowing them thoroughly, academically and socially, is one of the most important investments we can make in understanding their obstacles. Making the time to build trust with students, ask what they are struggling with, to show that you genuinely care, and that it matters how they are doing and what they are feeling, may go farther than anything else we do in uncovering the gaps and obstacles that hinder them.

Look around: Investigate jobs in community, required skills

Especially at the middle and high school levels, there is a strong focus on "what's next?" Students are encouraged to think forward into their future, considering jobs, post-secondary training, and college plans. Despite this emphasis, there may be scarce explicit connections between skills being taught and skills needed for those future endeavors. This lack produces another opportunity gap. If the "why" isn't made clear, student investment in the struggle may be lacking.

Community surveys, although uncommon, may be revealing. Locating employers in the neighboring area and asking what skills they need in new employees, whether they hire local graduates, and particularly what skills they lack on exiting school, can offer insight and program development guidance for schools. It may open opportunities for students to job-shadow or intern as well. Explicit linking of classroom activities and experiences to actual training, apprenticeship, and employment opportunities shows students that, beyond the joy of learning and solving problems, there are rewards for those who overcome the gaps and master the skills.

Go deeper: Investigate expectations of adults, inputs of bias, mindsets

The source of opportunity gaps that may be the most uncomfortable to explore is ourselves. Teachers, staff, and administrators are human beings with human tendencies. They have conscious and unconscious biases and attitudes about students, particularly students who are different from them. These differences can be obvious—based on race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, family composition, education expectations, disability status—or they may be subtler. Teachers too can have fixed mindsets and that mindset creates barriers. Society at large has expectation about what "these kids" can and cannot do, can and cannot be. It is "the soft bigotry of low expectations" come to life in schools every day. Students from marginalized populations get written off, spoon-fed a weak and limited curriculum. The belief that students cannot rise to high expectations, learn critical thinking, and conquer difficult academic content, enacted in the classroom, is the very definition of an opportunity gap.

> "Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to have the conversation with the student first off, what is it that you're struggling [with]? Or self-check yourself, as a teacher, to be able to see... am I a barrier to our kids being able to succeed?"

Findings: Address the Gaps

There are many things that can and should be done to address the opportunity gap in schools. Our high performing teachers, their colleagues, and their school administrators had insights and suggestions to offer. All seek to reduce the effects of gaps and increase the success of the students in their care.

Relationships, relationships, relationships

Just as the three most important factors in the price of a home are "location, location, location!", the most important factors in mitigating the effects of opportunity gaps are "relationships, relationships, relationships!" This theme appeared in every interview and focus group. It is evident in the videos of the high performing teachers at work. Strong, caring relationships are the foundation of trust from which transformation and change are built.

The most essential relationships to be formed are those with students. Students come into a building, into a classroom, knowing they are wanted there, that the adults like them, that they are important. Students have to be seen not just in their academic setting, but as full human beings living in the context of their family and community. All students are unique, but at school they share common finish lines: an exam, finding the joy in reading or problem solving, graduation, success. The path may vary. Students may need different supports, different types of feedback, or different scaffolds to enter and conquer the work.

> "Once a relationship is established and there is trust … they're real honest about telling you what they need, what are their shortcomings, and how we can work together."

To get there, students all need to believe that they can grow and learn and change. And that belief must start with the adults. Teachers seek and find support in their relationships with each other and with their administrators. Joint planning, cross-content projects, and collaboration lead to highly successful student outcomes. Partnering with a mentor teacher to improve pedagogy and techniques is one of the most effective ways to advance professional skills development (Rockoff, 2008). Just as with students, teachers know they are not perfect. Instead of feeling censured or alone with their faults, teachers need ways to address them. Relationships allow for honest feedback, genuine insight in areas for improvement, and most importantly, progress towards mitigating gaps in instruction.

Teachers make professional progress with assistance and coaching from their leadership as well as each other. This is another relationship that must be built carefully, with trust and truth. Opportunity gaps cannot be closed by one hero teacher, despite what media may show us. The reality is that the whole system must work in concert. Teachers must be supported, and must believe they will be supported, in order to take risks, try something new, and go above and beyond to reach every student. The administrators who truly lead their school communities don't punish the failures that inevitably come with new approaches, but instead recognize the learning and growth that can come from it. They seize opportunities to share lessons learned and successes achieved. No piece of good news is too small to be celebrated. That attitude strengthens the relationships that undergird a thriving learning community.

Experiences Build Empathy

It seems obvious that students should learn to respect and value cultures that are not the same as theirs. In diverse communities, this can be facilitated by the presence of students and families from many backgrounds able to share. But in communities with more uniform ethnicity, our high performing teachers point out that apparent similarities don't necessarily mean equivalent experiences or lead to harmony in the classroom. These students may need more than others to be exposed to new and different ideas, things and attitudes that are unfamiliar.

Students need to grapple with and learn to push through the discomfort that comes with new perspectives, data, and facts that may contradict things they have believed their whole lives. This

"Our students here don't have the opportunity to see and interact with people that are not exactly like them."

is true regardless of their home culture or current environment. These experiences may come in any class: science, examining evidence and data, discovering trends that may not align with personal beliefs; foreign language, experiencing the culture of the lands that use that language as part of learning; English, reading diverse authors who describe experiences in profound and moving ways; history, learning about the unflattering reality of actions taken by our own and other nations; and even mathematics, where the roots and origins of techniques may be unexpected and evaluating reported statistics critically can be eye-opening.

