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¹ UnitedHealthcare Retiree Services historical quoting data.
² UnitedHealthcare HouseCalls Member Survey data, January 2016-December 2017.
³ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, 2019 Part C & D Medicare Star Ratings Data for UnitedHealthcare H2001 contract, October 10, 2018. Medicare evaluates plans based on a 5-star rating system. Star Ratings are calculated each year and may change from one year to the next.

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From the Editor

And the winner is

WHEN STUDENTS worry about where they will sleep at night, they can’t concentrate on that math lesson. When students don’t have access to health care, an untreated illness could mean days out of the classroom. When students aren't successful in traditional high schools, they are at risk of failing or dropping out.

The school leaders recognized by the 2020 Magna Awards program are doing whatever is possible to remove barriers to education for their vulnerable and underserved students. While they receive the awards, we know the real winners are the students and families in these communities.

The Magna Awards have been recognizing school board and school district excellence for more than 20 years. This is the third year that the Magna Awards have focused on equity and the efforts of districts to increase opportunities and achievement for children of color, children with disabilities, children from impoverished families, children with mental health issues, and children who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning.

The determination to expand what is possible to serve their children is the hallmark of Magna Award winners. This year, the Grand Prize winners have demonstrated this quality many times over.

In Moreno Valley, California, the district leaders stepped in to help their homeless and struggling families with necessities: food, clothes, a laundry facility, and showers. The lack of these items was keeping students from homeless families from coming to school. Children and families in isolated areas in Wyoming now have a medical clinic and access to quality child care in Fremont School District #6. A team of administrators and teachers in Missouri’s Liberty Public Schools turned the alternative school model upside-down, creating a space where at-risk students can thrive.

The adults in these districts knew they couldn’t make sustainable reform in a vacuum. They reached out to their communities for help, and they looked inward, too, with training and services.

Our three Grand Prize winners, and the 15 first-place winners, flipped the status quo in their districts and made their students winners, too. I hope that you will get ideas and inspiration from their stories.

As always, I welcome your comments and suggestions.

Until the next issue...
When it comes to choosing a group plan, the numbers are on your side.

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Willing to pay

PEOPLE BY nature tend to be bargain hunters. We search for discount coupons and rebates, compare prices, and can go to extraordinary lengths to pay as little as possible for what we want. We generally have an aversion to higher taxes, often expecting great public services without wanting to contribute more for them. Given all that, the results of the first National Educational Poll of Voter Priorities for Public Schools, commissioned by the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC) and released at NSBA’s Advocacy Institute in February, provided very pleasant news, indeed.

The poll of 1,000 likely voters tapped a rich vein of support for public schools, across all demographic groups. Those surveyed overwhelmingly favor higher funding levels for schools. Nearly three-quarters said that inadequate resources for public education is a problem. More than 60 percent of those surveyed said they would be less likely to vote for an elected official who supported taking funds away from public schools to give to private schools. This underscores the strong public opposition to tuition vouchers and similar schemes that would direct tax dollars to private schools. That the poll was released one day before President Trump delivered his State of the Union Address, which called again for the enactment of so-called “education freedom scholarships” (a form of vouchers), was a serendipitous reminder that such proposals run directly counter to what the public wants.

Some other important takeaways from the NSBAC poll:

• While views of charter schools were mixed, respondents were adamant that oversight of them should be placed with school boards.
• Teachers, local schools, and school boards are all viewed positively.
• More than eight of 10 voters say the lack of high-quality teachers is an important issue to address.
• Fully 92 percent of respondents say school safety is a high priority.
• More than three-quarters of voters want schools to teach real-world skills—a resounding endorsement of NSBA’s “LifeReady” initiative with the business community to ensure all students graduating high school are prepared for the workplace, whether they go to college or not.

It is important to note that the NSBAC poll was not an informal sampling of public opinion. It was conducted by two nationally known and highly respected research firms with extensive experience—one typically representing Republicans, the other usually retained by Democrats. They worked together in a bipartisan manner to survey likely 2020 voters, including an oversampling of African Americans, Latinx, parents of school-age children, and battleground state voters, with a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percent. In other words, it is a reliable measure of voters’ opinions. The detailed results can be viewed at www.nsbac.org.

When the public says it highly values something, is willing to pay more for it, wants it to continue to improve, and opposes efforts to divert funding from it, elected officials should take note. Public schools are the most important asset of any community. Funding for them is not an expense; it is an investment in children and in the future of our country.

Thomas J. Gentzel (tgentzel@nsba.org) is the executive director and CEO of NSBA. Follow Gentzel on Twitter @Tom_NSBA.
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President’s Perspective
ElizaBeth Branham

The power of just one for just one

THIS MORNING, somewhere in America, a small child woke up excited, ate breakfast, grabbed her bookbag, and ran to catch the bus. She greeted her school bus driver, “just one” of the many bus drivers who rise early each morning to take a bus full of children to their school.

When the bus arrived at school early this morning, the little girl and her friends on the bus were greeted by just one administrator and just one teacher who had morning duty. On the way to class, the little girl and her classmates were greeted by just one custodian, just one cafeteria manager, just one guidance counselor, just one school nurse, and just one teacher’s aide. Just one first-grade teacher waited patiently at the door of her classroom to greet her eager learners. And later that morning, because it was “Read Across America Day,” just one school board member arrived to read one of her favorite childhood books to the class. All of these are “just ones” who individually and together help make a difference for the children in our public schools.

For many years, public schools have been under attack—in our home states, in the media, and at a national level. But, proponents of public education know the true value of public schools and continue to band together. From teachers banding together to march on their state capitols and on the nation’s capitol, to the administrators’ associations supporting growth in public schools, to NSBA’s advocacy for full funding of IDEA, our voices that began as “just one” are together becoming a mighty roar.

But, we’re not alone in our support of public education. The public also recognizes the value of public education and its need for investment. A recent national poll commissioned by NSBAC found that, among likely voters, 64 percent think funding for public schools should be increased and—of those who believe funding should be increased—eight out of 10 would support an increase in funding even if it meant they would pay more in taxes. The poll also found that 73 percent of voters agree that public funds should NOT be taken away from our public schools to fund private, religious, and home school education.

Further, 64 percent of voters are much less likely to vote for an elected official who supports taking away funds from public schools to give them to private schools. As a long-time school board member and public school advocate, I’m delighted to hear that there is such a high level of public support for our public schools. And rightfully so.

So, when we go home from the marches on state capitals and our nation’s capital, we go from being part of a collective voice combined for a mighty roar in support of our public schools back to being just one teacher or just one administrator or just one school board member. But we must remember the difference we can make for that “just one” child who may be living in or close to poverty, has special needs, is being bullied, or is not getting the support needed and deserved. Each of us, just one of many, and also just one, must remember the difference we can make.

ElizaBeth Branham (ebranham@nsba.org), NSBA’s 2019-20 president, is a school board member of Lexington School District Two, in West Columbia, South Carolina.
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September 23 | Houston, TX
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NSBAC Poll: Bipartisan support for public schools

A MAJORITY OF LIKELY 2020 voters are “committed to and favorable toward local public schools and teachers in their community,” “committed to investing in public schools, teachers, ensuring safety and supporting the teaching of real-world skill,” and support increased funding for public schools even if it increases their taxes. Those are some of the top findings in the 2020 National School Boards Action Center’s (NSBAC) nationally representative survey of 1,000 likely voters as reported by Politico.com.

“Going into an election cycle, it’s imperative that we understand what is on voters’ minds with regards to the challenges facing public schools today,” said Frank Henderson, NSBAC president. “Voters made it clear that public school funding, teacher shortages, school safety, and the need to teach real-world skills are issues that they recognize as critical for elevating public schools, and they are willing to pay to achieve this important goal.”

As a cornerstone of our society, “we need to make enhancing public education and serving the 50 million public school students our No. 1 priority,” added NSBA Executive Director and CEO Thomas J. Gentzel.

Some boards support gun storage education

TO REDUCE FIREARMS-RELATED DANGERS, including school shootings, school boards in Los Angeles, Denver, and a number of other communities are passing policies that require their districts to send home information to parents about the secure storage of guns. In some cases, parents are asked to sign letters saying they know why it’s important to keep firearms securely stored. Support of such safe storage awareness campaigns “is a really good example of something a school can do without needing any act of Congress” to encourage gun safety measures, Jillian Peterson told NBC News.

Peterson, a criminal justice professor at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota, is co-founder of The Violence Project, a federally funded research initiative. According to the Violence Project’s Mass Shooter Database, over 90 percent of school shooters are students at the campuses they attack, and 80 percent get their weapons from family members.

Schools respond to COVID-19

CONCERN OVER THE SPREAD OF the novel coronavirus COVID-19 has school districts—particularly those with large Asian-American populations—asking whether students should be allowed to wear face masks in class or to self-quarantine at home. California’s San Ramon Valley Unified School District in the Bay Area, where nearly 40 percent of the 32,000 students identify as Asian, faced the self-quarantine request from a small number of families. It eventually said yes. “We want our families to have the option, even for the families who are afraid to send their kid to school,” spokesman Christopher George told Kaiser Health News.

Arcadia Unified School District in Los Angeles County is allowing students to come to school with face masks if they wish for prevention. About 66 percent of the 9,400 students identify as Asian. Wearing masks is considered normal in many Asian countries as protection against air pollution or germs. Visit www.nsba.org/resources/coronavirus for an updated list of resources that can help school board members prepare to respond to the coronavirus.
A heavy workload for teacher coaches

COACHING TEACHERS TO BE BETTER instructors is often viewed as one way to improve student performance, but those who provide the coaching often say they do not have the time to do the job effectively. In a survey of more than 1,000 active, school-based coaches, 40 percent say they were also classroom teachers, and 47 percent say they oversee more than 16 teachers at one time, the website The 74 reports.

The survey was conducted by Digital Promise, a nonprofit that promotes digital tools in education, and Learning Forward, an educator professional development nonprofit. Google for Education also took part in the survey’s release.

More than three-quarters of the respondents said they find coaching valuable, ranging from somewhat to highly valuable. A similar percentage find coaching to have a positive impact on their practice. While fewer than half of teachers surveyed met with their coach at least biweekly, 61 percent of those who found coaching valuable had at least biweekly meetings with the coach.
New Mexico sues Google over kids’ data

NEW MEXICO’S ATTORNEY GENERAL has filed a federal lawsuit that claims tech giant Google is using the education services products it offers to school districts, teachers, and parents to track children and their families. Attorney General Hector Balderas said the information being mined includes everything from physical locations to websites visited, videos watched, saved passwords, and contact lists, all without parental consent.

“The consequences of Google’s tracking cannot be overstated: Children are being monitored by one of the largest data-mining companies in the world, at school, at home, on mobile devices, without their knowledge and without the permission of their parents,” the lawsuit says. Google spokesman Jose Castaneda told the New York Times that the lawsuit’s claims were “factually wrong.”

“G Suite for Education allows schools to control account access and requires that schools obtain parental consent when necessary,” he said in a statement. “We do not use personal information from users in primary and secondary schools to target ads.”

Praise can motivate students

CHILDREN FOCUS ON tasks up to 30 percent more when teachers praise them for good behavior rather than reprimand them for being disruptive. That’s the finding from a Brigham Young University study that recommends teachers praise more and reprimand less if they want to improve student behavior in elementary school classrooms.

Unfortunately, “previous research has shown that teachers tend to reprimand students for problem behavior more than they praise students for appropriate behavior, which can have a negative effect and worsen student behavior,” lead researcher Paul Caldarella told ABC News.

The advantages that come with praising students are “backed by science,” Dr. Neha Chaudhary, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, told the network. “When kids receive praise, it activates certain feel-good chemicals in the brain. These chemicals can enhance functioning in the parts of the brain that are responsible for things like focus, attention, planning, and problem-solving,” she explained.

Literacy lawsuit settled for $50M

CALIFORNIA WILL SPEND $50 million for literacy instruction at dozens of poor-performing schools to settle a civil rights lawsuit that claimed the state had failed to help students learn how to read. According to the Associated Press, the advocacy law firm Public Counsel filed the suit in 2017 on behalf of students and teachers to demand the California Department of Education address its “literacy crisis.” The suit claimed that the state did not meet its constitutional responsibility to educate all children and had not followed suggestions from its own report on the problem from years earlier.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Rupert Byrdsong approved the new settlement, which outlines a three-year grant program to improve reading and writing instruction at 75 schools. In addition, the settlement “calls for screenings of reading levels at the beginning and middle of the school year for elementary school students and interventions based on programs proven to succeed.”
Trends

Number of homeless students at all-time high

MORE THAN 1.5 MILLION PUBLIC school students nationwide said they were homeless at some point during the 2017-18 school year, the most recent data available, according to a report from the National Center for Homeless Education. The findings, the highest recorded in more than a dozen years, reflect a growing problem that could negatively affect children's academic performance and health, researchers told The New York Times.

“The ripple effect here is real,” said Dr. Megan Sandel, a director of the Grow Clinic at the Boston Medical Center. She said housing instability was associated with developmental delays in children and children in fair or poor health. The new report compared the 2017-18 school year with the 2015-16 school year and found a 15 percent increase in the number of students nationwide who experienced homelessness. The 2017-18 number also was more than double the nearly 680,000 homeless students reported in 2004-05, the first school year examined by the center.

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California may give mandatory fitness test a break

CALIFORNIA’S STATE-MANDATED physical fitness test may be suspended over concerns that the tests are discriminatory, and some students could get bullied. A proposal by Gov. Gavin Newsom would pause for three years the law that requires all fifth-, seventh-, and ninth-graders to take the test that assesses strength, endurance, and flexibility. The evaluation also determines a student’s body mass index (BMI).

H.D. Palmer, a spokesman for the governor’s Department of Finance, told the Sacramento Bee that there are concerns that the current test can lead to body shaming and bullying of special education and transgender students. He said the California Department of Education has received complaints that the test’s BMI screening discriminates against students who do not identify as gender non-binary because it requires them to select a gender.

