



Prepared Remarks for the 30 May 2019 Meeting of the Montgomery County Public Schools Board of Education

Members of the Board of Education,

It is an honor to speak to you tonight about excellence gaps and your district's impressive efforts to combat them.

Excellence gaps – differences at advanced levels of student achievement – are among our most damaging problems in education and society. Nationally, far fewer low-income, Black, and Hispanic students perform at advanced levels than their upper-income, White, and Asian American peers. In many states, the percent of low-income, Black, and Hispanic students scoring at advanced levels is near zero.

That is shocking and makes me fear for our economic and cultural development as we move forward, not least because the underperforming groups represent well over half of the student population in many districts (and in most states).

Maryland is an interesting case, in that it has very high levels of advanced achievement – among the highest in the country – but disadvantaged student groups have advanced achievement rates close to the national averages. This results in Maryland having among the highest excellence gaps in the country, and Montgomery County has similar data for its students.

Getting all of our talent from less than half the student population is bad for students, bad for families, and bad for our communities. We simply must turn this around.

Excellence Gaps are a Solvable Problem

If I were talking to you 5-6 years ago, my comments would end right about here. We didn't really know how to address these problems, we just knew they were very bad and headed in a worse direction. But here's the optimistic part of my comments: WE KNOW WHAT TO DO. To quote the Six Million Dollar Man: We have the technology, we can fix this.

Center for Talented Youth

5801 Smith Avenue McAuley Hall, Suite 400 Baltimore, MD 21209-3655 410-735-4177 cty.jhu.edu

Researchers and educators have worked together to create and study a range of potential interventions, and we know vastly more today than we did just a few years ago. For example, most districts use a nomination-then-screen strategy for identifying advanced students: Teachers nominate students (or parents would apply on behalf of their children) to be considered for additional screening, then the district administers assessments to determine who is eligible for advanced programming.

Research provides ample evidence that this process discriminates against low-income and minority students. A far better approach is to screen every student initially (an approach called universal screening), which can be done with existing data to control costs. Universal screening can increase the odds of a talented low-income student being identified nearly three-fold. Quite frankly, we were just doing it wrong, and now we are moving to universal screening across the country.

I won't take up your time with a detailed description of every research-based intervention, but the attached article provides an overview of the most promising and well-supported strategies. Suffice it to say that we now believe this is a solvable problem, and solvable during our lifetimes. Again, I wouldn't have said that 5-6 years ago. We know what to do, we just need to do it.

Why Aren't More Districts Addressing This Problem?

Given all we know about addressing excellence gaps, why then are so many districts struggling to address them? And why are some districts addressing the problem in ways that we know won't work?

As we work with schools and education leaders around the country, we believe the roadblocks are primarily political. And Montgomery County has certainly faced – and is facing – many of these political issues.

Under the leadership of Dr. Smith and his team, Montgomery County has become a national leader in tackling excellence gaps. They have studied the research literature, identified the most promising practices for closing excellence gaps and creating equity within advanced education, and implemented them within the context of the district's diverse schools and communities.

Indeed, I've been so impressed with MCPS' efforts that I have invited MCPS staff to speak at national conferences about their efforts and the lessons they've learned; and with an increasing number of journalists writing about excellence gaps, I often refer them to MCPS as an exemplar of a district making the necessary – and difficult – steps to address these issues.

I like many features of your approach, but to keep my comments brief, I will only highlight two. First, you "expanded the pie." Most of our equity strategies don't work if you hold the size of services constant. A key concept for tackling excellence gaps is that more students than we expect benefit from a rigorous, advanced education. In other words, you need

more pie, not the same pie with different eaters. If you don't expand the pie, you create winners and losers in talent development. There should only be winners! This aspect of MCPS initiatives was not necessarily communicated well to parents initially, but that is being corrected.

Second, the district involved a range of teams within the central administration in these efforts, including but not limited to gifted education, Title I, and research. I also study creativity, innovation, and organizational change, and one key take-away from that field of research is that successful, large-scale change and innovation is always a team effort. Sure, Einstein was Einstein, but historians have also noted the critical role of Einstein's first wife, his many patrons and employers, and colleagues in the success of his brilliant work. It really does take a village.

Both of these strategies – expanding the pie and bringing a diverse team's talent to bear – are obvious in hindsight, but I am continually perplexed by the number of districts around the country that don't "expand the pie" or create cross-department teams to address excellence gaps and equity in advanced education. MCPS should be commended for taking this approach.

Next Steps

I recently reviewed the proposed changes to secondary education within MCPS, and they are consistent with the approaches used in the elementary and middle schools. Impressively, the MCPS team talks frankly about how they have learned from the implementation of those earlier changes. Again, that sounds obvious, but I would love for other large districts around the country to exhibit the same awareness and self-reflection in their efforts. I don't want to name names, but there's a district to the north that I'll call Tew Tork that seems intent on repeating its mistakes again and again and again. So credit where it's due!

I'd like to leave you with two brief, cautionary notes. First, there is a growing movement in some cities to address equity in advanced education by eliminating all advanced programs. Technically, equal lack of access to a rigorous, challenging education is a version of equity, but it's a version that strikes me as very odd and vaguely un-American.

Putting philosophical concerns aside, there's another reason to avoid this strategy: It doesn't work. Consider the urban districts that have taken this approach, eliminating elementary level gifted education programs and middle school advanced math classes. Without exception, two things happen: Well-resourced families pull their students from the public schools and seek advanced education elsewhere (widening excellence gaps!), and the number of disadvantaged students performing at high levels plummets. Eliminating all advanced programs may look like equity, but it's "feel good equity" that doesn't feel very good over the long haul.

Second, these changes need time to work. Inequity in society and our schools didn't happen overnight – it took a long, long time for these problems to manifest themselves. Although I

am optimistic that the necessary changes can occur in a relatively short period of time, that length of time is almost certainly longer than the average tenure or term of a superintendent or a school board member. We must remain vigilant and committed to attacking excellence gaps over the long haul.

Given all that we've learned about achieving equity in advanced education, it would be a shame if lack of political will to implement the necessary changes became our major barrier to success. Fortunately, the students and taxpayers of Montgomery County have the leadership in place to make these changes happen. Your commitment to attacking excellence gaps is laudable, and you have my deepest respect and appreciation. I encourage you to continue your nation-leading reforms to advanced education with the goal of greater equity.

Thank you for your time. I appreciate having the opportunity to speak with you today.

Dr. Jonathan Plucker is the Julian C. Stanley Endowed Professor of Talent Development at Johns Hopkins University, where he works within the Center for Talented Youth and School of Education. He is the president-elect of the National Association for Gifted Children. His work focuses on education policy, equity in advanced education, and creativity and innovation. Recent books include Excellence Gaps in Education, co-authored with Scott Peters, published by Harvard Education Press.