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Considering a New Diploma System: An Update and Editorial about Race, Equity and the Achievement Gap

by Peter D. Lee
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“The miner’s canary metaphor helps us to understand why and how race continues to be salient. Racialized communities signal problems with the ways we have structured power and privilege. These pathologies are not located in the canary.” – Dr. Pedro Noguera from “The Trouble With Black Boys: And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education.”

PROVIDENCE, RI – Very shortly, the RI community will be asked to provide public comment to the Board of Regents’ proposed plan to institute a 3-tiered high school diploma system (see Providence Journal article, “Rhode Island’s 3-tiered high school diploma system described,” November 19, 2010, by Jennifer D. Jordan). In this article, Education Commissioner Deborah Gist is quoted as saying, “[t]his proposal does not water down expectations. Having multiple diplomas ... addresses a concern we all share, that, too often, we are shooting for the middle. With this design, we are really raising the floor. It’s not like tracking students. This is a merit-based design.”

I am unclear how this proposal would raise “the floor,” and for whom: for the system? for teachers? students? parents? It seems to me that the proposed system would actually create multiple “floors,” and that each floor would carry with it an implied life direction. Is this a good thing, when many of our students are already being told, “don’t bother applying to college,” “you’re not college material,” or, “maybe you should just take the GED?”

According to Kids Count RI, in PPSD school year 2008-2009, 43% of high school students were absent 18 or more days. For the State (same year), the graduation rate for Black and Latino students was 67% and 64%, respectively. I believe the 3 (really 4) tiered system would exacerbate these realities.

The Commissioner states that “it’s (the proposal) not like tracking students.” Isn’t it? At least somewhat? Under the proposed 3-tiered system, students who pass the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) with a score equal to or above “proficient with distinction” would receive an honors diploma; students who score equal to or above “proficient” would

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receive a regent's diploma; students obtaining partial proficiency would receive a diploma; and those who do not obtain partial proficiency would receive a certificate.

Should not the NECAP alone be a sufficient standard to ensure that more students are achieving success? Students who do well on the NECAP, historically, do not have difficulty getting accepted into "good" colleges. Furthermore, guidance counselors know full well that colleges and universities are primarily looking at high school graduates' transcripts: what courses did the student take? did s/he take honors, Advanced Placement (AP) and/or International Baccalaureate (IB) courses? did s/he take the AP exam? what did s/he score? what was her/his SAT score? what was her/his grade point average (GPA)? With these questions at the forefront, does it really matter whether a student receives an honors or a regent's diploma?

In the same vein, what real value-add does a certificate provide? A student with a certificate in hand has demonstrated diligence, completed a portfolio, the required Carnegie units, and community service, but s/he still can't pass the NECAP. What are the options? Does s/he become a 5th year student or does s/he accept the certificate and take her/his chances? If s/he decides to become a 5th year student, will s/he have access to programs that will help her/him study for and pass the test? "Throughout the United States, schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic and emotional needs (Noguera)." Does the 3 tiered system provide greater supports for students?

I believe the proposed plan, for all its good intentions, is short-sighted. I believe there are strategies we have not yet fully embraced that can make a difference for our children. Across the country, we hear superintendents saying that districts can't do "it" by themselves. But has the "it" been clearly articulated?

Students – and particularly students of color – are dropping out in record numbers. There are more black men in jail than in college. The achievement gap among Latinos is growing. In some districts, "Latinas fare even worse than Latino males (Narrowing the Achievement Gap: Strategies for Educating Latino, Black and Asian Students [Susan J. Paik and Herbert J. Walberg])." And the myth of the model minority, a belief that all Asian Pacific Americans students are high achievers (Hune & Chan), is alive and well.

In too many instances, "[b]lack kids don't get validation and are seen as trespassing when they exceed academic expectations (Paik, Walberg). They turn on it, they sacrifice their spots in gifted and talented classes to belong to a group where they feel good." Thus, students of color are not engaged. They know that education is important but, they do not believe it will be their ticket out of poverty (Noguera).

I am not pointing fingers. All of us – districts, superintendents, schools, teachers, community-based organizations, ministers, parents, students, stakeholders, foundations, etc. – are responsible for helping all students succeed. But to do this, we must first know who our students are. And we all must believe beyond rhetoric that all students, particularly greater numbers of students of color, can achieve academic success.

In my mind, the 3-tiered proposal only enhances the differentiation of students. It does not implement additional supports, nor does it establish a climate in which academic success is attainable and rewarding for all.

In many instances today, "...schools sort children based on various measures of their academic ability and place them on trajectories that influence the economic roles and occupations they will assume as adults. In doing so, they play a role in determining who will lead and manage corporations and government and who will be led and managed by those in charge." (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985)

By introducing the proposed three-tiered diploma system, are we, as Commissioner Gist says, "raising the floor?" Or are we, in fact, sorting?

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