Air filters and student achievement

IT’S COMMON KNOWLEDGE that exposure to air pollution is linked to health concerns like bronchitis and asthma. But several recent studies also have suggested that indoor air pollution can harm cognition and academic performance. Discover magazine reports that one of the newest studies indicates that installing air filters in classrooms in a Los Angeles neighborhood impacted by a gas leak resulted in significantly improved student test scores.

In the unpublished paper released by New York University economics researcher Michael Gilraine, he compared student performance among the schools that received air filters with nearby schools that were not part of the air filter program. Results showed that air filters were linked to upticks in both math and English performance comparable to those seen after slashing class size by a third. Given that air quality tends to be worse in lower-income communities, “installing air filters in polluted regions should both raise student achievement and reduce the pervasive test score gaps that plague public education,” says Gilraine’s paper.

In search of the ideal classroom temperature

TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CONNECTION between indoor environmental quality and cognitive performance, the National Science Foundation has awarded a research team a nearly $300,000 grant to study how temperature, lighting, ventilation, and other environmental factors influence student engagement. The research team from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts will begin by developing “computer vision software to measure moment-by-moment changes in student engagement,” Forbes magazine reports.

It notes, for example, that “past research has found that an average increase of 1-degree Fahrenheit can decrease student learning by 1 percent over the course of a year if air temperature is not properly controlled. Moreover, low ventilation has been shown to reduce attention, vigilance, concentration, and memory.” The researchers also will explore whether “experimentally induced environmental changes can effectively combat lapses in student engagement.” They cite, for example, research showing that “momentary changes in ambient light can have an ‘alerting’ effect on people, similar to what happens when someone takes a sip of coffee.”
Trends

Special ed complaint goes to court

A YEAR-OLD COMPLAINT AGAINST the New Jersey Department of Education for failing to meet federal and state timelines for hearing and moving disputes between families and school districts over services provided to special-needs children has made its way to federal court. The class-action complaint says thousands of families have suffered from what the plaintiffs call “systemic flaws in (the state’s) system for timely resolving special education cases,” the website NJ Spotlight reports. It notes that a letter of noncompliance released by the U.S. Department of Education last year detailed cases unaddressed for months, in violation of state and federal guidelines that require cases to move within 30 days to 45 days, depending on the stage of the dispute.

Last summer, the state responded by establishing new procedures for districts, including a pilot program that would enlist outside mediators to resolve cases. The complaint before the court, however, argues that the problem continues. It lists plaintiff families with cases that have not been resolved for close to a year.
Trends

Hairstyle at center of anti-discrimination effort

DEANDRE ARNOLD, THE
Houston-area teenager who was told the length of his dreadlocks violated his public school’s dress code and would prevent him from participating in graduation ceremonies, has found support from various quarters. In addition to receiving $20,000 from TV host Ellen DeGeneres and singer Alicia Keys to put toward his college tuition, Arnold was a guest at the 2020 Academy Awards of director Matthew A. Cherry, whose film “Hair Love” won the Best Animated Short Oscar.

Closer to home, members of Texas’ Legislative Black Caucus announced plans to introduce a bill for the 2021 legislative session that would make it illegal to discriminate against students based on hair typically associated with race. The proposed legislation is part of a national effort known as the CROWN Act, which stands for “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair.” CNN reports that California, New Jersey, and New York already have passed laws banning discrimination based on hair texture and styles, and dozens of other states and cities are pursuing similar legislation.

Curriculum will teach all students about Tulsa Race Massacre

OKLAHOMA’S EDUCATION
Department is expanding its social studies curriculum to ensure all students, elementary through high school, learn about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The deadly assault, which broke out on May 31, 1921, occurred when mobs of white residents attacked the residents of the Greenwood District, Tulsa’s center of African American business and culture. The prosperous community, often referred to as Black Wall Street, was destroyed, and hundreds of African Americans were killed or never accounted for.

Tulsa Public Schools and other districts already have been teaching about the massacre, but now the state will release a comprehensive curriculum building on those efforts and expanding them statewide, CNN reported. “What we want to ensure is that ... we are teaching in a grade-appropriate level those facts that have not been taught in a way they should have been taught in Oklahoma,” State Superintendent Joy Hofmeister said. “This is ... our history and we should know it.” The HBO series “Watchmen” included a scene set during the massacre, introducing many viewers to the act of racial violence for the first time.

No link between teacher turnover and high-stakes testing

ELIMINATING MANDATED STATE TESTS DOES not appear to impact overall teacher turnover and attrition, a study finds. A common theory exists that teachers are exiting the profession because of high-stakes testing and the related stress and time spent prepping for the tests, Tim Sass, an author of the study and a professor at Georgia State University tells Education Week. The report, published by the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, “found that the removal of statewide tests had no effect on the likelihood of changing schools within a district, moving between districts, or quitting altogether.”

The report notes one key exception: Early-career teachers, those with fewer than five years of experience, were less likely to exit teaching when there are fewer testing requirements. Sass says that these teachers “probably aren’t aware of exactly how testing plays out before they enter a classroom,” while veteran teachers may be less susceptible to changing policies.
Trends

Integrated schools a great idea—for other people’s children

PARENTS’ SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL integration is high, but in districts where they are given greater opportunities to choose schools for their children, those schools appear to become more segregated, a Harvard University report finds. Researchers with the Making Caring Common project conducted a survey of more than 2,600 parents (73 percent white; mostly upper- and middle- income) to explore how much parents value school integration. Support was extensive, regardless of race, class, or political affiliation.

However, when it came to enrolling kids in school, factors such as a school’s academic profile, safety record, and location outranked integration as a priority, U.S. News reports. Asked to select the top three features of a school that were most important to their selection, 81 percent picked academic quality and 70 percent picked safety. Just under 10 percent picked racial and economic diversity in their top three. “Simply the presence of substantial numbers of black children in a residential area appears to affect white parents’ assessment of school quality,” the study says.

2021 CALL FOR WORKSHOP PROPOSALS IS YOUR DISTRICT LEADING THE WAY?

Share your insights, experiences, and innovative solutions by submitting a workshop proposal for NSBA’s 2021 Annual Conference in New Orleans, April 10-12.

Submission Window: April 10 - June 10, 2020 nsba.org/conference
"THE PARKLAND GENERATION was raised on lockdown drills—responding to tragedy by learning to hide better. Tragedy: a word we've grown so sick of, but we employ it selectively. Year after year brings a fresh crop of devastated kids." Gun violence in American schools is all too commonplace for today's students, giving this timely book, Parkland, even more significance. The irony was not lost on me as I read this book, as a reviewer, just days after a school shooting occurred at my university.

Dave Cullen is a reporter who has devoted his professional life to researching major tragedies across our country. He gets into the trenches of the sadness and horror that occurs right after a mass shooting, engaging with experts and survivors. Cullen is the New York Times bestselling author of Columbine, which he spent 10 years researching and writing.

When the Parkland shooting occurred, Cullen flew directly to Florida to cover the responses of the survivors. Cullen clearly states his purpose for creating Parkland. "What drew me was the group of extraordinary kids. I wanted to cover their response. There are strains of sadness woven into this story, but this is not an account of grief. These kids chose a story of hope." Readers will learn personal stories about the victims and their families, the survivors, the moments leading up to the tragedy, and the brave steps 12 students took to change gun reform in the U.S.

Cullen divides the story of Parkland, written as a narrative, into three parts: Uprising, Building a Movement, and The Long Road. "Uprising" recounts the chilling moments of the shooting that occurred within Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day 2018. The bravery and steps taken by the Never Again Group are outlined as members demand change. Two weeks after the attack, Stoneman Douglas classes were back in session; Cullen exposes the difficulty of getting back to normal. "Building a Movement" expounds on the March for Our Lives group strategies.

Other rallies such as the National Student Walkout and March for Our Lives, the fourth-largest protest in American history, are highlighted. "The Long Road" highlights the success and setbacks students experienced along the way. Their main goal was to "register, educate, and inspire people to vote on issues of gun control," which is no small task, especially for a group of high school students. Graduation, college admissions, and the transition to college are also explained.

Parkland is a must-read for those interested in gun reform and in making a change to our country's current state. Cullen discloses the depressing truth that in "twenty years, America alone has lost 683 lives in 81 mass shootings, and we've done virtually nothing." Cullen's purpose in the creation of Parkland is apparent when one realizes that the media angle is the only aspect that has shown progress following mass shootings. The media shapes what the world sees and values in the aftermath of a tragedy. Parkland highlights how "the Parkland kids seem to have accidentally solved the problem of celebrity shooters simply by becoming bigger celebrities themselves."

Leslie Schmidt is a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
Connect with colleagues to discuss key issues affecting districts, schools, and students, and lead the national conversation about public education. Discover ways to address current challenges by participating in educational sessions, workshops, and clinical sessions while earning CEU and CLE credit. Join together to advocate for issues and policies that will benefit public schools and students.
The 2020 Magna Awards

Students are the WINNERS when school leaders focus on equity

Kathleen Vail
Giving at-risk high school students the support and opportunity they need to succeed; bringing medical services, daycare, and preschool to a small, far-flung school community; and a districtwide program to help homeless students and their families: These are among the winning programs for this year’s Magna Awards.

For more than 25 years, the Magna Awards, with the support of our sponsor, Sodexo, have been recognizing innovative school district programs. This year, the awards continue to focus on equity in education. Our winning districts—the three Grand Prize winners and the 15 first-place winners—are working to remove barriers to achievement for their underserved and vulnerable students.

We present these winning programs with the hope that you will discover information that you can use in your districts. Our profiles give you an overview of the programs, including evidence of success. We include district contact information so you can find out more from the school leaders and staff who created and manage these initiatives.

We also created an opportunity for you to learn from the three Grand Prize-winning districts. They will be presenting their equity programs at NSBA’s annual conference in April in Chicago.

Whether it’s at our annual conference or through the pages of ASBJ, we invite you to connect with your peers to gain insights and practical ideas to create more equitable schools for your students.

Kathleen Vail (kvail@nsba.org) is editor-in-chief of American School Board Journal. This article contains excerpts written by the winning districts.
little more than a decade ago, within the 1,300 square miles of Fremont County School District #6, there were no licensed day care providers, no preschools, and no medical clinics. The board and superintendent of the tiny district of about 400 students in the Wind River mountain range embarked on a journey to make their district a community district that served the needs of their unique rural community.

Fremont encompasses the Wind River Reservation, and 30 percent of its students are Native Americans. Many families in the area face poverty and geographic isolation. The board and superintendent set a goal to make the district into a community hub, where all 1,300 square miles were considered part of its campus.

"You need to show families how to take advantage of these services," says Superintendent Diana Clapp. "It’s not just ‘build it, and they will come.’"

Preschool was the first of the three services that the district addressed. Students were coming into kindergarten with gaps—some reading, some chewing on books. A preschool for 3- to 5-year-olds was established at the Wind River Elementary School. However, as Clapp notes, she knew they were still missing children who needed it the most.

The district’s solution was the Purple Bus—a painted school bus that became a mobile classroom for preschoolers whose parents couldn’t travel the many miles to the elementary school. (This program earned Fremont a Magna Grand Prize in 2016.) The Purple Bus serves families in isolated areas, many of them Native Americans. A certified preschool teacher delivers regular lessons to the children, and a certified nurse travels with the bus to handle immunizations and other medical needs of both the children and the families they visit.

Next was the opening of a child care center at the elementary school for infants and children up to age 2. Because of the distances that people had to travel, child care was difficult to find in the area. The child care offered at Wind River Elementary School is open to district teachers and others in the community. It’s taught by a certified child care worker and is open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. to accommodate working parents.

Lack of access to health care and wellness screenings, urgent care, dental screening, and mental health services was a major barrier in the district, Clapp says. Many families without funds or reliable transportation would forgo medical visits until the illness became serious. Families didn’t have money to fill prescriptions promptly, even if they were seen by a medical professional.

Wind River High School students helped in the construction of the building, which is housed on the district’s main campus. The Cougar Community Health Center is now a recognized federally qualified health center.

“A lot of people have to decide, ‘Do I take my child to the doctor or pay my electric bill?’” says Fremont School Board member Kristen Benson. “The board had this conception that we are responsible for the whole child and family, making us a community school district.”

The community school programs are seeing results: Childhood on-time immunization rates for Fremont have risen in the preschool-age students from 2 percent to consistently 95 percent to 100 percent; preschool enrollments have grown from the original program serving eight to 12 students annually to 90 to 110 students for the past two years. The rate of Native American or multiracial children participating in the preschool services has risen from little to no participation to 23.7 percent since 2013, nearing the district K-12 averages.

Building relationships with Native American families and others so that they trust the district with their young children is of the utmost importance. According to Clapp, the Purple Bus was the catalyst that allowed the district to offer child care and medical services. “That bus has been the bridge between home, cultures, and schools,” she says. “It’s exactly what we were hoping for, what we envisioned.”
On the Purple Bus, preschool comes to students in remote areas.
Liberty Academy has no classrooms or teachers—at least not in the usual sense. And the school, housed in an office park, doesn’t look like a school at all. It’s different by design: Its students haven’t done well in traditional school settings.

“School prepares you for life, but school doesn’t look like life,” says Melissa Norris, director of Liberty Academy. “Our school is the closest thing that looks like life. Everything that happens is organic. Kids don’t realize they are doing school because it doesn’t look like school.”

The academy is the alternative high school for Liberty Public Schools in Liberty, Missouri, a community outside Kansas City. The district of 12,800 students is one of the fastest-growing in Missouri. The program has been in existence since 1996, but two years ago the staff, including Norris and lead teacher Art Smith, turned the model on its head. Encouraged by the superintendent and school board, they set out to create a place where their students would be successful.

The 90 high school students who attend Liberty Academy come from the two other high schools in the district, usually through recommendations from teachers and administrators. Many have behavioral issues as well as trauma in their home lives.

