

Findings and Insights From Hewlett's Education Roundtable

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FROM: Hattaway Communications
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RE: Findings and Insights From Hewlett's Education Roundtable

This memo summarizes our findings and insights from the roundtable of civil rights and advocate leaders on equity in K-12 education. These include leaders' personal experiences and views on the purpose of K-12 education, as well as their take on the role of parents and communities in defining academic success, barriers to achieving equity, and what types of support they would like from philanthropists.

The findings and insights are based on the discussion between a moderator and 19 participants from the following organizations:

Alliance for Quality Education	NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund
American Civil Liberties Union	National Center for Learning Disabilities
Civil Rights Project at UCLA	National Equity Project
Education Trust	National Indian Education Association
GLSEN	National Urban League
Inclusive Design Research Centre, OCAD University	Rural School & Community Trust
Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights	Rutgers Graduate School of Education
Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and School Transformation at NYU	Schott Foundation
Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund	Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
	UnidosUS

Findings and Insights

The search for a sense of belonging in the K-12 education system was the formative experience for most of the participants, not the pursuit of academic success.

Participants shared personal K-12 education stories and experiences that helped shape them as professionals in their respective fields. Participants, especially people of color, discussed the feeling that the public school system didn't serve them: Teachers didn't look like them, or they were held back because of stereotypes. Some participants found their community's stories erased from their learning altogether.

*"I had **one teacher of color in 12 years**, black man in 6th grade ... [He] took me aside and was the first person to convince this young insecure boy that he was worthy and could learn and do better."*

*"In 5th grade, this kid Guillermo got suspended, and I was shocked that suspension was actually a thing, and moreover that **all the black and Latinx children were getting suspended**. I kind of had a sense that I could do things and it was fine, but if Guillermo did it, it wasn't okay."*

*"Every year the 4th graders do an incredible activity, take several days off to celebrate the Oklahoma Land Rush ... I told my dad about it and he asked **'Where were the Indians?'** ... I learned about my history."*

*"**Ethnicity becomes whitewashed from your own mind** in some ways being the only person of color in your school."*

While some questioned whether public education actually provides opportunities for students, others participants shared that, for them, K-12 education was a way to get ahead in life. Positive experiences of belonging came from teachers and educators who made a conscious effort to reach out to students and guide them, preparing them for what came next.

*"**Education was a ticket out of my house**, if I did really well at school I could get out of my house."*

*"I was bussed to school from South Central [Los Angeles] to the San Fernando Valley ... Even though I was othered in those spaces, I benefited from a magnet program. **I learned what I was capable of.**"*

Almost no one shared stories about academic success—it was all about how school and teachers made them feel and the things they learned that would help them throughout their lives. The people who had the power to shape a personal educational experience had a bigger impact on learning than any particular academic subject.

To prepare students to be successful, K-12 education should empower them to define their own identities and have control over their own lives.

When asked about the purpose of K-12 education, participants discussed students having the necessary tools and skills to succeed in life, going beyond “processing information.” They mentioned the importance of accessing knowledge, applying critical thinking skills, and other non-academic skill sets. Since much of their learning will take place outside of schools, students need to be prepared to apply the skills they learn in schools to the outside world.

*“We have to get to a place where we’re **teaching young people to access knowledge, apply knowledge, and the critical thinking skills to create new knowledge.** Currently we’re just asking students to process information. We’re not allowing students to take advantage of the cultural knowledge, critically think about what’s around them.”*

*“The things we want for our kids is both, we don’t want to **choose between schools focused on individual skills and those focused on content or academic mastery.**”*

*“We need more young people to **critically think about what’s around them.**”*

*“**Teach them how to process content.** There’s a difference between telling young person to write a paper about [former President] Reagan and one about your personal hero—one doesn’t allow the student to take advantage of the knowledge around them.”*

Along with those skills, participants said K-12 education needs to teach students how to make decisions by themselves, saying this is currently “far overlooked.” Instead of letting others define their identity and their life’s story, students with these skills can take control of their life and make their own decisions.

*“I really feel **the role of public education is to make you feel like you are in control of the story of your life.** I’m driving the narrative of my life and not anybody else.”*

*“Of course academic success is important, but the idea of **agency is also so important.**”*

*“**Deeper knowledge doesn’t happen in our schools, it happens in our communities.**”*

For students to feel that sense of ownership and control, many stressed the need to provide them with the necessary tools and resources.