Adults must learn empathy as well. In dealing with defiance and inappropriate student behavior, it is easy to react and punish. Our teachers emphasized the need to look for the root causes of the behavior first. Trying to understand sources beyond the immediate situation, perhaps stressors in the home or family, can help rescue a difficult situation and increase compassion. Giving students control of a situation, offering alternative approaches to conflict resolution, and constructing behavioral routines help get everyone back on track: these are approaches that lead to consensus rather than confrontation.

"If some of them act out, they need attention. I may say 'What is the problem? Why are you doing it? Could you have handled it in a different way?'"

Working from a place of caring and empathy may lead to opportunities to "flip the script" and make an obstacle into an opportunity. One of our teachers noticed a substantial portion of contributions to a food drive, a major community event, were marked as government food commodities. Students felt social pressure to give, even though their household supplies had come from food banks. Empathy led to transformation of the food drive into a participation and service opportunity. Students contributed their time and talents, not material objects. Students could participate equally without uncomfortable sacrifices for their family.

Increase Exposure

One opportunity gap frequently mentioned as affecting economically disadvantaged students is a lack of exposure and experience with "mainstream" culture. Students may have never left their home town, or even their own neighborhood. They have never visited a university campus or a Starbucks coffee shop, never been to a museum or seen a play, never flown on a plane, never seen a live farm animal or a subway train. They may not know anyone who has graduated from high school, attended college or post-secondary training, or gone to graduate school. This limits their ability to understand and use cultural references that appear in written texts, news and entertainment media constantly. Not only is the vocabulary unfamiliar—the very concepts are foreign. This opportunity gap can depress estimates of student proficiency and increase apparent achievement gaps.

"They don't go to museums. They don't have field trips. They don't know what jobs are available in the community. They've never even—we have a big university about two miles in the opposite direction. A lot of the kids have never been there."

This gap can be addressed with exposure, both direct and indirect. Awareness by the adults that this is an issue encourages explicit instruction in what the references are. Habits of academic study, effort, teamwork, and positive attitude must be taught to all students, not assumed. Our high performing schools offer direct experiential opportunities as well. The time-honored tradition of field trips is especially important when the result is personal experience with a novel activity, place, culture, or concept. Guest speakers, especially those with a personal connection such as alumni or local employers, broaden student perceptions. The more the unfamiliar is made familiar and comprehensible, the less fear and prejudice create obstacles to learning.

Consistency and Coherence

Another theme we heard from these high performing teachers and administrators is the need for coherence. A clear focus throughout the curriculum, well understood and backed by faculty who are trained and supported in delivering it, makes a huge difference to reducing opportunity gaps and leveling the field of academic endeavor. Everyone—students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents—must be doing the same things for the same reasons. Even better is a consistent curriculum adopted at the district level. This increases resources offered for training and support, as well as adding potential collaborators at the other district schools to problem-solve when challenges arise.

In addition to curriculum, there are philosophies that need focus, support, and consistent delivery. Schools have the opportunity to build mindsets in their students, and this is far more likely to be effective if the ideas are reinforced throughout the system. Many of the schools surveyed in this study have core values, academic approaches and habits of mind as guiding principles, posted throughout the school and in classrooms, taught as part of academic lessons as well as in stand-alone techniques. Students learn mindsets about their future from these experiences, as well as habits and skills that are valuable throughout their lives.

Build the Culture

Strong, positive school and classroom culture are a major aspect of addressing opportunity gaps. With students from marginalized groups, it is essential that these attitudes and skills be explicitly and consistently taught. Our high performing teachers emphasize culture before content instruction begins. They spend several weeks focused on behavior, routines, conflict resolution, getting to know each other, and expectations. While spending this amount of time may seem surprising in a limited school year, it is an investment well worth making.

A culture of trust takes time to build. It requires not only patient follow-through, it requires careful, focused evaluation of its efficacy. These teachers and leaders are constantly asking themselves: "Is this working? Do we want to continue? If not, what do we want to change or do next?" This critical selfexamination, done individually and in groups, allows for flexibility when the unexpected happens or a new approach fails with their specific students.

Every teacher we spoke with believes strongly in inculcating a growth mindset (see, for example, Dweck, 2015; Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). They bring a sustained focus to the ideas that struggle and failure are parts of learning. Those are essential components of how you gain a skill or get better at something. Intelligence or ability are not inborn traits that cannot be altered; instead they are flexible and increase as trials are faced and problems solved. Students learn to seek input from others and to use new strategies when their current approach fails. They steadily increase their toolbox with each new challenge conquered. The skills gained are not only academic, but habits of mind and approach that generalize to all aspects of their lives.

> "We talk a lot about … growth mindset and the idea of malleable intelligence. You can get smarter by working harder."