Liberty Academy staff receives ongoing training on mental health and psychology. “Our staff understands the brain,” says Norris. “If kids lose their cool and are not OK, we understand what’s going on with their brain, and we don’t take it personally. The culture is nurturing.”

In fact, says Smith, “while they are here, they are getting the closest thing to a family.” The school design reinforces the family atmosphere. “Structure breeds hierarchy,” he says. “Our schools and society have become binary and tech-centric. If you want kids to be whole people, you must design for human connection.”

Teachers are referred to as advisers, and they don’t have classrooms or desks. Students choose a project or an interest they’d like to work on, and they work with their advisers to link the project to standards and class credits.

In the mornings, students choose some physical activity. (Yoga is offered once a week.) They gather for a circle meeting, where they check in with advisers and hear about the outside trips available for the day. Small groups of students go with advisors on trips out in the community: greenhouses, farms, other workplaces in the area. Some trips focus on community service, such as to a homeless shelter in Kansas City. These trips link up with students’ projects and interests. Students follow a six-week burst model, and at the end, they give a defense of their time and work completed to a panel of at least three adults. At the end of the semester, they write a capstone essay and display chosen artifacts for a school and community showcase.

“They are a great example of meeting needs of diverse learners in a way that engages them,” says school board member Kim-Marie Graham. “It’s the way to approach an innovative program: Let it grow and be successful, then it organically moves out to the district.”

Liberty Academy teachers must be able to let go of the usual school hierarchy and tolerate ambiguity, says Smith. They also must want to have close relationships with students, acting as their guides and mentors, not to mention being de facto parents at school.

“The relationship piece is a daily focus,” says Liberty Superintendent Jeremy Tucker. “The staff is equipped to recognize that, and triage with kids as they need to.”

The district started giving the Panorama survey for Social-Emotional Learning in 2018-19. In the area of engagement, Liberty Academy scored in the 33 percentile, with the district average being 28 percent. This shows progress, since academy students often are referred as a result of disengagement from school and the consequences that come with it.

“We redefine what schools are,” says Smith. “We enjoy being what we need to be for each kid.”
At Liberty Academy, teachers are advisers who help students design their own projects.
When Connie Edwards was hired to be the district wellness liaison at Moreno Valley Unified School District, she researched the needs of the families in the 30,000-student district. She found that some students weren’t coming to school because they had no shoes. So, she started a fundraiser called Happy Feet that collected 33,000 pairs of tennis shoes for children. “I realized we had a lot of needy families,” says Edwards. “I know what the district needed. It needed a school-based family center to support these families.”

Moreno Valley is in the Inland Empire region of California, 70 miles east of Los Angeles. The district encompasses a small portion of the city of Riverside and parts of unincorporated Riverside County. It has approximately 6,000 students that are considered homeless; the majority are living with other families due to financial hardship. There are approximately 850 families that are considered fragile—living in their cars, shelters, or with friends and relatives.

Edwards started with donations stored in cubbies in her district office. The district opened the Community Wellness Center in 2016 in a one-room portable building adjacent to an elementary school. It has expanded to four large classrooms in a portable building converted to an office and resource center, a food pantry, a clothes and shoes room, a mindfulness and yoga studio that includes social-emotional learning training by a certified coach, and a living “space” that houses a bathroom, shower, couch, washing machine and dryer, extended folding table, microwave, and refrigerator. The center has helped 12,000 families since its inception.

“If we help their families, we help their children. You can’t get to critical thinking until you take care of basic needs,” says Superintendent Martinrex Kedziora. “I tell the community that malnutrition is not cured with one meal, it’s generational. Families get in the situations but don’t know how to get out of them.”

Moreno Valley school board President Marsha Locke says she sits on panels that deal with students with chronic attendance issues. “We found out they aren’t coming because they don’t have shoes, money for gas and lunches, and they are ashamed of their clothes,” she says. “We need to get proactive before you get to that point.”

In addition to the ongoing support throughout the year, the center holds a Summer Health and Resource Fair involving 72 community and county partners to distribute 600 backpacks, 600 pairs of shoes, 100 free haircuts, immunizations, teeth cleaning, vision check-ups, health services, and numerous booths with information on county and state services.

The first annual Health and Resource Fair, in the summer of 2017, reached over 2,000 families and children. During the summer of 2018, expanded services included clothes closets (1,000 items) and medical insurance enrollment to over 2,200 families. Recently, the 2019 Health and Resource Fair was held and had a food pantry. All attendees were provided with fresh fruit, vegetables, and nonperishable items.

District officials see that standardized test scores are improving. New 2019 state test results show a 3.2 percent increase in English Language Arts (ELA), which translates to 402 more students on track than the previous year and exceeds county and state growth rates of 1.4 percent and 1.0 percent. For ELA growth in 2019, the district ranked second among 37 similar school districts in California. Math shows a 1.9 percent increase in 2019 (a 5 percent increase since 2015), more than both the county and state, which grew 1.3 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

Edwards became a certified mindfulness instructor out of her recognition that the center needed to help parents with emotional as well as physical needs. “We work on healing them from inside, to bring peace in the storm,” she says. She holds mindfulness meditation and yoga classes for parents and their children. The classes, which have been successful, give parents and children a chance to do something as a family.

“I love to create support programs where families don’t feel helpless,” says Edwards. “If you come to us, we will help you.”
Moreno Valley Unified School District's Community Wellness Program holds a back-to-school event with local businesses and other partners.
THE 409 PROGRAM

The goal of the 409 Program has been to provide high school students with significant mental health needs the opportunity to fully participate in their public school. The program provides comprehensive learning supports, intensive therapeutic/emotional supports, behavior management, social skills training, individualized coursework, and community-based service-learning opportunities. The 409 is the classroom number; the program is an innovative support program within a highly successful suburban high school.

The 409 Program was created 15 years ago in response to parental concern regarding children’s ability to attend high school if they exhibited emotional and behavioral issues that impacted their learning. Students with significant mental health issues had to attend specialized schools outside the district. Going outside the district left students feeling ostracized and negatively impacted their lives within the community.

Participating students qualify for special education services and exhibit a variety of mental health diagnoses, including autism, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and/or oppositional defiant disorder.

Within the 409 classroom, the staff creates a therapeutic milieu, a classroom environment that feels safe, where students can share their struggles and seek help from the classroom staff or their peers. The classroom has become a sanctuary for students. Within their supportive community, students can begin to develop resiliency and experience more success in high school.

Removing barriers: The 409 Program seeks to remove the barriers to achievement in five key ways: (1) uncovering the gifts of each student despite their challenges and providing opportunities to grow, (2) collaborating with parents and outside providers, (3) addressing the therapeutic needs of students, (4) providing the necessary academic supports and accommodations, and (5) enhancing social skills development through community-based service learning.

Students receive individual and group therapeutic sessions to address their diagnoses and presenting problems. When students experience behavioral challenges within their general education classes, the emotional support teacher and licensed social worker collaborate with teachers to create solutions.

Academic and learning needs also are addressed. Students are scheduled into any high school course that meets their needs. Some students participate in honors and Advanced Placement classes, while others enroll in academic classes or vocational-technical experiences. Academic supports are delivered based on each student’s needs. Students have access to the 409 classroom throughout the day and can receive academic instruction as needed to support their involvement in general education classes.

Evidence of success: Students have experienced a higher level of academic success as measured by course grades and participation in higher-level classes. Some students struggled academically before their involvement in the 409 Program but then were able to benefit from the program supports and earn higher grades. In addition to better academic success, 409 students also demonstrated improved behavior as measured by progress on their individual behavior goals.

Over the past 15 years, 85 students have graduated from Upper St. Clair High School after participating in the 409 Program. These graduates have experienced positive postsecondary outcomes. Forty-one students have completed postsecondary education.

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Prefering Students for Tech Sector Jobs
CodeRVA Regional High School, Richmond, Virginia

CODERVA REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
CodeRVA Regional High School is a next-generation high school focused on preparing a diverse pipeline of students for careers in the tech sector. The school’s design builds on models across the nation that rethink the use of time and space, leverage technology to accelerate learning, personalize learning experiences, and redesign curriculum to align with competency-based progressions. Focused on computer science, the school offers the opportunity to complete high school requirements through a combination of blended (online and face-to-face) learning, integrated coursework, and project-based learning. Students are provided an opportunity to graduate with a Virginia high school diploma, an associate degree in computer science from J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, industry certifications, and paid internships in computer science-related fields. CodeRVA’s approach to learning develops students’ self-management skills while integrating academic content, agile workplace methodologies, and internship experiences that provide a pipeline of critical thinkers prepared to enter college or Richmond’s growing tech sector.

In support of its mission to focus on computer science and provide opportunities for all students, CodeRVA enrolls every ninth-grade student in Advanced Placement (AP) Computer Science Principles class. The course introduces students to the creative aspects of programming, abstractions, algorithms, large data sets, the internet, cybersecurity, and how computing impacts our world. Students develop the computational thinking skills needed to fully use the power of digital technology and help build a strong foundation in core programming and problem solving. The course prepares students for the associated AP exam.

Removing barriers: The three main goals at CodeRVA are: redesign the high school experience to better meet the learning needs of today’s students; address racial, economic, and gender inequities in STEM-related education; and increase the pool of potential employees in computer science-related fields for central Virginia employers.

CodeRVA serves a population of students that ranges from 31 percent to 51 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. The school provides several opportunities and services for students that support their success. They also provide college and career services to students and guidance to students and their families.

There are no admissions criteria or academic prerequisites to attend CodeRVA. Students are selected through an independently operated lottery system that ensures diversity reflective of the Richmond region.

Evidence of success: Currently, there is an ongoing independent evaluation implemented by Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition, the school, in three years, has achieved increasing support through 14 school divisions, three universities, the Virginia Department of Education, the YMCA, and numerous businesses—including Capital One, CarMax, and Snagajob, among others. Due to student growth, the school footprint has grown from 15,310 square feet to over 43,000 square feet in three years.

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CodeRVA’s innovative curriculum integrates multiple academic content studies and incorporates authentic project-based learning. PHOTO COURTESY OF CODERVA REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
Transition for Special-Needs Students
Bergenfield Public Schools, Bergenfield, New Jersey

IEP FOR LIFE PROJECT
Bergenfield Public Schools has seen great success in delivering access to the best teachers and a rigorous curriculum. However, an assessment in 2017 revealed that students with severe disabilities—ages 16 to 21—were not prepared for anything at all after high school.

The district recognized that it was not providing the staffing, curriculum, systemic vocational training, employment opportunities, formalized partnerships, and classroom resources needed to adequately prepare targeted students for postsecondary success and independent living.

It created the IEP for Life Project to target a cadre of 20 students in grades nine through 12. The group included students with classifications including intellectual disability and autism.

The district began by increasing staff to improve the staff-to-student ratio; training staff to implement person-centered planning and instruction, purchasing new curriculum and instructional supplies, and building a manufactured home called the Bear Den to enable students to practice life skills. It also increased access to community-based instruction, and structured learning experiences; to internships, employment, and community service opportunities; and to postsecondary adult education and college classes.

Removing barriers: The district dramatically increased access to postsecondary instruction and career training for high school students with severe disabilities. It increased staff from three teachers to seven staff members, including three special education teachers and four paraprofessionals. The district also increased the hours of the transition coordinator to full time; this made a significant difference in offering improved structured learning experiences and community-based instruction experiences. Students and parents participated in Person Centered Approaches in Schools and Transition training, and a vocational profile was developed for every student.

Evidence of success: The district has successfully developed a transition program that exists in an independent structure. The program includes community-based instruction and structured learning experiences matched to students’ interests and skills. Other goals of the project are the development of independent living skills and increased opportunities for leisure and physical activities in the community. In terms of student performance, 100 percent of students have demonstrated improvement in social skills as a result of the project.

Through the IEP for Life Project, the district has improved its student-to-staff ratio to provide the extra time and extra help students need to succeed and increased stakeholder planning among families, staff, and community partners from once a year to once a month.

Staff professional development hours rose from four hours to 40 hours per year. The number of parents contributing to a vocational plan for students with severe learning disabilities increased. Parents also participated in events planned by their children, including Back to School Night, Holiday Dinner, and April Brunch. A notable event was the Completion Ceremony, as many parents felt that a “graduation” might not have been in their future.

The number of recreational hours that students with disabilities spent with nondisabled peers increased from 1.5 hours per week to five hours per week. Students increased their fitness activities and learned to track steps and their heart rate on Fitbits. They also learned to download data from their Fitbit to their laptops to assess their progress.

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A student unbags groceries after returning from the supermarket.
PHOTO COURTESY OF BERGENFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Support for English Learners
Manassas Park City Schools, Manassas Park, Virginia

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROGRAM
A 2.5 square-mile city in northern Virginia is home to a richly diverse school division of 3,600 students who come from 50 different countries and speak 47 different languages. Nearly 60 percent of incoming students are identified as English Learners and considered economically disadvantaged. Recognizing the diverse needs in the division and knowing that English language proficiency would be crucial for student academic success, Manassas Park City Schools developed a literacy package that incorporated language art skills in each instructional lesson while allowing students to move through self-paced independent work.

Already on the cutting edge of a digital 1-to-1 rollout, the district aimed to harness technological tools to boost English learning. The Language Acquisition Program was created to enable a diverse set of teaching strategies that provide each student with a personalized language acquisition plan. Emphasizing language acquisition, the program fosters speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English throughout all instructional units. It uses technology-based platforms to reinforce learning.

Removing barriers: The Language Acquisition Program helps to level the academic playing field and paints a picture of what each student can become. The ability to independently assess and support each student’s learning ensures students remain engaged and have the best possible opportunity to master material that is commensurate with his or her ability.

The division’s 1-to-1 digital rollout extends to all K-12 students, and that five-year program laid a foundation of support services throughout the community that includes internet access to underserved families. To further capitalize on the work done to maximize the effectiveness of the division’s digital plan, the decision to use technology to support language acquisition made both academic and fiscal sense.