*“We need to provide enough varied and rich opportunities to get to that place where they’ll have the **tools to get to the level they want to.**”*

*“Kids need the **tools to engage successfully and inclusively** in a diverse and democratic society.”*

This insight suggests that, when communicating about deeper learning, advocates should use language describing how the competencies provide students with tools to exercise agency in their own lives.

Education and school systems are two separate things; in order to improve education, we need to take factors outside of schools into consideration.

A big point of discussion was knowing the difference between “education” and a “school system.” Participants agreed that each provides different things. School systems are responsible for distributing resources, but don’t always meet the needs of the community. Education isn’t confined to the school system and is “more personal” and broad. Because so much outside of school affects learning and education—including things like health care, housing, transportation and infrastructure—a sole focus on improving classrooms won’t drive equity, they said.

“There’s been an intentional conflating of what a school and an education can do. Education can speak to ideals. School systems don’t do that; they’re not supposed to do that. Their job is to make decisions, sort resources.”

“A school system is the product of what a culture values at a moment in time.”

“If you say that only schools are how students get educated, then you are set up for failure.”

“Access to affordable housing, wages—those are all education issues. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.”

Some also brought up the point that teachers cannot possibly do everything demanded of them without better support and training.

“An educator can’t be everything—nurse, social worker, gunsmith, content master ...”

“It would be so helpful to have support for teacher colleges. To build a pipeline of teachers who are diverse, collaborative, and do project-based work.”

One participant suggested a much more integrated system for K-12 education, referring to it as a “hub” being served by different industries in communities. Another expanded on this idea and said that “schools don’t have communities, communities have schools.”

“The ‘aha moment’ I had was that K-12 can serve as a hub in communities, and health and transportation serve the schools—not the other way around.”

The “one shot” mentality is one of the biggest barriers for students inside the classroom and for the educational system overall.

When asked to identify barriers inside the classroom that keep students from graduating high school, participants said the education system doesn't provide space for students to fail and learn, pointing to a “demonization of failure and mistakes” that prevents progress. Participants argued that not much can change if students, and the schools they attend, don't have the space or opportunity to make mistakes and improve.

*“[There's a] demonization of failure and mistakes, making [the mistakes] so determinative. Learning needs to be lifelong, not just K-12. **Preparing students for lifelong learning, mistakes and failures are some of the best lessons** ... [There's a mentality of] 'this is your single shot to get to college and if you stumble anywhere you've lost your shot.'”*

This “one shot” mentality also applies to the broader system, including funders, who don't want to spend more money on education when efforts don't initially bring the widespread results they hope for. These funders are often reluctant to embrace complicated results and put in the work to find effective solutions. Moreover, resources for schools are not being allocated “according to need.” This causes problems for students down the line, such as arriving at college and not knowing how to properly use the internet to do research because they didn't have access to computers back in school.

*“That mindset of 'We're already spending a lot of money on education and we're not getting anywhere.' But that's just completely wrong, **we should be throwing so much more money at this.**”*

*“I've got kids that are in facilities that are so unsafe, they can't walk into an environment where they can be taught. **We need to be thinking a lot about infrastructure.** Kids that don't have computers don't know how to do research when they get into college.”*

Participants agreed on the importance of letting students know that mistakes are part of the learning process and that they can improve with practice. Advocates should emphasize this point when communicating about building an academic mindset.

Without spaces for communities and parents to have a voice in defining what success looks like for them, schools won't be able to produce the right learning outcomes for their students.

Participants said that in the current system, parents are “pushed off to the side” instead of voicing their opinions on what they want their children’s education to look like. Better integrating parents into the conversation means creating more spaces where they can participate, and providing them with more information.

“They want more power, want a voice. They don’t want to be treated as someone who’s rejected, disrespected.”

“In order for people to change the purpose of education, they need spaces to think about what they want the purpose to be.”

“They want schools to see the kids the way they see their kids. That they’re human beings, not a test score, or a failing statistic.”

Participants also stressed the fact that different communities think differently when it comes to defining success for their students. There’s no one definition of academic success.

“Many in the Latinx community define academic success as a student feeling a sense of permanent belonging in the community.”

“Southeast Asian parents want their students not to experience the same poverty they did.”

“It’s one basic system. Our government, our economic system are designed to favor some people and not others. All the problems we see in our public schools are no different than what we see in our neighborhoods. It’s not a coincidence that our schools that aren’t doing well are in these neighborhoods where there’s no good jobs and housing.”