Professional Development: Of, By, and For Teachers

Ideas like growth mindset and school culture appear frequently in research about both opportunity and achievement gaps Clearly, they are important. But how do they move from abstract ideas in papers to real actions and instructional moves that reduce opportunity gaps? Professional development (PD) is often the answer. PD is a part of every teacher's life, often required to maintain professional licensure. But the kind of PD matters, as does who delivers it (Calvert, 2016; Gates Foundation, 2014).

> "Our professional development is geared to the teachers' needs and geared to the teachers' successes … Because their peers are going to accept it a lot easier when it's coming from their peers."

PD is more effective if the topics are personalized. Just as with students, teachers want learning that focuses on their personal interests and experiences when choosing areas of improvement. These focal areas should come from the teacher's and the administrator's viewpoints, examining both for areas of overlap and agreement. Both bring essential knowledge to the table. The teacher knows her own experiences day-to-day in the classroom. Administrators, coaches, and mentors don't observe teachers all day in every class, so there are inevitably gaps in their knowledge of the individual's instructional practice. But external observers have the advantage of a more objective viewpoint. An experimental lesson or novel approach can feel precarious to the teacher even as it succeeds with the students. Observers may see patterns of unconscious behavior on the part of the teacher. If a behavior is seen in the limited sample of classes observed, it may indicate something occurring consistently. Together the viewpoints create a richer and more complete landscape of instruction, with its imperfections and strengths. And that view will suggest places for focus and effort.

External observers have another advantage: scale. They generally observe many teachers in the same school. This allows them to see patterns in the strengths and focal areas across the faculty, across departments and across grade levels. The range of observations uncovers consistent behaviors of concern as well as teachers with extraordinary talent in those same areas. All of this infor-

mation goes into optimal decisions about professional learning: who attends, what content or skills are covered with what techniques, and who provides it (Margolis, 2008).

In the schools where our high-performing teachers work, teachers with particular strengths and strategies provide the PD. Having the expert in the house supports a model where PD can be provided, not in one-day, one-shot workshops, but in small chunks with a lot of follow-up and support. Continuous support of implementation is facilitated by having the expert just up the hall, able to check in on how the newly learned approaches work in different contexts and classrooms.

Change the Questions

An aspect of opportunity gaps frequently mentioned is the "dumbing down" of curriculum and expectations. Reducing rigor exacerbates, not mitigates, opportunity gaps. The opposite approach is needed. Students are held to high expectations with no excuses, while they are given the resources and supports they need to achieve those standards. Adults will go above and beyond, outside the classroom and outside the school as needed, to assist student learning and remove obstacles.

One tool that has helped teachers hold high standards of rigor is re-thinking discussion and questioning in the classroom. Webb's Depth of Knowledge (Webb, 1997) is a popular framework for evaluating the cognitive demand of questions, tasks, and assignments. Webb's DOK focuses on how deeply students understand and are aware of what they are learning. It asks students to provide and explain their answers, outcomes, results, and solutions. It requires that students transfer and use what they have learned in different academic and real-world contexts at the higher levels of complexity. Students need learning cycles comprising projects, labs, and activities, in order to grapple with information and internalize it, switching from the more traditional cycle of notes, review, test, move on.

Our high-performing teachers who have implemented cognitively challenging activities in their classrooms noted an interesting phenomenon: rigorous activities that are created or designed by the students themselves often don't "feel" rigorous to the students. Instead, they feel fun, interesting, and engaging. And they note a limitation: depth and breadth of coverage hold a tension between them. It may not be possible to cover the full breadth of a curriculum at rigorous depths of knowledge. In these cases, they opt for depth over breadth. There is tremendous pressure to focus on tests and scores in every school, but the emphasis must remain on higher-value skills. And it is important to remember that academic effort may not always be the first area where a student shows improvement. Shifts in attitude and independence can be the first changes seen as a new mindset takes hold, with schoolwork and academic achievement following.

> "We need to present more opportunities, but we don't lessen the expectations."

Step Back

When students participate in hands-on activities, it can make academic material more relevant. It supports critical thinking and creativity at deeper levels of knowledge, as well as team building and perseverance. Students improve valuable communication skills when they report, explain, and defend their results from critiques by their peers. In these activities, students take control of their own learning and find opportunities for themselves; the experiences feel authentic when they come from students rather than directed by the teacher. There are very few teachers who do not agree with the premises of project and activity learning or the value of active student exploration of content.

> "When you give students an opportunity to be the authors of their education rather than the receivers of their education, you empower them."

However, this approach to teaching and learning comes with a requirement: the teacher must be prepared to surrender control. This may be an uncomfortable exchange for teachers. Research going back decades (e.g., Flanders, 1961), shows a pattern of teachers dominating the spoken time in a classroom. More effective teaching, however, is characterized by less dominance by the teacher, more speaking by students. When teachers do speak, some types of talk are more effective, such as less lecture, more questions, and added support for student ideas (Song, 2017). Students can and must be expected to do more than record and remember—and teachers have to allow them to do so.

The teachers in this study all said stepping back like this is difficult. Learning to facilitate rather than instruct runs counter to both their own experience as students and a great deal of professional training. It is a risk to let students lead discussion, control the pace of the class, determine assignments, write their own questions, and tackle difficult, complex content. Many of our teachers found that they grew into this changed role over time, gaining the confidence to step aside and let their students—even the youngest ones—lead the way.