Before any intervention and skill development program is introduced into a learning environment, interventionists, literacy and math specialists, instructional technology resource officers, and teachers work together for program evaluation. Once approved, programs are used in small groups before full implementation. Specialists work directly with teachers for needed training and implementation schedules.

Teams have a flat organization so that decisions can be made, and the implementation of good tools can occur quickly. Rather than bring a great tool to all students, the Language Acquisition team’s goal is to bring the right tool to each student.

The district uses progress monitoring software to ensure student growth. If student goals are not being met, recurrent progress monitoring allows educators to quickly identify and transition to different educational tools, further closing equity gaps in the classroom.

Evidence of success: Since its full implementation three years ago, the program has had a big impact on English language acquisition. Currently, district students are exceeding 2020 state-established progress targets and outpacing the state average for achieving English language proficiency. Manassas Park Elementary School has already surpassed the state 2021-22 testing year target for English Learner progress by 10 percentage points.

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Students learning English receive personalized language plans.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MANASSAS PARK CITY SCHOOLS

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Remote Medical Care for Students and Staff
Shawnee Public Schools, Shawnee, Oklahoma

The district formed a partnership with TEAM Clinics to provide prompt, nonemergency medical care to students. TEAM Clinics uses a telemedicine video platform that allows the student, school nurse, parent, and health care provider to meet virtually. With a parent’s permission, the school nurse contacts a provider. Through specialized equipment and the nurse’s guidance, the provider can examine and assess the student. The parent may use a free mobile app to attend the health examination virtually. The provider can then prescribe medicine, if necessary, and call the prescription into the pharmacy for the parent to pick up. TEAM Clinics bills the family’s insurance or, if the student does not have insurance, covers the cost of care pro bono. TEAM Clinics is a privately held and growing company. There is no cost to the district for the telemedicine partnership. The company also provides the technology platform to work from and the necessary on-site equipment to facilitate each visit, such as stethoscopes, otoscopes, oxygen meters, and blood pressure cuffs.

The district employed school nurses and health aides to serve all school sites prior to the addition of the TEAM Clinics program, so the district has not seen any additional staffing costs.

Removing barriers: This program has given students access to needed medical care. Most of the time, students can return to class at the conclusion of the telemedicine visit, thus lessening the number of absences for at-risk students. The district also found that staff members were using the telemedicine clinics if they felt ill during the day. Teachers could stay at school because they were not contagious, and students were taught by their certified instructor rather than a substitute.

Any time a student or staff member was found to be contagious, the school nurse could send the patient home. Preventing the spread of illness has kept at-risk students from missing school days. Thirty percent of Shawnee’s student population are citizens of a Native American tribal nation.

Evidence of success: A total of 158 patients visited the TEAM Clinics in 2018-19, the program’s first year of operation. Of that number of patients, only 10 (five students and five teachers) were sent home due to illness. The program began in the fall of 2018 in four school sites in the district. Now, the clinics serve students and staff in each of the district’s eight school sites. In this second year of the program, TEAM Clinics is expanding its health care offerings to include behavioral health services and treatment for students and staff.

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Telemedicine helps provide nonemergency medical care.
PHOTO COURTESY OF SHAWNEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Building Relationships Between Parents and Schools

Cajon Valley Union School District, El Cajon, California

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DEPARTMENT (FACE)
The Cajon Valley Union School Board initiated the Family and Community Engagement department (FACE) as the disparity in community and parent engagement became more and more evident within schools. The lower-socioeconomic schools received little to no support for their parents and community, while higher socioeconomic schools received a wide range of supports. After the FACE office was created, the district saw an influx of refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. This shifted district needs, and the FACE office became a vital member of the community and district to support the newcomers. It evolved and grew into a robust program based on positive feedback from teachers, parents, and students.

**Removing barriers:** Barriers are removed through relationships, and the program builds connections intentionally. Community liaisons build relationships with parents and help school staff and parents build relationships. The district does not want the liaison to be the only one who has a relationship with parents; instead, they help build a relationship between the staff members and parents. This is accomplished in several ways.

Family-teacher teams allow teachers to repurpose back-to-school night. Teachers give parents time to share their specific hopes and dreams for their children in a large group. This builds community among the parents and, of course, with the teacher. Most students have a parent or caregiver at home, but many caregivers do not know how to support their children academically.

Positive home visits are a powerful way for school staff to build meaningful relationships with parents that can forever change the parent and the teacher. The teacher asks to visit the home well in advance, and the parent agrees or disagrees. Next, the teacher and community liaison visit the home and ask one question: What are your hopes and dreams for your child? They spend the rest of the time listening.

Parent University is a program where a teacher and a community liaison work together to teach a group of parents specific reading strategies and parenting skills. The teachers model these strategies with the parents. When parents graduate, they become roving readers in the classrooms. The students see that their parents value education.

**Evidence of success:** The program has been running and growing for the past four years. Last year, the California State Assembly passed a $13 million bill to create a Family and Community Engagement model. The goal is to spread this work to districts across the state of California. Cajon Valley applied and was accepted after a full-day interview to be one of six districts to work on this initiative for the next three to five years.

FACE’s implementation model was to start small with interested and willing participants, and then to use those initial participants to help recruit other school sites. It now has 14 itinerant community liaisons that support all sites on some level, but traditionally Title I sites receive more time based on student needs.

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FACE helps build community among teachers, parents, and schools.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CAJON VALLEY UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT
EQUITY AND ACCESS: SUCCESS FOR ALL
Too many students were leaving Meriden high schools with uncertain postsecondary plans. The Equity and Access: Success for All initiative is designed to ensure all students leave high school ready for college, career, and life.

The initiative includes personalized pathways, which have led to greater choice and voice, critical thinking, creativity, and academic gains. A suite of tools helps staff get to know students and measure their college and career readiness.

“No-Zero” grading procedures support student effort, leading to greater engagement and motivation. Restorative practices and youth dialogue groups have increased student voice and improved school climate. Students are provided district-issued mobile devices to use with digital content in classes and on their own to explore anytime, anywhere learning. Commitment to student ownership is enhanced by providing high school students with opportunities to design their own credit-bearing personalized learning experiences based on interest, talent, or potential career options.

Removing barriers: Success for All builds a college and career culture for all students, starting with all incoming kindergarteners receiving T-shirts with the year they will be graduating college.

With open access to classes, including Advanced Placement (AP) classes, there are no barriers to accessing high-level learning. Since implementing open access to AP courses, enrollment of students of color has increased exponentially. The school board funds AP testing and voted to require all 11th-grade students to participate in an SAT preparation course. Middle school students can earn high school credits, while high school students are able to earn college credits.

A summer bridge program held at the two high schools supports at-risk entering ninth-graders. The board’s curriculum committee created a High School 101 course to prepare students socially for high school. Follow-up during ninth grade is provided by on-track grade nine transition counselors. To increase credit accumulation and reduce failures, transition counselors provide intensive “case management” to a targeted group of underserved ninth-graders.

Evidence of success: Success for All has been highly effective in increasing achievement, attendance, behavior, and graduation rates over the last decade. During this period, while both numbers of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals and students of color increased significantly, academic performance measures reveal the highest scores in district history. Other attendance and behavioral indicators also show growth. On the Connecticut Accountability Index, the Connecticut State Department of Education’s report card for districts, Meriden’s achievement growth from 2015 to 2019 outpaced the state and the 33 urban districts identified as the most economically challenged districts in Connecticut.

Meriden has 96 percent of ninth-graders on track to graduate in four years, up from 75 percent several years ago. Most importantly, over the last five years, four-year graduation rates have increased by 20 percent. Behavioral indicators also show highly positive results: chronic absenteeism decreased by 23 percent, suspensions by 82 percent, and expulsions by 93 percent.

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Curriculum and Student Voice
Roseville Area Schools, Roseville, Minnesota

ENGAGING ALL STUDENTS THROUGH RELEVANT CURRICULUM
Roseville Area Schools has been working for over a decade to close the significant gaps in opportunities and outcomes for its diverse student population. After several years of enhancing Culturally Responsive Teaching skills, on Nov. 18, 2016, it had a wake-up call that galvanized students and the community. A few months before, a black man (Philando Castile) was shot by police in a routine traffic stop in the district. This deeply disturbed everyone, and a large group of high school students decided to act. They staged a walkout and presented their demands at the Minnesota Department of Education located nearby. Half of their demands related directly to curriculum. District administrators met with the students and committed to working on the missing narratives. Within six months, the district began using an Equity Curriculum and Instruction Compass co-created with consultant Marceline Dubose. The initial focus has been on curriculum, with the Engaging All Students Through Relevant Curriculum Program. Its objective is to de-center dominant narratives and expand learning to include traditionally absent narratives and to make the learning materials reflective and relevant to the diversity of perspectives, histories, and identities in the student body and society.

The work is proceeding in all grades, from kindergarten to high school seniors. K-6 has mainly focused on revising all social studies units. For example, in second grade, the unit studying good citizenship now includes a culturally and racially rich array of figures. In fourth grade, students look at the U.S. government and then compare it to tribal government. The work in the middle and high school has been applied broadly across subject matter. Some examples include shifting from only the dominant narrative to a multi-ethnic perspective in covering American history (retitled American Histories); adding American history through an African American lens course as an option to meet the U.S. history requirement; creating a more diverse literature experience in language arts classes with greater representation of different races, cultures, gender, etc.; using skin color to study genes and evolution in biology; and shifting in math classes from academic examples to real-life scenarios.

Removing barriers: This program gives students a context within which they can develop into engaged, motivated, and self-regulated learners. The key impetus came from students, with underserved students’ voices strongly represented. They believed curriculum was key to what needed to change. It needed to reflect their racial and ethnic communities, histories, and leaders, and build connections to their lived experiences.

Evidence of success: Through helping to improve attention and engagement, this program has contributed to the growth in students graduating from high school and a narrowing of race-ethnicity gaps. From 2014 to 2018, the four-year graduation rate increased by 1 percent, ending with 88 percent of students graduating in four years. Because the gains were concentrated among students of color, the graduation gap between white students and students of color narrowed 112 percent. The district and nearly all race-ethnic groups currently outperform the state of Minnesota.

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A controversy erupted over an article and photo in the San Luis Obispo High School student magazine. The feature article on the LGBTQ+ community on campus sparked many responses, including a letter from a teacher that some considered hate speech. From this controversy, the San Luis Coastal Unified School superintendent created the Common Ground Advisory Task Force (CGATF). While the CGATF grew out of the desire for school environments that were inclusive for LGBTQ+ students, it has evolved to focus on inclusivity for any student or group who may experience discrimination or alienation in the district.

The CGATF is composed of 20 community, district staff, and secondary student leaders with a cross-section of civic and religious interests, including all major religions prominent in the community, free thinker/non-religious leaders, educational leaders, parents, and students. The CGATF serves in an advisory role, making recommendations to the superintendent that are submitted to the school board each spring before the development of annual board priorities.

Removing barriers: The CGATF listened to panel discussions from diverse groups of students, district teachers, and site administrators regarding steps to improve equity and inclusivity in the school district. The members recognized the district's commitment to moving from equality (non-discrimination/equal access) to equity (promotion of equality) and inclusivity (creating a culture of care by engaging in proactive actions that acknowledge the dignity of all and the value of diversity).

The CGATF recognizes that families and the San Luis Coastal community share responsibility with district officials and staff to create a positive, equitable, and inclusive environment at all schools. Administrators are now looking at their programs through an equity lens. For example, the food service director describes her program as "being a lot more thoughtful in how we communicate about the free and reduced-priced meal program and how we identify students who may be overlooked and have a need." They systematically analyzed historical data and gaps in enrollment to find sites where more students could benefit from the program. This focus has been successful at locating students who otherwise would have gone hungry.

Evidence of success: As a result of the CGATF’s recommendations over the past two years, San Luis Coastal has taken specific, actionable steps towards creating more equitable and inclusive schools across the district. Teacher recruitment practices have been modified to specifically search outside of the local area for staff who reflect the culture and heritage of district students. The CGATF has influenced annual board priorities by creating a focus on equity and a culture of care. This has influenced professional development, instructional strategies in the classrooms, and the types of diverse literature offered in the libraries and classrooms across the district. The multiyear district equity plan is evidence of how the CGATF played a vital role in how San Luis Coastal has turned controversy into positive, systemic change.

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Health Care Training for High Schoolers
Vail Unified School District, Vail, Arizona

ANDRADA POLYTECHNIC HIGH SCHOOL HEALTHCARE PATHWAY
Andrada Polytechnic High School broke the mold of the traditional American high school. It has no athletics program. Instead, students choose from one of eight STEM-related majors or pathways. Andrada students identify with their major rather than a sport. Students take three required science courses along with another three pathway science courses. The experience culminates with a 120-hour internship during students’ senior year with high-quality professionals in a field. Andrada was designed and built for career and technical education programs, where the focus is a hands-on curriculum in a college-like campus community of 1,000 students.

Students in Healthcare Pathway classes, including medical assisting, sports medicine, veterinary assisting, and behavioral health, must be prepared for professional life. As such, students are treated as employees. They earn payment in the form of points and are allotted sick days, just as they might experience as personal trainers, physical therapists, veterinary assistants, or medical assistants. Students must request time off, can be docked “pay,” and must adhere to workplace standards.

Removing barriers: Andrada’s Healthcare Pathway is open to every student in Vail with varying levels of academic commitment and has no barriers to entry. The Healthcare Pathway students experience the same or greater success as their counterparts at career centers while leveraging all their other courses. Andrada offers specific pathways where students not only earn certifications in their fields but also where they are prepared to pursue advanced degrees within those fields.

Students who attend Andrada receive busing to the school. No additional transportation is required. Any student, regardless of disability, is welcome and encouraged to attend Andrada. Further, students are offered the Healthcare Pathway and training during the regular school day. The typical roadblock for students with transportation difficulties is eliminated. It is not a Saturday or evening program.

Often, students are required to pay extensive fees in similar health care programs to earn certifications. When Andrada faculty discovered that some students were opting out of taking national certification exams due to the expense, the school and district found a way to cover the expense through grants and other funding. Andrada provides transportation to the testing centers.