Data should inform solutions to improve the K-12 system, and people using the data should be mindful that larger numbers don't necessarily equal success for those not in the majority.

Participants who work in research warned that relying on “dominant patterns” in data would not be the path to equity. Instead, they advised people to have conversations to rethink the metrics that show success. People who are the outliers—who aren't part of the “homogenous” group that benefits from solutions that work for the majority—will continue to be left out if research isn't mindful about measuring their success. Because some of these outliers represent a small percentage of the system, participants stressed that representative research can only exist if people, and philanthropists in particular, seek it out and prioritize it.

*“Data pushes against diversity; it **highlights the dominant patterns and removes the outliers.** So if you are anomalous, not part of a large data set, then they're biased against you.”*

*“We need to rethink what we mean by evidence and metrics, and how to **ensure we're not biasing against the outliers.**”*

Participants stressed the importance of finding solutions that work—backed by new indicators beyond test scores and grades—and being aware of how the data is being collected in the first place. Investing in new data-collection methods and adopting new indicators of success will also provide necessary information to indicate gains in educational attainment and measure a community's movement toward equity.

*“We need new indicators in data. How will we know that we got it? I can't answer that, but I know it's not in anyone's ESSA plan. We're limited in the way we frame solutions—we're **limited in the frame of data we view as legitimate.**”*

*“This question of research is really important to me, this new framing of data, **we need new indicators of data.**”*

The diversity of needs and children means that there is no “silver bullet” for fixing the entire education system. Focus instead on finding what works for different communities.

Seeing successful solutions in one community can create a temptation to scale it for implementation everywhere. Complete replication of these programs, participants said, won't work. Citing the Harlem Children's Zone as an example, they described how the density of the Harlem community couldn't be replicated to produce the same results. The exact same solution wouldn't work, for instance, in a rural community. Trying to adapt a successful model everywhere fails to consider environmental factors or local communities' needs.

“A lot of the times we’re looking at the solutions in fish tanks—and asking why we can’t do that in the river. But the river is toxic, the supports are not there. And we try to create more fish tanks with charter schools, but we have to ultimately say education happens in community and it takes a healthy living environment to get the outcomes we desire.”

“We still have a really steep hill to climb, there’s an embedded, ‘if it works in Philadelphia and Chicago and New York City, it’s going to work in the central part of Pennsylvania.’ The promise neighborhoods is a great example. But that’s not going to work in Appalachia.”

“If we focus on scaling outcomes instead of models—it might be hundreds of ideas that get us to the place where larger numbers of young people are successful. We won’t do it by identifying two things that we can scale.”

Participants emphasized that solutions need to be tailored to meet the specific needs of each community. They also encouraged those in philanthropy to think beyond just black or Hispanic communities when the topic of different or diversity is brought up.

*“We need interrelationships between sectors to come up with real reform that’s informed and evidence-based and **meets the needs of communities.**”*

*“Be ready to adapt your models so it meets the community or your teacher’s needs. And be open to be making those changes. Often times if you’re doing racial work, **it’s not just black or Hispanic, so many folks are being left out of the table.**”*

Philanthropic organizations need to listen to the voices of different communities and perspectives from the beginning and throughout the development of solutions, and not only invite them to the “kiddie table.”

When asked what philanthropy can do better, participants acknowledged that educators and schools “can’t do it on their own” and need help, even if it’s sometimes hard to collaborate with them. One participant called schools “the least collaborative institutions” they’d ever dealt with.

However, some brought up the idea that foundations and other philanthropic organizations don’t always consider the people closest to the problems. Participants stressed that a lot of the time the “right people have been left out” while foundations seek to “fix everything.” Some said foundations, and other philanthropic actors, tend to leave schools and communities out of technical conversations, such as policy or curriculum-change talks, because funders assume that they lack relevant expertise.

“There’s the kiddie table and the technical table. We’ll hear you at the kid’s table, then do the complicated stuff over here and bring you something back.”

“When we want to talk about ‘complicated’ we want to get different people and then we’ll give you the stuff you need.”

“There’s lots of times where foundations give money to the wrong place.”

Participants also brought up the need for foundations to diversify their grantees and the type of organizations they collaborate with. Foundations, they said, usually work with academics or policy wonks simply because it’s what they’re used to. Foundations and other philanthropic actors should be more open to take risks and be “messier.”

“We’ll just be inheriting these ideas because it’s the same people talking about the same things in the same way.”

“[We need to] have philanthropy appreciate messiness, that things will not come out clean.”



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