Academic Identity and Future Self

> "They can't see life beyond where they are right now."

The final major theme in addressing opportunity gaps resounded across all schools, all grade levels, all content areas, and all the teachers in the study. Students, particularly disadvantaged students facing opportunity gaps, need guidance to develop an academic identity and sense of belonging. There is a phenomenon in psychology called "impostor syndrome" (Clance & Imes, 1978), in which people doubt their accomplishments and experience fear of being exposed as a fraud. It frequently occurs in high achievers, who feel they do not deserve success and do not belong in the roles they occupy.

It is well-documented in research and practice that marginalized and under-resourced students experience this feeling in school as well as when looking towards their future. They do not see themselves as "doers" of academics. They lack role models to see themselves in careers or roles

different from those in their immediate sphere. They lack a vision of themselves in their future and the true scope of what is possible. They simply do not believe they belong in the ranks of high school graduates; of trainees for a profession or trade; of college students; of scientists, mathematicians, programmers, artists, writers, teachers, or any profession.

To address this, the schools we visited put a strong focus forward on the future. Students are oriented towards the idea of post-secondary training or education in many ways, small and large: college weeks, where they wear apparel from a school they are interested in; field trips to employers and universities; guest speakers who hold a variety of positions, and who connect their work to skills being learned; and searching job boards for roles that require the content and skills they are engaged with now. These things act to center attention on what is possible, the "can" beyond the immediate neighborhood and the immediate assignment.

Teachers are reaching across the disconnect between what is and what can be; between how students perceive themselves and the potential the teacher can see in them. Because what students know and can do will last a while, but how they see themselves will last a lifetime.

Findings: Parent and Community Engagement

Parent and community engagement in the life of the school was mentioned as an area of growth and concern in nearly every school we visited. Even when engagement is high, schools, teachers, and leaders seek to do more. They do this with a sense of urgency, perceiving that schools are becoming the source for more and more services that other government agencies have provided in the past. These range across such things as supplying medical, dental, and vision services; offering English language classes to families; furnishing counseling and psychological services; and providing clothing and food. Opportunity gaps do not only affect students. They frequently have their strongest roots in their family, home, and community situations.

Find Connections

It is obviously easier to communicate and collaborate with parents who are physically present on campus. The schools with the highest levels of parent and family engagement actively seek to find ways to not only invite parents on site, but to encourage and induce them to come. Schools can and do function as centers of community events. Often, the facilities are used for sports, plays, concerts, science fairs, club meetings, award ceremonies, and art exhibits. Schools that are transparent, operating an open-door policy that allows parents to observe any class, let the community see what is happening and share the success of their students.

The most successful schools in this area are flexible in offering events at various times of day to accommodate parents who work shifts or nights. They seek out tools that allow them to communicate with parents, using the traditional printed newsletters and report cards; individual and blast phone calls; modern approaches like online posting of data, grades, and assignments; and apps that support instant messaging via cell phone.

Although less common, some schools in this study have implemented home visit programs by either the administrators, the faculty, or both. A successful home visit program clearly requires resources and time. In addition, sensitivity to the culture and social norms of the families is paramount. It may be important to include a translator or staff member fluent in the primary home language if it is not English. Despite the challenges, a home visit program improves the sense of the student as a whole person, with a context and concerns beyond the classroom. Home visits also can help to build trust between families and schools, particularly when the focus of the visit is on getting to know the student and the family in contrast to discussing academic or behavioral problems.

Offer Respect

A frequent complaint of parents and families is that their input and information about their student is unwelcome, received ungraciously or dismissed. Improving connections with families starts with understanding the value of such information, with seeing education as a collaboration between the school and the home. Consistent follow through on information given or promises made is key to maintaining open channels of communication and building trust.

> "All parents want good things for their kids. Not all parents know how to go about doing that."

Schools often only communicate with parents when there is a problem or bad news. It can be a shock to receive praise or positive feedback, and thus breaking that pattern is a key practice to improving the interactions. Parents need to hear about more than just tests, results, ranking, and scores. Parents send their children to school to be educated, yes, but for more than that. Hearing about student's social successes, gains in independence, acts of good judgment, kindness to others, and exhibition of a positive attitude, all address the students as a person and are a major part of what education should be about.

Help Them Shine

Parents will want to be involved in a school where they are seen, and shown, as exemplars. Providing roles where their experiences are valued will make the school a place they want to be. Engage family members to participate actively in student's education. Have them read a book in class. Ask immigrant parents to speak to classes learning about migration. Ask them to come in and share their culture, their religion, their food, their experiences. Make them guest speakers about their own education and their profession. Through as many routes as possible, illuminate the ways that family members are models that students can and should emulate and learn from.

Communities with large immigrant populations, especially those whose primary language is not English, deserve special consideration. Translation of documents, information, and communications must become a routine action. Making bilingual and native-language class materials easily accessible to students and parents supports family engagement in activities from which they might otherwise be excluded. Providing workshops, like a Parent University, lets families learn techniques to support students academically at home. If possible, pair or team up households of students with similar issues, so they can support and help each other as well.