Evidence of success: Andrada’s Healthcare Pathway enjoys a 100 percent student completion rate. Every student in the medical assisting and sports medicine programs has earned passing scores on end-of-year assessments each year since Andrada opened in 2012. Medical assisting students consistently have the highest scores in the state, including in the top 20 last year. Students also take the national exams that adults take for certification. Adults who have gone through training courses take the test an average of three times before passing. However, 95 percent of Andrada’s medical assisting students have passed it on their first attempt, and 85 percent of sports medicine students did so. A passing score on the national

Healthcare Pathway students earn sought-after certifications.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VAIL UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
certifications increases employability and college entrance opportunities. Andrada’s students are sought after by veterinary clinics, local university sports medicine programs, and various clinics around the state.

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Closing Gaps Through Reading Instruction

Compton Unified School District, Compton, California

To ensure tutors’ knowledge and skills in literacy instruction, the district through the Ed Services Department provides thorough and systematic professional development.

PHOTO COURTESY OF COMPTON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

PROJECT REACH

The district developed a partnership with California State University Dominguez Hills to address the need to build strong foundational reading skills in grades K-2 to close the achievement gap. They developed a partnership called Project REACH. Since then, the university has recruited hundreds of college students, many of whom are Compton graduates, to participate in the program. The district provides them with the necessary professional development and assigns them to the school sites as tutors. This program has increased reading proficiency, improved student behavior, and enhanced interest in learning. Furthermore, the rigorous training that the college tutors receive has better prepared them not only for the effective delivery of reading lessons but also for a future career in education.

Project REACH was prompted by the reality that less than 30 percent of the district’s student population in 2015 was reading on grade level by third grade. Based on baseline assessments, about 80 percent of students started kindergarten significantly lower in reading than their peers in more affluent districts. This deficit left students unprepared and without the essential early literacy skills that they needed to be academically successful. Students were leaving elementary schools reading well below grade level.

Removing barriers: The goal of Project REACH is to increase the reading fluency of at-risk students in grades K-2 through additional targeted tutoring provided by district-trained college tutors. By developing fluent readers, the program also aims to improve students’ interest in learning and their self-confidence. Students in Project REACH increase reading proficiency, and teachers and tutors have reported that these students also gain motivation and interest in school. In addition, there has been significant improvement in their attendance over time.

Evidence of success: The impact of Project REACH on the reading achievement level of the students receiving services is measured by multiple data points. The 2017-18 Achievement Improvement Monitoring System (AIMSweb), for example, provides student growth over time. In the fall, kindergarten students participating in the program recognized an average of 2.9 letters on the Letter Naming Fluency assessment. In the spring, the average increased to 37.6 letters, reflecting a growth of 34.7 letters. Second-grade students read an average of 15.3 words per minute (wpm) on the Reading Curriculum-Based Management (RCBM) assessment in the fall; the average increased to 52.8 in spring, reflecting a growth of 37.5 words.

The 2018-19 AIMSweb indicates student growth over time on alphabetic principle, phonics, and reading fluency. In the fall, participating kindergarten students recognized an average of 5.22 letters on the Letter Naming Fluency assessment. In the spring, the average increased to 31.94 letters, reflecting a growth of 26.72 letters. Second-grade students read an average of 22.8 wpm on RCBM assessment in the fall. The average increased to 54.64 in spring, reflecting a growth of 31.84 words.

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FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT AMBASSADOR (FGCSA) COHORT INITIATIVE
The Guilford County Schools First Generation College Student Ambassador (FGCSA) Cohort, administered through the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, is now in its fifth year. It was created to provide opportunities for underserved youth to be the first in their families to attend college. The initiative started with 18 students in 2014-15 and has progressively grown to serve around 100 high school juniors and seniors each year.

The program components include the following: boot camp to prepare incoming students for the rigor of the initiative; monthly college cohort Saturday classes; college tours; and SAT and ACT prep classes.

Removing barriers: The FGCSA College Cohort classes, college tours, and, most certainly, scholarships remove barriers and expand access for achieving college entrance for underserved students. FGCSA assists students in setting goals, developing their gifts, identifying their strengths, and maximizing opportunities as they prepare for submitting college applications.

Elements of the program include:

• Researching colleges for the “best fit,” which assists students in identifying institutions with higher graduation rates and more favorable institutional financial aid policies.

• Developing students’ college portfolios to expand their postsecondary opportunities.

• Supplementing the support offered by secondary school counselors who are frequently responsible for too many students to provide adequate college planning guidance and support to meet the needs of students.

• Assisting participants in seeking financial support so that they can complete their college programs once they are enrolled. Financing and financial planning remove one of the most significant barriers to college entrance for first-generation college students.

FGCSA Summer Boot Camp is a three-day training session specifically geared toward rising juniors who intend to transition into the FGCSA college cohort program in the fall. The session provides insight into what the program is and how it can benefit students who are serious about preparing for college and those who will successfully complete the program; basic training for new recruits entering the program to prepare students for what’s expected of them while in the program and when they enter college; and focused college planning activities that involve developing academic resumes; identifying best college matches; developing junior-year action plans; identifying gifts, talents, and branding; and identifying financial aid and scholarship opportunities.

Evidence of success: In total, the initiative has assisted nearly 400 students, most of whom are first generation and college aspiring, in developing comprehensive college-bound plans to expand college access and successfully navigate college admissions, scholarships, and financial aid. Participating students have been offered admission to top colleges. Scholarships received by cohort students have totaled in excess of $10 million over five years.

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Cohort students who are in the refugee program are completing assignments.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS
Bringing Books and Learning to Children
Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD, Bedford, Texas

HEB READS!
HEB Reads! is a partnership between the Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD and the city libraries of Hurst, Euless, and Bedford, Texas. It was developed to lessen the effects of the summer reading slide, by creating a program that incorporated all the school and city libraries’ summer reading activities into one communitywide challenge. This partnership has expanded to include a mobile learning lab, the Think Tank, and a summer lunch and learn program—all designed and specifically located to reach students in low-income areas.

To kick off the annual summer reading campaign, the partnership hosts a communitywide reading event on the first Saturday in May. This free event has literacy and STEM activities, games, entertainment, information about summer offerings at all three city libraries and the schools, food, and more. Every attendee receives a free new book of their choosing to take home. Each year, the event has grown in popularity, starting with approximately 3,000 attendees in 2016 to over 4,500 in 2019. To date, the program has given away over 20,000 free books at the kickoff events.

The Think Tank is a mobile STEM lab and features everything from snap circuits to paper circuits to robots to computers to straw connectors. It offers free hands-on learning for all ages and has both plugged and unplugged activities. The Think Tank appeared at 52 school and city events in the 2018-19 school year. This outreach mobile lab sets up in apartment complexes, at city block parties, and at school carnivals. The program includes a summer lunch-and-learn site within the middle of a nine-apartment-building community complex. Children can come every weekday to receive a free hot meal and have access to no-cost educational opportunities in a safe, air-conditioned environment.

Removing barriers: HEB Reads! seeks to take resources to the learner, both physically and academically. The program addresses barriers of food insecurity and lack of constructive activity that reinforces learning. It also builds trust between students and authority figures, establishing a climate of respect in an atmosphere more relaxed than the regular school environment.

Evidence of success: HEB Reads! was officially launched in May 2016 and continues to post positive trends in the number of attendees at the kickoff event and in minutes read during the summer. In year one, the district only collected data from the school district (1.93 million minutes of reading). In year two, it added additional data points for adults, home schools, other districts, and children under 4 years old. It disaggregated the data for each city library as well so that it would have numbers to present to the city councils. And the numbers speak for themselves: from 1.93 million minutes in 2016 to almost 7.5 million minutes in 2019.

The Think Tank made its debut last year. It made an appearance at 52 different school and city events and delighted thousands of children and adults. The eight-week summer lunch-and-learn has grown extensively in just one year, with the number of lunches served increasing by over 135 percent and the number of learners participating up by over 125 percent.

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Students choose a free book to bring home.
PHOTO COURTESY OF HURST-EULESS-BEDFORD ISD
Access and Opportunity
Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland

ALL IN: EQUITY AND ACHIEVEMENT FRAMEWORK + ALL MEANS ALL INITIATIVES
The All In: Equity and Achievement Framework, in conjunction with the All Means All initiatives, provide the purpose, plan, and path to ensure success for all students. It has three interconnected components:

The Evidence of Learning (EOL) framework consists of multiple measures in classroom, district, and external categories that allow schools and the district to monitor individual student progress at each level—primary, intermediate, middle, and high school with the goal of being college- and career-ready.

The Equity Accountability Model (EAM) uses EOL data to determine the impact schools have on students who have typically not performed as well as their white and Asian peers.

The Equitable Access to Resources tool (EAR) examines how well the system and schools are using staff, time, and money as measured by student outcomes, with emphasis on the five focus groups. The EAR focuses on an analysis of student performance and funding data to provide a diagnostic view that analyzes the student experience through the lens of equity, such as leadership quality, teaching quality, instructional time and attention, rigorous and empowering curriculum, diverse and inclusive classrooms, and the whole child.

Together, these integrated components provide the data needed for schools to take targeted action to close the achievement gap and ensure that success cannot be predicted by race or socioeconomic status.

The All Means All initiatives ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the access and opportunities needed to meet their full potential and to be successful in college, career, and community. These initiatives include dual/two-way language immersion, universal screening and expanded access to enrichment.

Removing barriers: For 50 years, the achievement gap in Montgomery County has grown in the shadows while many of the county’s schools and students garnered well-deserved praise and earned awards. Despite efforts by county leaders, the gap continued to grow, overshadowed by aggregated data, which allowed the struggles of some students to be masked behind the outcomes of their peers in one of the nation’s largest school districts. This disparity in academic outcomes is a crisis in the community that must be addressed.

Through the initiative, the district has granular, disaggregated data that allows educators to take targeted, individualized actions to combat the specific barriers to equity and excellence.

For instance, through EOL, a school can review the real-time data of a specific student, identify an area of struggle, and provide in-the-moment additional or differentiated instruction. Through the EAM, a school and the community can know that Latinx students not impacted by poverty are underperforming relative to their peers and the standard, and then develop a school improvement plan that increases the focus on supporting that particular group. And, through EAR data, a school will know if its assignment practices are disproportionately placing students of color with less experienced educators.

Evidence of success: The components of both the All In Framework and the All Means All initiatives began rolling out in the 2016-17 school year. Since this time, the district has seen significant progress toward closing the gap in student outcomes.

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Students benefit from a plan and analysis of disaggregated data.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Fresh Start for the New School Year
Virginia Beach City Public Schools, Virginia Beach, Virginia

Students receive back-to-school necessities and services.
PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

JUMPSTART
Created as a partnership between the Virginia Beach-based nonprofit AidNow and school social work services with Virginia Beach City Public Schools, JumpStart is an annual event for students identified as homeless and marginalized to receive everything needed to start school. This includes backpacks, school supplies, clothing, haircuts, and more. School social work services houses Project HOPE Virginia Beach, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education project for the district.

The partnership began in September 2009 when a member of the AidNow board reached out to the district coordinator of social work services. The main issue identified was clothing. Clothing was needed in a large quantity, in various sizes, and for different seasons.

To remedy this issue, AidNow arranged for a storage facility, and within eight weeks, the facility was filled with new or nearly new clothing. However, throughout the 2009-10 school year, the requests for assistance with clothing continued, and AidNow began to question what these students were doing for clothing at the start of each school year.

That was the impetus for JumpStart 2010: provide identified students with new or nearly new clothing so all students can begin school with new outfits and other necessities. JumpStart has grown into a partnership that brings together nonprofits, service organizations, city agencies, schools, and several corporate sponsors to provide students with everything they need to start the school year. Students choose clothing, socks, underwear, new hoodies, new shoes, and more.

Besides clothing and haircuts, vision and dental screening are offered, as well as information on health care and other available services. Families also may obtain public library cards and books. Corporate sponsors provide bags of healthy food and hygiene products. Students pick out a new backpack and school supplies.

Removing barriers: A student who starts the school year with ill-fitting clothing, uncut hair, dirty shoes, and a backpack with a broken zipper may not feel the confidence needed to be a successful student. Students who don't have the support they need to feel equal to their peers can suffer from a lack of confidence and self-esteem, which can lead to absenteeism and poor academic achievement. An unstable home environment, which may include homelessness, separation from parents/family, or not knowing where they will sleep at night, can create barriers that may seem insurmountable. With JumpStart, students can look forward to the fresh start of a new school year. Building student confidence and giving them a positive outlook on the upcoming school year can have lasting effects.

Evidence of success: JumpStart has been an annual event for nine years, held the third Thursday in August, before the start of school. Students attending the first two years received two outfits, a haircut, and school supplies. The program now averages 500 student attendees each year. Over 200 community members volunteer their time to planning, setting up, and providing day-of support for the event. The school social workers also attend the event to distribute school supplies and assist in other areas as needed.

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2020 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

September 24-26
Houston, TX

nsba.org/CubeAnnualConference

AN nsba EVENT
It was early in Thomas J. Gentzel’s professional career in county government when an unexpected opportunity came his way. Little did he know that it would change the course of his life and forge a deep commitment to public education and school board governance.

While working for the County Commissioners Association in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1980, Gentzel was approached about a lobbying job with the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA). “It sounded interesting, so I decided to try it,” he recalls. “I thought I’d do it for a while. I was still in my 20s and open to opportunities.”

He found four decades’ worth of school board-related opportunities: more than 32 years at PSBA (first as a lobbyist, later as director of governmental and member relations, and finally as executive director), followed by eight years, starting in 2012, in the top leadership position—executive director and CEO—of the National School Boards Association. Leading a staff of more than 70 in Alexandria, Virginia, Gentzel has overseen NSBA’s legislative, legal, public advocacy, and member services initiatives for the past seven and a half years.

