

# EXCELLENCE THROUGH EQUITY

Five Principles of Courageous Leadership  
to Guide Achievement for Every Student

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*with Lorena Kelly*

Foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu



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# Foreword

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

**H**aving helped to act as a catalyst and to shepherd one of the world's few peaceful transitions from a colonial occupation to a democratically elected president, I can say that a movement is born out of the convergence of dire conditions, a powerful idea, and people committed to carrying out that idea. This landmark book, edited by Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera, may be a similar catalyst to such a movement. Complete with a bold and compelling vision, cases of success throughout the world, and a guide to action for the reader, *Excellence Through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student*, offers a powerful way forward and new hope for millions of children.

The timing for this book is on target, as America may be reaching a breaking point. Some of the signs—growing economic disparities, segregated housing, police brutality, and inequitable education for children—are well known to me and all South Africans who suffered 4 decades of apartheid. Unlike America, the inequities and brutality endured by our people were systematic and officially state-sanctioned. Yet America's challenges may still feel similar to the children, families, and communities that endure them. Looking from afar at cities throughout America like Ferguson, Missouri, it would seem so.

When a growing number of a country's citizenry feel overwhelmed, disenfranchised, angry, or hopeless, the possible roads forward are finite and known. Overall economic decline due to neglect of infrastructure and support for the common good is one; violent struggle for power is another. We in South Africa, however, chose a road less traveled. Probably unique in the history of colonialism, White settlers voluntarily gave up their monopoly of political power. The final transfer of power was remarkably

peaceful; it is often described as a “miracle” because many thought that South Africa would erupt into violent civil war.

The challenges in choosing the road to higher moral ground and prosperity for all are many. They include confronting old zero-sum game thinking in which someone must lose. Blankstein and Noguera tackle this head-on and provide a more compelling reality in evidence in schools throughout the world. It more closely aligns with our own most highly held tradition of Ubuntu: “I am because you are.” This view of a united community was a saving grace in South Africa.

Ubuntu was drawn on by our first popularly elected president, Nelson Mandela, and served as an underpinning of our work in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which we ourselves were wounded healers of our people. We attempted to repair the gap between the races by getting the ugly truth of the apartheid regime and of the liberation movements out into the open, granting amnesty even to the worst offenders, and then seeking to find ways of reconciling the conflicting parties. We realized that everyone in the room—from the most powerful leader, to the most victimized young person—had much to learn, and we modeled an environment of equity and equality. We made sure when we had these public hearings that even the furniture layout demonstrated this. We didn’t sit on a platform higher than, but we deliberately sat on a level *with* the victims.

Fortifying this reality of being stronger united than separated similarly, the authors of this book demonstrate in case after case how every student advances when learning in an equitable system. In such an environment, everyone learns and each person counts.

Allowing for this brighter reality in which all of God’s rainbow children succeed within an equitable environment alarms those who fear for the loss of resources for their *own* child. Blankstein and Noguera rise to the challenge and, along with their coauthors, offer up schools, districts, and even nations that have discovered a more powerful secret: when done well, school communities focused on equity actually better educate wealthy majority students as well as those who are less privileged!

Following one’s moral compass to an enlightened but less traveled road to success takes courage. Even if the mind is captured by a glorious vision that the heart is morally compelled to pursue, the body will need specific direction and courage to make the journey successfully in the face of many obstacles. *Equity Through Excellence* takes this into consideration, spotlighting how pioneers in this venture have successfully moved forward, and framing all of this in five principles of Courageous Leadership.

In their section on “The Arguments for Equity,” Blankstein and Noguera share an insight that was also critical to our successful transition

of power: We didn't struggle in order just to change the complexion of those who sit in the Union buildings; it was to change the quality of our community and society. We wanted to see a society that was a compassionate society, a caring society, a society where you might not necessarily be madly rich, but you knew that you counted. *Excellence Through Equity* provides direction for those bent on creating such a society for generations to come. Letting go of a system of winners and losers in favor of what is proposed in this book is a courageous leap forward that we all must take together. Let this bold, practical book be a guide; and may you travel into this new exciting vista, in which every child can succeed, with Godspeed.

God bless you.

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# Introduction

## *Achieving Excellence Through Equity for Every Student*

*Alan M. Blankstein and Pedro Noguera*

**I**n education circles, the word *equity* is often controversial and confusing. When it is brought up to an economically diverse audience, those with affluence and privilege often become squeamish and start looking for the exits, while those in financial need often become more engaged, hoping that a focus on equity will bring relief and attention to what they lack. Such responses tend to occur because when the term *equity* is raised, it often evokes a zero-sum scenario; a perception that if we do more for those who are disadvantaged it will mean there will be less for the advantaged. When this occurs and the pursuit of equity—which we define as a commitment to ensure that every student receives what he or she needs to succeed—is subverted by the assumption that there must be winners and losers, rarely is any progress achieved. Invariably, conversations about equity either degenerate into acrimonious debate over how to serve the needs of both privileged and disadvantaged children, objectives that are typically perceived as irreconcilable, or we lapse hopelessly into a state of paralysis.