Seek Support

Many teachers commented on the high levels of support they receive from their parents, the

school district, and community businesses and members. While it can be uncomfortable to ask, most communities strongly support their local schools and will do everything they can, acting on expressed needs with money, materials, and labor. In addition to those local resources, our high-performing teachers regularly seek financial support and grants from foundations, organizations, and government sources. This is a skill that can be learned and developed, so new aspirants may want to connect with experienced applicants, online or at a conference, to seek guidance and tips on accessible sources as well as approaches that have been successful. One teacher noted that it may be easier, at least initially, to gain funding for concrete things like books or technology equipment so that may be the ideal place to start.

Findings: Don'ts

This study offers extensive insights into things that teachers, schools, and leaders can and should do to address opportunity gaps. Within the process of discovering those themes and ideas came some things that may widen the gaps, rather than narrow them. As this is not the focus of this work, the topics below are described only briefly.

Passive Engagement

Every member of the staffs at schools in this study believes strongly in the power and necessity of family and community engagement in the life of the school. Students are more successful, more motivated, more positive about school, when their families support them, when they ask them questions, when everyone believes in the desirability of an education and the societal outcomes it can bring. Yet this topic was the one most frequently mentioned as a growth or need area in these schools. One theme that emerged from the discussion was the difference between passive and active engagement. When information or an opportunity is passively "available", "accessible" or "offered", it may or may not be successful in attracting families and communities.

> "...the culture and the relationships that we have here with our parents breed success for the kids, no matter what barrier it is."

Outreach is more effective when it is active. Sending text messages directly to family phones works better than posting information online. Calling individual parents is more effective than a blast, standardized phone message from the school. Going on visits to students' homes creates more contacts than holding a back-to-school night. Talking to local employers directly about their needs is more impactful than mailing out a survey or reviewing job board postings. Asking the community to support a specific outcome, like requesting support to build a garden or paint a classroom, brings in more volunteers than a laundry list of wants and needs. Passive outreach sometimes contains assumptions or is too vague to get people motivated to engage. Be specific!

Investing in technology but not training

Technology is generally not lacking in schools, even under-resourced ones. In terms of funding, schools find it relatively easy to make the argument for purchasing computers, printers, smart boards, and other technology to districts, schools boards, and external funders. The benefits seem—and are—obvious. Students need technology skills to navigate their futures, and technology changes extremely rapidly. Schools aren't always caught up with the latest and greatest equipment, but few indicated significant lacks in this area.

What many participants mentioned as an issue was what to do with all those devices. While some resources come with training, many don't. Some that do are one-shot, "drive-by" training courses with few opportunities to practice new skills. When training and support is offered, it often requires teachers to invest substantial time. Time is a precious resource in a classroom and something teachers do not often have to spare. Institutional support in terms of time and funding for ongoing, high-quality technology training is much more limited than support for purchases of machinery. Investing in training on what to do with the devices in the classroom—making sure that teachers are not just doing old things with a new piece of equipment but are taking full advantage of a resource with appropriate changes in their approach, methodology, pedagogy, and resources—is key to making technology truly as valuable as it is perceived to be.

Tests, ratings, and stigma

Schools' reputations, including national rankings and state and local report cards, are often based on tests. National tests, state tests, local tests, formative tests, summative tests, end-of-course tests, Advanced Placement tests, college entrance tests, and more. The list is long and growing. Poorly-ranked and rated schools face stigma that has numerous concrete effects. Teachers and administrators don't want to work there. Parents don't want to send their children to school there. Real estate prices in the neighborhood drop. School control may be taken over by an external agency.

> "…our principal got Elementary Principal of the Year, we were profiled by the U.S. Department of Ed as one of the five really high improving, high poverty schools, and we got [a] Race to the Top grant. In that same year, we got a D on the state report card"

But not all tests are created equal, nor are all deserving of the time spent preparing for and administering them. To be valuable, tests should provide actionable data to teachers and schools. Tests should be carefully aligned with the academic standards being taught, so that the system is coherent and consistent. And sometimes the best strategy for increasing scores or rankings—like focusing resources on students close to achieving a criterion at the expense of students much further behind academically—isn't what is best for the students overall. Thoughtful consideration should be given to which tests are worth spending time, money, and resources on. Decisions about testing are often made by elected officials at the state or district level, so teachers and schools can advocate for their views through testimony at public meetings and exerting their influence as voters and taxpayers.

Short-term versus long-term focus

There is a great deal of pressure on schools to demonstrate progress and achievement on the part of students. Teachers are routinely judged by the results of large-scale standardized tests, even those not designed or validated for that purpose. Although assessments can and do provide useful data, they are always an incomplete picture of the life of a school. Effort is focused on making gains that are visible in immediate, short-term metrics. But schools are not businesses and students are not products to be manufactured and machined into tight tolerances.

It is unusual to see a large-scale assessment that requires complex problem-solving or teamwork, yet those life skills are the ones employers and communities most value. Teachers who instill those skills often are not rewarded by the current system. Finding ways to incorporate these outcomes, especially in schools where opportunity gaps have been overcome to provide them, would support long-term planning and a different view of educational success.