“I’ve thought about this a lot recently, how serendipitous it was that I wound up taking a job at the school boards association just about 40 years ago,” says Gentzel, who will officially retire from NSBA in June.

INSPIRING AND COMMITTED
What started as a career became a calling that deeply resonated with the self-described amateur historian’s interest in American history. An hour-long conversation with Gentzel is peppered with references to Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings about the importance of associations in America; Thomas Jefferson’s views on the need for an educated citizenry for a society to be self-governed; and then-candidate Barack Obama’s 2008 speech on race relations and the ongoing work.
needed to make this nation “a more perfect union.”

“I’m a passionate advocate of public education but would be the first to say we’re not doing the job we need to do for all our kids. If we’re serious about this work, we have to make sure every child in America has access to a great public school where they live, and we’re not there yet,” Gentzel says. Achieving this goal demands “having a candid conversation about what we can do to continuously improve public schools,” he adds.

It’s a drum that Gentzel beats frequently and to great effect, say colleagues and admirers in the school board and education community. “I’ve always found Tom to be an eloquent spokesperson for public education and local school board governance,” says Lisa Bartusek, executive director of the Iowa Association of School Boards. “I see him time and time again in speeches, articles, panel discussions, and in the media describing the value of public education, the difference that local school board governance makes, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said, ‘I wish I’d said that.’ And then I do by quoting him,” she laughs.

Richard Long, executive director of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of leading education organizations working to improve student learning in public schools, has participated in numerous forums and panels with Gentzel over the years. He praises the NSBA chief’s “realistic advocacy,” “thoughtful and strategic” approach in interactions, and “ability to unpack an issue and then focus on how it’s positive for the [education] field and effective for NSBA.”

Kenneth Smith, president and CEO of Jobs for America’s Graduates, Inc., a national youth employment and training program, consulted with NSBA’s Commission to Close the Skills Gap. He calls Gentzel “one of the most inspiring and committed leaders” that he’s met in 40 years of working in the education workforce space.

Adds Rich Bagin, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association: “Tom has an ability to analyze and slice through important issues that some other people often miss. That was an asset to us when he served on our board.”

Colleagues from Gentzel’s days as a lobbyist, leading governmental and member relations, and serving as PSBA executive director say that his management style has been rooted in inclusion and ensuring that as many voices as possible are given the opportunity to be heard. “It seemed important to him to get a lot of input from the various people on the staff who were responsible for the different aspects of serving our membership,” recalls Stuart Knade, PSBA’s senior director of legal services.

He had a way of bringing people together, even when they had divergent viewpoints, and “focusing on those points that are key to moving an issue forward,” says Barbara Bolas, president of Pennsylvania’s Upper St. Clair School Board and PSBA president in 2001. Bolas served as the 2008-09 NSBA president.

Iowa’s Bartusek notes that “across the country at the state level, each state is in such a different situation politically. The school districts are in very different situations: rural, urban, suburban, and such a diversity of need. Tom is excellent at listening, striving to draw all of those diverse views and needs and situations toward common ground.”

OWNERSHIP FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A proud product of the Keystone State, Gentzel grew up in State College, Pennsylvania, and attended The Pennsylvania State University. “It was a great town to grow up in,” he says. Although not a big city, it is a university town where racial and ethnic diversity enriched the community and Gentzel’s world view. “My family wasn’t directly involved with the university, but they owned rental property,” he says. “What I appreciated years later is that, as a kid, I would meet students from different countries from around the world, and it was just a way of life growing up. By the time I got to high school or certainly college, I realized that a lot of kids who lived 10 miles from where I was never had that experience.”

The role that public schools can play to bring people together from different walks of life is important, but Gentzel says he worries because charter schools, vouchers, and the
• Miss Boyd, Tom’s kindergarten teacher, was also his dad’s kindergarten teacher, in the same schoolroom.

• In high school, a stint on the Mayor’s Youth Advisory Council led to a seat on the local traffic commission as a full voting member. Tom remained active on the commission through college.

• Large audiences are no problem for Tom, who served as the State College Area High School mascot. Much like Penn State’s famed Nittany Lion, State College’s Little Lion energized the crowd by doing pushups on the field when the football team scored a touchdown.

• Tom loves history, and he collects old maps—including a 1598 view of the Western Hemisphere that is, he says, “amazingly accurate, especially considering that it was made just 100 years after Columbus stumbled across the area.”

• To sweeten up long meetings, Tom offers Wilbur Buds chocolates in his conference room. The sweet treat is made in Lititz, Pennsylvania, and is rumored to have been the “inspiration” for the better-known Hershey’s Kisses.

• “The Barnyard”—a sausage, egg, and cheese breakfast sandwich—is a Tom favorite when attending the Centre County Grange Encampment and Fair. For years the Gentzel family loaded up the family RV and stayed for the full 10-day event. These days, Tom “can handle about three days” at a time, says his wife, Sherrin, who remains a diehard for the full encampment experience. “That’s my joy, not his,” she says.
choice movement often can be a means for resegregating schools, “and we’re seeing a lot of evidence of that.”

From his earliest days at PSBA, advocating for school boards “was never just a job,” he explains. “I always felt strongly about the need to have really effective school boards and that there’s a correlation between what boards do and how they spend their time and student achievement.” This point was highlighted in the 2001 Lighthouse Study, Gentzel notes.

“Back in the day,” he says, the role of school boards typically rested with “putting the resources in place.” Those resources were often referred to as the four Bs—buildings, buses, budgets, and ball games. That mindset allowed school boards to hand off to the superintendent the responsibility for all things related to student performance.

“The big blinding glimpse of the obvious, when you think about it,” says Gentzel, is if boards “don’t feel some ownership for student achievement, if they just feel that’s the superintendent’s and the teachers’ responsibility, then they are making a big mistake. If they realize their ownership role, then they can devote their efforts to support student achievement.”

Clearly, boards should not be in the business of running their districts on a day-to-day basis, and they have a lot to do that’s not directly related to student achievement, “but if they don’t organize their board meetings in a way that they’re talking about student achievement and how they allocate resources to improve student achievement, then they’re probably not as engaged in it as they should be,” he says. “The best test is to look at a board’s agenda. It says a lot about where priorities lie.”

**DISTRICT MANAGEMENT**

Emphasizing a governance approach that involves both the school board (for setting the vision, adopting policies, allocating resources, and providing accountability) and the superintendent (as the chief education and executive officer of the system), along with a governing culture that emphasizes how the two entities interact, has been a priority during Gentzel’s tenure leading NSBA.

It’s a priority echoed by Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. Domenech and Gentzel’s like-minded view on district management, as well as their friendship and mutual respect have been on display during their joint appearances at each organization’s annual conferences.

“We do it every year twice, and we’re proud of the fact there’s never a script, no pre-planning,” says Domenech. The spontaneous give-and-take on board-superintendent relations offers “a great example of the relationship that we have. We can interact with each other, have a great time doing it, and make it an informative session for the people who show up.”

The two have worked closely on numerous initiatives, including passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, and have become fast friends. “I don’t recall one time when we’ve been of a different mind,” Domenech says.
There was, however, that little friendly wager over the likelihood that ESSA, the federal education law, would be passed by Congress. “I was of the opinion it would never happen,” he says. “Tom was an optimist and said, ‘Yes, it will.’” The two bet a steak dinner on the outcome, and when the bill passed, Gentzel “was very happy to not only collect his meal, but also let the world know that I had been the pessimist and that he proved me wrong,” Domenech says.

Along with the passage of ESSA, which included NSBA’s successful effort to include provisions that boost local governance as part of the nation’s strategy to improve schools, Gentzel says he’s particularly proud of NSBA’s advocacy work “on the Hill, in the courts, and in the public arena. I think we’ve done a great job in terms of getting the message out from local school officials about the importance of local governance.”

He also cites the work done on equity as noteworthy. Along with reorganizing staff to sustain this commitment, “the board went through a really good process of coming up with a common definition of equity, and we’re seeing a lot of state associations doing great work with this, and we’re supporting them actively.”

And while “we’re not out of the woods yet,” he says that the “serious financial problems” related to the association’s pension are now being managed. “We had to make some difficult decisions in terms of furloughing some staff and cutting some expenses, but we’re starting to build cash and are finally growing reserves.”

As a former state association executive director and former chair of NSBA’s Organization of State Association Executive Directors, Gentzel remains committed to the view that NSBA’s primary purpose is to serve its state school boards associations. “They’re the members. We’re their Washington office. That’s why we’re here.

“Everything we do, I hope, goes back in some way directly to policies that our board adopts or that our delegate assembly approves, or that our state associations are telling us in one way or the other that they want us to do.”

STAYING ENGAGED
Gentzel stresses that he’s loved leading NSBA but is at a stage in his life where he wants “to have a little more control over my schedule.” With that freedom, there will be more time to spend with his family (wife Sherrin, three sons, and five grandchildren) and more time for non-work-related travel—perhaps a road trip along Route 66, visits to some presidential libraries, or following the Lewis and Clark Trail, says Sherrin, a retired schoolteacher.

“Beyond that, I’d like to stay engaged,” Gentzel says. “I want to continue to find a way I can contribute in support of public education, school governance, and leadership issues.” There’s a lot of work to be done, and there always will be, he adds: “I’m not ready to leave the vineyard and am willing to keep toiling on a slightly different schedule.”

Michelle Healy (mhealy@nsba.org) is associate editor of American School Board Journal.
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Gaggle
When eighth-graders at South Carolina’s White Knoll Middle School created projects about their state’s nullification crisis over high tariffs, they used something they were all very familiar with—meme.

Previous classes, which had used traditional lectures, activities, worksheets, and videos to learn about the conflict between South Carolina and the federal government in 1832-33, had struggled to understand the importance of the dispute during Andrew Jackson’s presidency.

But when these eighth-graders were tasked with creating two memes—one to represent Jackson and the other to represent his vice president from South Carolina, John C. Calhoun—interest soared. They overlapped pictures of the men with adapted song lyrics and common meme formats such as “That look you give when…” to demonstrate each leader’s perspective of the conflict.

“It was a drastic shift” in comprehension, says digital learning coach Suzanne Brooks. “They ended up being really creative, and it seemed to take the content to a different level.”

This is exactly the sort of approach to teaching that resonates with today’s students—digital natives for whom engagement, according to research, is a serious problem stretching across racial, geographic, and socioeconomic lines.

Not even half of students who responded to a recent Gallup Student Poll—47 percent—are engaged with school. And while engagement is strong by the end of elementary school, it declines from fifth grade through
Getting students to care about what they’re learning requires authentic and meaningful connections and collaboration, as well as choice and agency in the classroom. Along with parental involvement, these factors contribute to better academic and personal outcomes. Gallup also found that engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say they get excellent grades, as well as 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful about the future than their disengaged peers.

School districts certainly can find ways to increase student engagement—but the most successful efforts appear to be born from a quantifiable starting point.

“It turns out that engagement is not just an elusive intangible,” says Sonya Heisters, director of partnerships and outreach for YouthTruth, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that works with schools and districts nationwide to administer anonymous school climate surveys. “It’s actually quite measurable, and we can measure it elegantly in a way that’s actionable for educators.”

**‘PURPOSELY PLAN’ FOR CHANGE**

YouthTruth can disaggregate data by grade level, gender identity, and student self-reported race or ethnicity, which helps educators target interventions where they’re needed most.

That means focusing less on “lagging metrics” such as attendance, grades, graduation rates, college placement, or acceptance rates, and more on real-world experiences, notes Heisters.

YouthTruth’s recent report, “Learning from Student Voice: Engagement,” analyzed online school climate and culture surveys administered across 36 states. While it shows that the majority of students feel engaged overall, only 48 percent of them in grades five through 12 feels that what they’re learning is relevant to life outside of school. And, as with the Gallup poll, the older the students, the less likely they are to feel engaged. In addition, the report found that only 52 percent of secondary students enjoy attending school most of the time.

Engagement soars when students are encouraged to work together toward a common purpose, are exposed to novel experiences, and understand how what they’re learning relates to their lives outside of school, according to Jimmie Walker, executive director of curriculum and instruction for Texas’ Alamo Heights Independent School District.

To do that successfully takes vision, strategic preparations, and a calculated execution, says Walker: “You don’t just wait and wish it happens. You have to purposely plan for it.”

Alamo Heights offers professional learning opportunities through the Schlechter Center, a Kentucky-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to increase engagement in schools.

As the district discovered, it pays to go straight to the source when trying to figure out how to combat complacency in the classroom. Students are surveyed about the level of engagement they feel with their teachers—a level that gets tracked over time and compared to a national norm sample.

“They know what they’re talking about,” says Walker. “They know what works with them.”

**TECHNOLOGY AS ENGAGEMENT TOOL**

An effective way to make content more accessible, even fun: Technology, particularly the kind of high-quality, animated digital content Utica Community Schools uses to keep kids mentally stimulated.

“When a student gets stuck, there are immediate prompts or questions to make them think about their responses,” says Christine Johns, superintendent of the 27,000-student district, which is part of six communities in Macomb County, Michigan, and is the state’s second-largest school district. “It’s not unusual to walk
into a classroom and see students giggling as they watch a short little video showing them how to do an instructional task.”

Children who learn at a young age how to set and reach goals become intrinsically motivated to continue learning, a benefit that carries forward into secondary, postsecondary, and professional life experiences, explains Johns.

Williamson County Schools in Franklin, Tennessee, found a way to make its 41,000 students more involved by putting them front and center in videos, published on YouTube, that celebrate good news, describe class projects, and spotlight issues such as vaping, cybersafety, and distracted driving.

Carol Birdsong, the district’s communications director, came up with the idea after watching how the television show “CBS This Morning” summarizes world news in 90 seconds.

Birdsong recalls: “I came in one day and said, ‘What if we could show, once a week, a clip of what every school is doing?’ Each one has a personality.”