This book offers a way to move beyond zero-sum thinking and compelling reasons to do so. In the following chapters we provide *practical*, detailed accounts of what schools, districts, classrooms, and community-based organizations are doing to promote excellence through equity. We also show through these cases that overcoming the impasse between the pursuit of excellence and equity is essential if we are to avoid remaining trapped on a path that is not only generating greater inequality in academic outcomes but also contributing to deeper inequality within our society generally.

## **U.S. EDUCATORS ARE SWIMMING AGAINST A WAVE OF POOR POLICY**

The persistence of disparities in learning opportunities and academic outcomes has contributed to America's decline in educational performance in comparison with other nations. Results from the Program in International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that American students have made little progress, and in some cases declined, relative to children in several other wealthy nations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Closer examination of the results shows that growing inequality is a central factor contributing to America's educational decline. Recent results from scores on the ACT show that only 39% of those students who recently took the exam were deemed college ready. Of these, only 11% of African Americans and 18% of Latinos passed with scores that met the college-ready threshold, while 49% of Whites and 57% of Asians met the mark (Resmovitz, 2014). Given that the majority of children in our nation's schools are presently students of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), and people of color are projected to make up the majority of the U.S. population by the year 2041 (Frey, 2013), these trends are especially troubling.

Furthermore, our nation has higher levels of child poverty than most other wealthy nations, with 23%, or almost one in four children, coming from households in poverty. In the nation's largest urban school districts the number of children from impoverished families is considerably higher. Unlike many nations that outperform us, we tolerate gross inequities in school funding, in access to quality preschool, and in health care (Sahlberg, 2011). Despite compelling evidence that growing poverty and inequality are at least partially responsible for our decline in educational performance (Barton & Coley, 2010), policy makers have largely ignored the issue. Instead, they have fixated on the idea that slippage in academic performance can be reversed simply by raising academic standards and increasing accountability on educators despite consistent evidence that the strategy has not worked (Fullan & Boyle, 2014).

There is compelling evidence based on comparisons with nations that have outperformed ours that the policy direction we have pursued has contributed to our decline relative to other nations (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Despite this evidence, policy makers from both major parties have been unwilling to consider a new set of strategies or to change course. A recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education called for greater focus on equity in funding and educational opportunities (Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). Despite the report, the federal government has not called for a change in policy, and we continue to focus

narrowly on accountability and standards. Instead of building the capacity of schools and providing them with additional support to meet the complex needs of students, we continue to rely on pressure and humiliation as a means of prodding schools to improve. The strategy hasn't worked, and it is increasingly clear that it never will. Ignoring equity, not merely in education but in wages, housing, health, and quality of life, has contributed to widening levels of inequality and is undermining our well-being and our future as a nation.

## AN EQUITY TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS

There is an alternative to growing inequality (in education at least) or remaining trapped indefinitely in a zero-sum quagmire. The alternative is to recognize that equity and excellence are not at odds, and that the highest level of excellence will actually be obtained *through* the pursuit of equity. To many, excellence through equity may seem like an implausible or even a radical concept. In some ways it is, given the policy direction we have pursued in recent years, but closer examination reveals that it has been a central part of the human experience for centuries. It was inherent in the message and the ethos that Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to push through the New Deal, that made it possible for a president from Texas (LBJ) to overcome powerful opposition in Congress to obtain approval of the Civil Rights Act, and that compelled the U.S. government to cooperate with Martin Luther King Jr. as he and others marched and organized for a peaceful end to American apartheid. In all three examples it is clear that by advancing equity the greater good of society would be furthered, or as Eleanor Roosevelt put it: "We do well when we all do well."

Similarly, a commitment to excellence and equity has been central to many of our nation's advances in education. The idea that we could achieve excellence through equity made it possible for President Lyndon Johnson to overcome opposition from southern legislators and enact Title I, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as a key provision of the effort to expand civil rights and launch the war on poverty. Later, the principle of excellence through equity served as an essential premise for advancing the educational rights of women (Title IX), linguistic minorities (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974), and the disabled (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014). It served as an effective rationale once again when the Clinton administration moved to significantly expand access to the internet for poor children in American schools during the 1990s (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) and when President Obama launched the Promise Neighborhoods initiative.