Summary and Conclusions

Opportunity gaps have plagued American education for decades. The gaps are widening, not shrinking, as economic inequality increases in U.S. society. This study draws together themes and actions taken by schools and teachers who are outliers on that trajectory: those who manage to reduce the effects of opportunity gaps in education, supporting their students to success and achievement beyond the expected. No single heroic teacher can eliminate these effects, but schools and districts, working together as a coherent system, can soften the blows and help students reach their full potential as students, as graduates, and as citizens.

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Appendix A: Sample

Schools in the study sample are varied in their location, from the south, west, and Midwest census regions. They are located in rural and urban environments, and range in size from about 200 to more than 2000 students. The rural schools have fewer students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, although this may be partly because they are both high schools where social stigma reduces the number of qualifying students who apply (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). All of the urban schools have more than 50% of their students who qualify. None of the sampled schools are the northeast, but come from all other regions of the country.

Table A-1: Summary of Characteristics of Participant Teachers

	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Subject	Grade Level	Years Teaching	Years Teaching at the School
School 1	F	Black	Elementary (Multiple)	Elementary	19 (Teaching) & 7 (Administrator)	8; 1 (T) & 7 (A)
School 2	M	White	ELA & Math	Elementary	9	11
School 3	F	Black	Science, ELA, & Social Studies	Elementary	19	19
School 4	M	White	Math	Middle School	13	7
School 5	M	White	ELA	High School	11	11
School 6	M	White	STEM	High School	18	18
School 7	F	White	Science	High School	35	35
School 8	F	Latina	Foreign Language, Education	High School	26	18

Table A-2: Summary of Characteristics of Sampled Schools

	Urbanicity	Grades	Demographics	FRPL	Approximate Size	Region
School 1	Urban	PK–6	80% Hispanic	70%	900	South
School 2	Urban	K–5	80% English Language Learners, mostly Hispanic	99%	550	South
School 3	Urban	K–8	110 GT, 96% African-American	60–65%	500	South
School 4	Urban	PK–8	60% African-American, 25% White, 10% Hispanic	51%	500	South
School 5	Urban	6–12	99% African-American	65%	350	South
School 6	Urban	9–12	88% Hispanic; 5% Asian-American; 3% African-American	84%	2,300	West
School 7	Rural	9–12	92% White; 2% each of African-American, Hispanic, Native American	13%	200	Midwest
School 8	Rural	9–12	90% White; 5% Hispanic	45%	500	Midwest

Although our focus was the STOY, we wanted a broader context for his or her work. Our sample included not only the identified STOYs, but the administrator(s) and other educators at the school. In total, we interviewed and observed 8 STOYs and their classrooms; conducted walk-throughs of each of the 8 school buildings, including observing other educators' classrooms; held 9 focus groups with 67 total participants at the schools; and interviewed 8 administrators at each of the sites.

The participants in the focus groups completed an Information About Me form. Their years of experience teaching are summarized in Figure A-1.
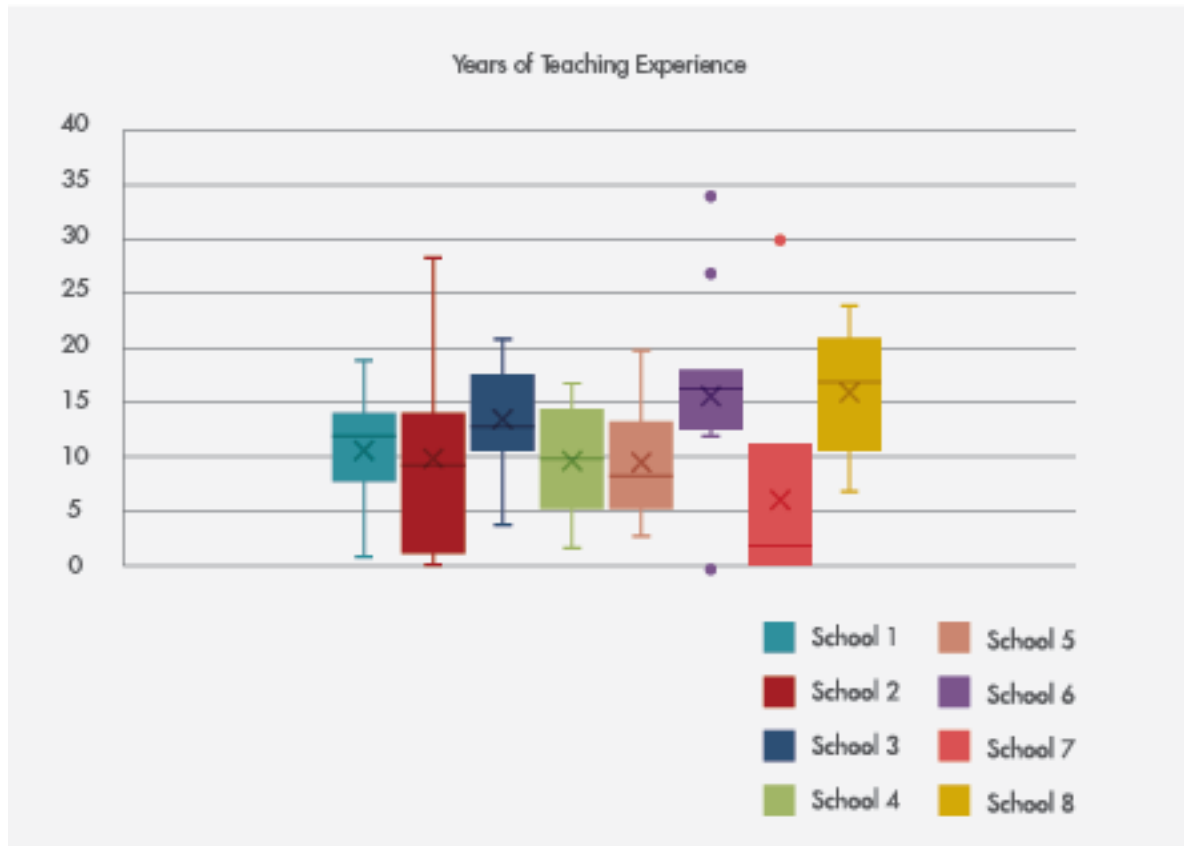