A NEEDED SHIFT IN FOCUS

Teachers who keep things “new and fresh,” ensure that learning connects to the world beyond school, and model what it means to be vulnerable when learning, are going to best prepare younger generations for what’s ahead for them, says middle school teacher and project-based learning proponent Heather Wolpert-Gawron, author of Just Ask Us: Kids Speak Out on Student Engagement.

Yet she believes there’s still too much emphasis on end-of-year exams.

“It’s a strange mixed message we face as educators,” she says. “We know that we want to teach students how to communicate and be creative and be critical thinkers, and we’re still having them take standardized tests, which is really the antithesis of all that.”

For Geoffrey Thomas, superintendent of Madison School District 321 in Rexburg, Idaho, proof of an engaged student body has nothing to do with how well students perform on state standardized tests.

“I’ve never even looked at [the scores],” says Thomas, who is a fan of formative assessments in the classroom. “It’s an interesting modern-day paradox. By not focusing on achievement, we achieve.”

While Madison School District 321 has the highest reading scores in southeastern Idaho, which encompasses 14 counties, Thomas is talking about another form of achievement.

According to a 2018 survey conducted by the Idaho State Department of Education, the district, with about 5,400 students, is home to two of the top schools in the state when it comes to student engagement. At Hibbard Elementary, 82.1 percent of students were engaged; at Kennedy Elementary, 83.8 percent of students were engaged—the highest level of any public school in Idaho.

Promoting opportunities for more physical movement has been a key factor in boosting that engagement, says Thomas. In addition to extending recess from 15 minutes to 20 minutes and incorporating mid-morning exercises that include yoga or dance, transitioning more often between workstations during academic lessons keeps students more interested in what they are being asked to do.

And that makes things easier for educators.

“It’s an enormous waste of academic and mental energy when you’re pushing the principals to push the teachers to push the kids, and when does coercion really work in any society?” Thomas says. “On the other hand, with a warm, welcoming, energetic classroom, kids are naturally going to be more inclined to be engaged, teachers are going to enjoy
their jobs more, and principals will have less stress because they'll be dealing with fewer behavior problems.”

FREQUENT CHECK-INS AND EQUITY
At Katherine R. Smith Elementary School in San Jose, California, a greater emphasis on student engagement in K-6 grew out of an increased interest in restorative practices. At first, morning circles became a place to help build relationships with students while giving them a space to offload stresses and struggles. But administrators concluded that circles could be used in other contexts throughout the day.

“They have shifted beyond just an emotional check-in,” says co-principal Kevin Armstrong. “It could be, ‘What’s one thing you’ve learned?’ ‘What’s one thing you’re struggling with on our project right now?’ ‘What’s a goal you have when you come back in the morning?’

“When a school commits to using restorative practices and circles, it can be transformative [especially for students who are hungry or tired], but there has to be alignment that that’s a need and something you want to focus on,” he continues. “Reading and writing is obviously important, but it is really hard to get better at those things when you’re struggling so greatly.”

Parents also have a role in creating a highly engaged classroom. The National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education reports that students with involved parents are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school—no matter their family’s income or background.

What about students whose parents are not involved?
It is exactly that sort of question that leads to conversations about whether engagement initiatives to guide teachers should be more formalized—perhaps with an engagement standard on a national scale, suggests Wolpert-Gawron.

“When we talk about issues of equity, we know that every student deserves to be in an engaging classroom,” she says. “Regardless of their fundamental knowledge or lack thereof, every student deserves access to strategies that can help them remain curious as learners.”

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AN nsba EVENT
These tips for school board members grew out of a similar list I created for NSBA to help provide orientation for new state association executive directors. I have worked for the New York State School Boards Association and the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education for nearly 40 years. This list is useful for new board members. It also can serve as a good reminder for those of us who have been doing this work for much longer.

Here are 24 tips to help make you a better school board member

Robert Rader
1. Put your students’ needs first. Be true to your district’s mission.
2. Drop your party affiliation at the boardroom door.
3. Remember that you represent ALL the children in the district, not just those whose parents voted for you.
4. Know your roles and responsibilities.
5. Know the superintendent’s roles and responsibilities.
6. Communicate often and honestly with other members of the board and the superintendent. One-to-one conversations are best for building relationships.
7. Learn about what drives other board members and the superintendent to develop strong bonds between the members of your leadership team.
8. Be the advocate your students and district need you to be.
9. Inspire others.
10. Strengthen your board’s image. Conduct yourself with respect and civility. Help build a professional culture. You are a role model.
11. Let others shine, whether other board members or staff. Dale Carnegie told us, “A person’s name is to that person, the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” Almost everyone likes to see their names in print in a positive way, too.
12. Speak your piece, but actively listen to others speak theirs.
13. When confronted by a mistake, whether by a board member or someone else, generally assume incompetence rather than malfeasance. Your first reaction should be to give them the benefit of the doubt.
15. Pick your battles. Often others just want to vent and will feel validated by your listening.
16. Apologize when you know you should.
17. Be aware of your own implicit biases. We all have them.
18. Remember that, as a board member, you have no other power than other citizens, except when at the board table.
19. Do not try to solve every problem you hear about. Explaining that there is a chain of command should be your mantra.
20. Follow the money. Your budget is your most important policy document.
21. Hone and use your emotional intelligence. Walking in someone else’s shoes can give you a completely different perspective.
22. Keep and use your sense of humor to defuse situations. Try not to take yourself too seriously.
23. Take time for yourself and your family. You need to recharge, too.

And, lastly...

24. Focus on the big picture with optimism and think long-term. Although this may be difficult in light of your current concerns, strong leaders are optimistic and build their legacies one step at a time.

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**Uncomfortable Conversations**

A district’s equity strategy is based on open communications

**THE SUPERINTENDENT OF**
Massachusetts’ Needham Public Schools recently met with a parent who was upset about his child’s school discussion of skin color and race in class. The parent said talking about those issues could make racial tensions or divisions worse in the 5,700-student district.

Both the parent, who said he is “color blind” to the differences in people, and the superintendent are white. The parent asked Dan Gutekanst, the superintendent, if he felt the same.

“After a pause,” Gutekanst wrote in his blog in early February 2020, “I answered, ‘No.’”

This admission is not out of character for the veteran superintendent, who has led an ongoing equity initiative now in its third year in this Boston suburb. Since mid-2017, district officials, staff, and the school board have embarked on a series of difficult and often uncomfortable conversations about race, cultural heritage, and understanding differences.

Those conversations, ranging from one-on-one meetings to classroom talks, community forums, and school and districtwide professional development, have been led by Gutekanst and Needham’s school board. By being open and public about equity, their hope is to raise awareness about differences in schools and the broader community, and then take steps to deal with those differences in a fair manner.

And slowly, sometimes painfully, it seems to be working.

**GET REAL**
In early 2017, I wrote an ASBJ story on the issues school leaders faced after a historically divisive presidential election. The story, titled “Aftershock,” looked at the increase in harassment and threats students were facing at schools because of their immigration status, sexual orientation, race, gender, religious affiliation, or political beliefs.

Maureen Costello, director of Teaching Tolerance, a program of the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, told me at the time that every school board would deal in some way with the effect of the election.

“The kind of division and emotion you are seeing in our communities is reflected in our classrooms and hallways, and it is affecting students’ behavior and their overall social/emotional well-being,” Costello said. “The question is what can you do to bring things under control, so all students feel safe.”

Around this time, Needham’s school committee—the name given to school boards in Massachusetts—supported an audit to see how the district was dealing with issues around equity. The audit showed the predominantly white district—fewer than one-fourth of its students are minorities—“needed a wakeup call,” says Diane Simmons, Needham’s director of strategic planning and community engagement.
“Needham has always prided itself in being a district with a focus on equity and all of our students, but we’re a product of a movement in our country that is making people rethink what is going on,” Simmons says. “Although we strive to be inclusive, accessible, and equitable to all, our students are living in a broader society and bringing that into the classroom.”

For the report, consultant Christine Robinson interviewed and held focus groups with more than 250 parents, community members, staff, and students. Issued in December 2017 and published in full on the district’s website in March 2018, the report showed that some students of color felt marginalized and harassed, some parents were not being heard or felt disconnected, and teachers were anxious about “doing or saying the right thing when the issue of race surfaces.”

“The audit was realistic about where we were as a community, and it really opened our eyes,” Simmons says. “A lot of it was very tough for us to recognize, but we decided to take a systemic approach to address it.”

The district established the REAL (Race, Equity, Access, Leadership) Coalition that works with staff, students, families, and community members to promote equitable practices for all in our community.” The coalition started with a steering committee of central office staff and building-level administrators who developed goals in six areas identified in the report. The committee then expanded to include students, teachers, parents, and school board members. The 31-member group now oversees the ongoing equity efforts across the district.

“We had a lot of ways of expressing equity across the district,” says Simmons, who serves on the committee. “We brought them all to the table and took what was a piecemeal approach and pieced it together to use as a working definition of equity.”

UNCOMFORTABLE
What makes Needham’s equity focus unusual is that it is very public and open. The audit findings, along with information about the work of the REAL Coalition subcommittees, is on the district’s website. “Equity” has its own tab on the homepage.

The district has developed a five-year strategic plan, with the first year dedicated to developing a framework for equity. “We had to relook at all of our communications vehicles and the opportunities we had to reinforce the plan going forward,” Simmons says. “The website is the place to capture all of the efforts that are going on across the district. It’s very deliberate. It’s our way of saying that equity lives here and is going to live here for the very long-term.”

In his blog, Gutekanst acknowledged that “conversations about race can be uncomfortable and unnerving,” but he believes they also present opportunities for learning. In explaining to the parent why he is not color blind, he noted that he does see “the differences in people, including their skin color and race.”

“Being color blind disregards the circumstances of that person and prevents one from being inquisitive about another’s life, culture, and story,” Gutekanst writes. “In short, color blindness whitewashes the world in an attempt to comfort ourselves and make believe that black and brown people, for example, all have the same experiences and opportunities in a predominantly white school and community when, deep down inside, we know that is not their reality.”

For Simmons and other staff, the challenge now is “maintaining momentum and keeping the messaging alive.” That includes Gutekanst’s blog, videos with various experts on equity issues, social media posts, information sent home in school newsletters, and an annual performance report that goes to all households and businesses in Needham.

Opening the door to talk about equity for all has not been easy, Simmons says. Some staff members have been hesitant to discuss race. Graffiti with hate speech has been painted on school walls. But the district is pushing ahead.

“All of the work around equity is hard,” Simmons says. Students now are leading conversations and interventions. A courageous conversations class at the high school is “bringing things to the teacher’s attention that were under the radar before.”

She continues: “Being blind doesn’t help. We really have to see. What we have to do is become clearer in our intentions and actions. It doesn’t mean that it’s ever easy. It just means we keep going forward.”

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The Public’s Voice

Uncontested candidates and low voter turnout are concerns in board elections

PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE RUN BY THE public. They are not controlled by any government body. As Bucknell University education professor Abe Feuerstein remarked in 2002, “While democratic processes are numerous and involve multiple opportunities for citizens to voice their preferences and deliberate on the common good, the most obvious evidence of democracy in education is found in school board elections.”

The nation’s nearly 14,000 school boards are responsible for overseeing and managing the educational resources that serve 56.6 million students across the nation. “The decisions made by school boards affect virtually every important aspect of local schools, from boundaries to bus schedules, curriculum to clubs, funding to field trips,” according to the New York State School Boards Association.

Most school boards are put together through elections while a smaller number are appointed. However, whether elected or appointed, these public officials take on one of the most demanding roles in America, namely, the leadership of public schools and the education of the children in their local community.

“Today, school board members need to adopt budgets, enact policy, establish clear and measurable expectations, engage the public, and chart a future course — and then hire capable superintendents to execute those plans,” wrote NSBA CEO and Executive Director Thomas J. Gentzel in his December 2019 column in ASBJ.

It is clear, then, that participating in the election of boards of education is of paramount importance, but the data show a very different picture, with very low participation by both candidates and voters.

LACK OF CANDIDATES

A 2014 Gallup Poll shows that 56 percent of Americans believe that local school boards, rather than state or federal government, should have the greatest influence on what is taught in public schools. However, school board elections often find themselves with uncontested candidates and empty school board seats. According to Ballotpedia, the candidates per seat ratio was 1.89 in 2014, 1.72 in 2015, and 1.90 in 2016 school board elections.

Researchers point out that uncontested candidates and empty school board seats have become an issue in school board elections. For example:

- In New Jersey, there was a total of 805 uncontested school board seats, and for 130 of them, no one was even on the ballot in 2015.
- In Virginia, an entire county had no contested school board seats, and two districts didn’t have a single individual running in 2015.
- In California, in 2015, one county had eight open seats from 25 school boards, but no single candidate signed up to run, and existing boards had to appoint members to fill these openings.
- In a district in Virginia, three candidates ran unopposed for re-election in 2019.

———
LOW VOTER TURNOUT
Voter turnout for political office elections has gone up since 2014, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. However, in local school board elections, voter turnout has been discouragingly low—often just 5 percent or 10 percent. According to local news:

• Only 8.7 percent of eligible Los Angeles County voters participated in the 2019 local school board election;

• In a school district in Iowa, 498 voters—10.05 percent of registered voters—decided the 2017 race for school board members;

• In South Dakota, in a school district with 2,054 voters at the time of the election, only 245 (12 percent) participated in the local school board election.

The significance of school board elections cannot be overstated. The chart above shows data analyzed by NSBA’s Center for Public Education (CPE). CPE researchers translated the numbers into estimated percentages, and found that:

• While about 2.2 percent of all board members nationwide were elected in 5 percent of the nation’s school districts in 2014 and 2016, respectively, the newly elected members were to serve approximately 35 percent of K-12 students in the U.S.

• Although about 1.3 percent of all board members were elected in 3 percent of the nation’s school districts in 2015, 2017, and 2018 respectively, the newly elected would make decisions for 20 percent to 25 percent of K-12 students in the U.S.

• In small districts (i.e., student enrollment lower than 1,000), elections in 2019 could bring in about 40 percent of new school board members (2 out of 5 or 3 out of 7 members in a board).

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD
While factors such as the timing of elections, demographic change, and voters’ lack of awareness of candidates can affect school board elections, unchallenged candidates and low voter turnout remain serious concerns in terms of selecting board members who can truly represent the local community to make school policies.

Research shows that school board elections with relatively higher voter turnout and a broader range of constituents (e.g., holding school board elections at the same time as state- or national-level elections) are associated with higher academic performance of students, as opposed to elections with lower voter turnout.

Simply put, engaging—being candidates or voting—in school board elections is a powerful way to support students’ success in their learning as well as in life.

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Shield and Sword
The law is a driver for educational equity

FOR DECADES, ADVOCATES FOR
students, parents, and other community
members have used civil rights law to
clear away at perceived barriers to equity
in schools. Federal laws, including Title
VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title
IX of the Education Amendments of
1972, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and
the Americans with Disabilities Act of
1990, provide protections against civil
rights violations in U.S. schools.

In state and federal courts and admin-
istrative proceedings, challenges to
school policies and practices impacting
students based on race, color, national
origin, disability, sex, and gender incre-
mentally have encouraged changes in
schools that made them more equitable.
School boards have often, although cer-
tainly not always, played a defensive role
in such conflicts, expending significant
legal resources in an effort to preserve
internal control. Advocates used the law
as a vehicle to control school district
decisions from the outside looking in.

In recent years, however, a shakeup
has occurred. Rather than seeking to
maintain the equity status quo in schools,
school boards and administrators increas-
ingly have joined forces with external
equity advocates, including parents and
students, to think about how to increase
equity for students.

With districts and boards playing of-
fense rather than defense, it is only fitting
that the law play a different role in these
struggles. Rather than being a source
of fear and concern for school leaders,
civil rights law is an important shield for
schools in supporting decisions aimed at
increasing equity. Boards can use the law
as a driver for internal reforms supporting
equity in public schools.

FINDING SUPPORT
A recent example from Illinois is illustra-
tive of the changed role that civil rights
law can play in the quest for equity in
American schools.

On Aug. 9, 2019, the Illinois governor
signed a bill into law that requires, among
other things, that public schools teach “the
roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bi-
sexual, and transgender [“LGBT”] people in
the history of this country and this State.”
The new law also requires that history
textbooks purchased by schools also must
include the topic. It takes effect in July.

Of course, LGBTQ curriculum has
been taught in public schools for years,
but only on an ad hoc basis. The Illinois
law for the first time requires that curric-
ulum to be addressed. The response from
critics has been strong.

As school districts prepare to imple-
ment the law, many have asked whether
parents should have the right to opt out.
Citing research that has long suggested
that teaching LGBTQ curriculum in
schools promotes school safety, some
schools do not wish to allow opt-outs.

This is where law can act as a driver
of educational equity internally within
schools. For school districts seeking to re-
quire LGBTQ curriculum for all students,
the law becomes a valuable shield against
opt-out requests. The state code allows
parents to opt out of sexual education.
However, the LGBTQ curriculum deals
only with historical matters.

Rather than defending against allega-
tions of violating state law by those who
would like to increase equity in schools,
the law allows districts seeking to increase
educational equity an opportunity to do so.
There are many reasons for board members and administrators to think differently about civil rights law.

AUDITING COMPLIANCE

Another way that school leaders can use law to support equity is by considering what changes would be required in an administrative civil rights complaint and making those changes even if no complaint has been filed. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is the federal agency tasked with investigating complaints against schools under Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504/the ADA.

If an OCR investigation uncovers noncompliance with a federal law, OCR requires the district to enter into a resolution agreement with it to address any issues found. OCR investigations are notoriously lengthy and costly, and resolution agreements can lead to oversight for years. That “monitoring” by OCR often necessitates expending significant amounts of money, time, and other resources to address issues found during an investigation.

In January 2020, the U.S. Department of Education announced a new center through OCR focused on “proactive compliance with federal civil rights law.” The Outreach, Prevention and Non-discrimination (OPEN) Center will “provide assistance and support to schools, educators, families, and students to ensure better awareness of the requirements and protections of federal non-discrimination laws” through “targeted support to recipient institutions and the public.”

Districts that have experienced data and interview requests from OCR will be understandably wary of opening their doors to the OPEN Center. Even if the center is aimed at helping schools reach civil rights compliance, the housing of it within an office that has a reputation for excoriating school districts publicly when it finds civil rights violations—even under the more-lenient leadership of the Trump administration and U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos—should cause many school leaders pause.

Yet, the idea of taking a more proactive approach to civil rights compliance is an important one to consider. Rather than waiting for an OCR complaint to then dedicate time and resources, including that of legal counsel, to a civil rights concern, school leaders can deploy those resources on the front end before a complaint has been filed.

Notably, such audits can be done in a confidential manner that mitigates the risk of public disclosure under open records requests through an internal audit, preferably with the assistance of legal counsel.

Legal counsel may even be able to contact OCR or the OPEN Center for guidance or other technical assistance without identifying the educational institution. This allows the benefits that likely motivated the new OPEN Center without the risks of voluntarily putting the district under OCR’s microscope.

Internal audits decrease the risk that individuals who feel a matter has been handled incorrectly by an educational institution will file a complaint with OCR. Even if an individual files a complaint, if a district has investigated and addressed the issue previously, OCR will defer to the district’s findings. The fact that the institution took the initiative to audit its civil rights compliance before a complaint was filed will reflect favorably on the institution both with OCR and in the media. Thus, devoting time and resources to an audit on the front end can lead to significant savings on the back end.

There are many reasons for board members and administrators to think differently about civil rights law and its role in efforts to increase equity in public schools. In the past, civil rights law was used as a hammer, with the goal of chipping away at perceived inequities and putting institutional leaders on the defensive. Today, civil rights law provides a tool for schools seeking to increase equity and defend against critics of equity measures.

By employing legal counsel or other parties to conduct internal audits, schools can gain the benefits offered by resources, such as the OPEN Center, without OCR’s spotlight on an institution. Civil rights law can be an important shield for educational institutions seeking to increase equity.

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Equity

**Equitable Instruction**

Integrate social-emotional learning into academics

**HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE TRULY equitable instruction?** Does it give every student access to rigorous academics that stretch their intellectual capacities? Is it personalized to each student’s unique academic needs? Does it mitigate the effects of the opportunity gap and close achievement gaps? Equitable instruction not only must address these academic needs for students: It must do more.

The missing piece in many approaches to equitable instruction is the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) into academics. Students should have authentic opportunities to practice SEL skills like conflict resolution, perspective-taking, and collaboration daily in their classrooms while they are learning the academic content through a student teaming process. These are the skills that will help all students thrive in college and their careers. They can equip the most vulnerable learners to lift themselves out of generational poverty and flourish in the new economy.

Google conducted a multiyear research initiative on the key skills of their most effective managers. The highest-ranked skill was being a good coach. Other skills in the top eight included empathizing with team members, being a good communicator, and the ability to create a clear vision and strategy with a team. Some students may be able to develop these highly sought-after SEL skills through sports, other extracurricular activities, or at home with their families. But what about the students who don’t have access to SEL-building opportunities outside of their classrooms?

**NOT JUST ‘ONE MORE THING’**

According to a 2019 survey by the Education Week Research Center, the No. 1 challenge teachers face in supporting students’ social-emotional development in the classroom is that focusing on academic content leaves them with little time for SEL. But SEL doesn’t have to nor shouldn’t be an extra burden for teachers. Though SEL is often taught as a separate program, the most effective way to harness its power is to embed SEL into daily classroom instruction along with rigorous academic learning.

In a traditional classroom, embedding SEL is difficult because the teacher is doing most of the talking and explaining, and students are expected to sit quietly in their seats and listen. Confident students usually raise their hands to answer questions, while other students may not feel comfortable speaking in front of the whole class. This leads to fewer opportunities to participate. A typical SEL lesson might look like this: The teacher explains what empathy and care mean and offers some examples. Students individually read a story illustrating empathy and care and write an essay to demonstrate their understanding. At no point in that process did students have a chance to exercise empathy and care with their peers.

**STUDENT-LED ACADEMIC TEAMS**

What if the lesson looked like this instead? Students work together in small, diverse teams on an open-ended task (in any academic content area) that requires the interdependence of the team members to complete it. Students wrestle
Student-led academic teaming opens access and equity to core instruction for every student, including reluctant learners, English learners, and those with disabilities.

with different ideas and push each other towards deeper thinking as they try to come up with a solution without the teacher’s help. The teams have guiding norms, including SEL protocols, so they can deal with their own issues such as arguing, being off task, or not contributing equally.

During this lesson, students experience social bonding and effectively develop empathy and care in their teams because the level of cognitive rigor in the task necessitates that they rely on each other and coach each other through academic struggles. In other words, students are in a classroom environment where every student must develop and practice SEL competencies. And in this scenario, students didn’t just learn how to empathize with peers. They also exercised persistence, critical thinking, and communication—the same skills they will need to thrive outside of the classroom.

Student-led academic teaming opens access and equity to core instruction for every student, including reluctant learners, English learners, and those with disabilities. The team members own each other’s learning and foster an environment of academic protocols and care. In an academic teaming school, SEL is integrated across all content levels and in all grade levels. Every student has opportunities to exercise SEL skills in their daily lessons.

Not only do students build SEL skills in their teams, which can lead to more equitable outcomes in their personal lives, but the academic achievement results from schools that have implemented teaming schoolwide also are significant.

A 10,000-student multiyear study in Iowa’s Des Moines Public Schools was conducted by Learning Sciences International’s Applied Research Center using the federal What Works Clearinghouse Design Standards. It focused on schoolwide implementation of academic teaming through a model called Schools for Rigor. The study found that students at schools where academic teaming was implemented experienced statistically significant improvements in reading and mathematics achievement compared to students at matched control schools.

Of particular interest is how academic teaming impacted students who had achievement gaps. African-American students, students with disabilities, and English learners all saw achievement gaps close by 4 percent to 7 percent in one year.

The associate superintendent of Des Moines Public Schools said, “Schools for Rigor fosters inclusiveness—instead of EL or special education students being pulled out into isolation, these students are able to work in their academic teams within mainstream classrooms.”

A comprehensive vision for equitable instruction must focus on both the academic outcomes that schools and communities want for their students and also the SEL skills outcomes integrated into core instruction. Student-led academic teaming puts this vision for equity into action, so all students have the chance to grow into leaders with the skills to effect positive change for themselves and others.

Visit www.academicteaming.com to see videos of students teaming, hear from teachers on the SEL and academic impacts, and access free resources.

Michael D. Toth

Michael D. Toth (mtoth@learningsciences.com) is the author of the book The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming, founder and CEO of Learning Sciences International (LSI), and leader of LSI’s Applied Research Center.
All children—including those who are incarcerated—deserve a quality education, says 2019 National Teacher of the Year Rodney Robinson. A social studies teacher and 20-year veteran of Richmond Public Schools, Robinson has spent the past five years at Virginia’s Virgie Binford Education Center, a school inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center. His goal: to better understand and help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Robinson, who will present a master class on teaching and equity at NSBA’s Annual Conference in April, spoke with ASBJ’s Michelle Healy about supporting our most vulnerable students.

What have you learned about education at Virgie Binford?
I’d always felt that a poverty-to-prison pipeline is at work and we criminalize being poor. That’s why kids end up in jail, and we were blaming the school system. But my first day at the detention center, I had an eye-opening experience when my first class walked in, and three of the students were kids I had just failed at my old high school. That really made me re-examine my grading policies, my attendance policies, my relationship building, everything that I felt would allow kids to stay in class. If our purpose is to educate students, we must ask, are there policies that facilitate failure in school?

Your advice for breaking the pipeline?
Implement more restorative practices when it comes to school discipline. That we put kids out of school is counter to our mission of education. If we put them out of school, number one, they’re falling behind in their schoolwork, and number two, they’re not learning from their behavior. Also, we need to eliminate police officers handling discipline in schools. They should be there to protect the school environment, not to do discipline. Let’s re-allocate resources to things that will solve and help our kids’ problems, rather than just punishing and disciplining them.

What’s a message that your students want to send?
They want to say that they deserve the best. So often in life, they’ve not been given the best. My goal is to treat them in a way that says you deserve the best when it comes to school, housing, resources, opportunities. I want to teach them how to express their desires in a positive way, rather than committing crimes; teach them to address the legislature to say, “Hey, poverty is an issue in my community. Let’s create programs that will feed us, so we’re not resorting to illegal ways to making money.”

How do we increase the number of male teachers of color?
One, create better experiences for students of color in our schools. A lot of our students of color are traumatized by school. No one wants to return to the scene of their trauma as a teacher. Secondly, start investing in HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) and other programs that produce male teachers of color. We need a targeted effort to get these future teachers in the schools and help with finances.
Stay abreast of breaking news, access resources, and engage in national discussions that help support a safe and secure environment for students, staff, and surrounding communities.

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ALSO ONLINE:

Curriculum and equity

School board member Shannon Stewart writes about how the Jackson-Madison County School System, in Jackson, Tennessee, has improved outcomes in literacy and math, with equity gains seen inside of a year. It was accomplished by supporting teachers with better curriculum. In 2018, the system was one of the fastest-growing districts in the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System outcomes, after just one year of using new materials.

Strengthen culture for change

By transforming relationships, priorities, processes, and commitments, school leaders can engage employees in new ways to optimize the work environment, fix organizational problems, increase employee commitment, and develop strong teams. Authors Barbara Adams and Jerry Covey write about doing this with a research-based, collaborative approach that has been tested in Alaska during the past several years.

On the Right Path

OUR FOCUS ON CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) IS ASBJ’S third multimedia venture. For this section, we traveled to Cleveland, Ohio, and Greenville, South Carolina, to see how each district offers CTE to its students. Through articles, videos, interviews, photos, and infographics, we look at the different elements and challenges of CTE facing district leaders, students, and communities.

www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2019/Multimedia

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