Figure 1. Percent agreement with statement: "The range of content represented on the test is grade-level appropriate."

Videography. A team of videographers experienced in classroom and school-wide videography roamed the school grounds at the direction of the STOY and administrators at the school and recorded the school and classroom environments as well as interviews with the STOY. The purpose was to capture "rich" information and details that are difficult to document using the other measures in this study, to serve as a foundation for a toolkit to be offered to other educators from the results of this study.

Appendix B: Forms and Interview Protocols

In this study, positive and negative evidence on practices related to addressing opportunity gaps was collected via multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observations) in seven broad categories, along with an "other" category for additional observations. The categories were based on a literature review highlighting key components related to opportunity gaps, including:

- Classroom and school conditions conducive to learning (e.g., safety, cleanliness, condition of facilities)
- Adequacy and appropriateness of curricular and instructional resources (e.g., cultural relevance, relevance to the needs and interests of the students)
- Clear and equitably applied standards of behavior
- Active participation and engagement of students in instruction and learning
- Attention to individual needs and interests of students
- Appropriate technology available and used in the classroom or school
- Parental and community involvement in the school and school activities
- Other observations that pertain to closing opportunity gaps
- Additional questions for clarification by the administrator or STOY

The following are the protocols used for the various forms and sources of data collection.

STOY Web Conferencing Interview Protocol

Date: _____   School: _____

Researcher: _____   STOY: _____

****

Appendix B: Forms and Interview Protocols

☐   Goal for today's interview: NNSTOY has suggested we interview you as a STOY working in a school that serves a community whose students are typically left behind when it comes to college & career opportunities. Because you are a model educator, we are interviewing you to get your input on how you and your school address opportunity gaps with your students. Our questions will focus on what you do in and with your classroom, and what your entire school does to address opportunity gaps.

☐   Briefly define & describe Opportunity Gap – For this study, we are defining "Opportunity Gaps" as "ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students." It is important to note that opportunity gaps are NOT the same as achievement gaps: opportunity gaps can lead to achievement gaps, but they can lead to many more undesired outcomes as well.

☐   Norms & Confidentiality: We are recording this interview in order to transcribe your responses for analysis in our research study. Your responses are confidential and will be treated anonymously in our research report, where we will NOT provide any identifying information.

☐   Please complete "About Me" form -- data will only be used in aggregate to characterize the sample of teachers who participated in the study.

☐   Please sign consent form giving us permission to audio-record and to use what is said in the interview for our study, again, without using any means to identify who said it.

****

Interview Question

1. Briefly describe your school, community, and context of your teaching.

2. You have been identified as a teacher/teacher leader who has been successful in both identifying and overcoming opportunity gaps, as we've defined them in this study. In your current classroom, what have you identified as opportunity gaps for your students?

3. What process(es) did you use to identify those gaps? Did you have help in identifying them? If yes, what kind of help and from whom?

4. What obstacles have you encountered as you've worked with your students to reduce opportunity gaps? What are some of the most successful strategies you have used to overcome those obstacles?

5. To what extent do teachers and students have adequate access to technology (i.e., hardware, software and internet connectivity) at your school, to support learning in the classroom? The school? In students' homes? What alternatives are available for students who lack appropriate technological resources at home?

6. Have you received any specific training related to opportunity gaps for disadvantaged students? This can be pre- or in-service training, or training outside of your job as an educator. Please describe:

7. How have you engaged with your administration in addressing opportunity gaps for your students?

8. How have you collaborated with other teachers to identify and resolve opportunity gaps for the students in your classroom and school?

9. What strategies have you used to successfully engage parents to resolve opportunity gaps affecting their children?

10. Have you been able to engage with the larger community to address opportunity gaps? Have you done this on your own or as part of a collective effort?

11. Are your efforts aligned with school-wide policies or initiatives? If not, how did you address obstacles to your efforts?

12. What do you consider as indicators of success (including but not limited to academic achievement) in overcoming the opportunity gap in your classroom?

13. What advice do you have for teachers for successfully identifying and addressing opportunity gaps?

Principal Interview Protocol

Date: _____   School: _____

Researcher: _____   STOY: _____

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Introduction

☐ <u>Goal for today's interview</u>: NNSTOY has identified your school as one in which there are efforts being made to address disparities in opportunities for students in your school. We are interviewing you to get your input on how you and your school address opportunity gaps with your students. Our questions will focus on what you do as a school administrator to address opportunity gaps.

☐ <u>Briefly define & describe Opportunity Gap</u> – For this study, we are defining "Opportunity Gaps" as "ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students." It is important to acknowledge that opportunity gaps are NOT the same as achievement gaps: opportunity gaps can lead to achievement gaps, but they can lead to many more undesired outcomes as well.

☐ <u>Norms & Confidentiality</u>: We are recording this interview in order to transcribe your responses for analysis in our research study. Your responses are confidential and will be treated anonymously in our research report, where we will NOT provide any identifying information.

☐ Please sign consent form giving us permission to audio-record and to use what is said in the interview for our study, again, without using any means to identify who said it.

****

Interview Questions

1. Briefly describe your school and community--who do you serve? How long have you been an educator in this community? (This is essentially a warm-up question so don't spend too much time on this).

2. Given how we've defined opportunity gaps for this study, what kinds of opportunity gaps have you seen in your school? These may be reflected in resources (e.g., instructional materials, enrichment activities, access to high quality educators), time (e.g., instructional time), student outcomes (e.g., achievement gaps for disadvantaged students) and so on.

3. Do teachers and students have adequate access to technology (i.e., hardware, software and internet connectivity) to support learning in the classroom? The school? In students' homes? What alternatives are available for students who lack appropriate technological resources at home?

4. What are the challenges your school and faculty face in reducing the opportunity gaps you see for your students?

5. How successful has your school been in addressing opportunity gaps? How do you define success in this arena? What are the indicators that you've had success?

6. As a school leader, how have you worked to build awareness among the faculty to identify and address opportunity gaps? To what extent would you say that the opportunity gap for your students is a focal area in your school? (Not at all - Very much so, scale of 0 to 10; ask for a number). Please explain.

7. What kinds of roles do teacher leaders play in closing opportunity gaps for students at this school?

8. How have you engaged families in addressing opportunity gaps faced by their children? What about working families?

9. Please describe any strategies you've used to engage the larger community to address opportunity gaps for your students?

10. Have you received training to identify and address opportunity gaps? Your teachers? What kinds of resources, including training, would be more helpful to you and your teachers to be more effective in addressing opportunity gaps?

11. Research indicates that disadvantaged and minority students are often placed with teachers who are less qualified (e.g., more novice, less training in specific subject areas and pedagogy). Are there efforts school- or district-wide to monitor and ensure equity in the placement of students with teachers? Please describe.

12. What efforts are made to recruit and retain a diverse teaching force that reflects the demographics of the school and district? How successful have these efforts been?

13. Students from some minority groups and disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have equal access to challenging coursework and instruction, such as honors or AP classes (Secondary), career and tech training, or gifted/enrichment classes (Elementary). What efforts are being made school-wide to provide access to a challenging curriculum for all students?

14. What does your school and district do to monitor disparities in the identification of special education for minority/disadvantaged students?

15. To what extent do students have access to courses outside the "core," e.g., music, arts, robotics, etc.?

16. What else would you like to tell us that would help us understand how you work to support students with opportunity gaps?

Classroom Observation Protocol

Classroom/school observation "Walk-through" protocol

Directions: Individuals conducting site visits should use this document to record general impressions as they are walking throughout the school and in teachers' classrooms. These data will not be used for evaluation purposes, rather to augment data collected through focus group interviews, school or district policy documents, and other sources.

Category	Positive Evidence	Negative Evidence
Classroom and school conditions and environment conducive to learning (e.g., safety, cleanliness, condition of school facilities)		
Adequacy and appropriateness of curricular and instructional resources (e.g., relevance to the needs and interests of students)		
Clear and equitably applied standards of behavior		
Category	**Positive Evidence**	**Negative Evidence**
Active participation & engagement of students in instruction and learning		
Attention to individual needs and interests of students		
Category	**Positive Evidence**	**Negative Evidence**
Appropriate technology available and used in the classroom and school		
Parental and community involvement in schools/school activities		
Other observations		

School Data and Documentation Request

- ☐ Existing school accountability reports broken out by students' race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (Free & Reduced Lunch or FRL)

- ☐ Data on student discipline (e.g., suspensions), broken out by students' race/ethnicity and FRL, if possible

- ☐ Data on student promotion to next grade level, broken out by students' race/ethnicity & FRL, if possible

- ☐ % enrollment in AP or enrichment courses; % of those taking AP courses who take the AP exams, broken down by race/ethnicity & FRL, if possible

- ☐ Special education enrollment: % of students with IEPs (broken down by race/ethnicity & FRL, if possible)

- ☐ For high schools: % dropout, % obtaining standard diploma, graduation rates (broken down by race/ethnicity & FRL, if possible)

- ☐ % taking ACT or SAT; avg. ACT and/or SAT scores (by subgroup if possible)

- ☐ School climate survey data (if available)

- ☐ Curriculum: availability/type of AP courses, enrichment courses, courses outside of math, science & ELA (e.g., arts, PE -- the "extras")

- ☐ Documentation of enrichment opportunities outside of the school day (e.g., after-school programs, summer programs, etc.)

- ☐ District strategic plan if pertinent to addressing the reduction of opportunity gaps