
PREFACE

EXCELLENCE GAPS are differences between subgroups of students performing at the highest levels of achievement. These gaps are among America's most pressing educational problems: they are economically damaging over the long haul; they hurt families and communities—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds; and they cast a dark shadow of lost potential over American culture and educational systems. Yet few educators and policymakers, let alone members of the general public, are aware of their existence or their importance. Indeed, probably the only groups that have noticed are affected students and the parents who have to watch their children's abilities and passions go un-nurtured and underdeveloped.

We were motivated to write this book for a number of reasons. Jonathan became concerned in the early years of the No Child Left Behind era that nearly all of the discourse surrounding education policy was focused on achievement gaps at the basic proficiency level. Many of the thought leaders in American education policy discussed advanced achievement and excellence gaps only rarely, and if they did, often expressed hostility toward these topics. But a quick look at the available education data showed that achievement gaps were large and, by some measures, growing at the advanced levels of achievement. This realization began a decade's worth of research that is reflected in this book. Scott approached this topic frustrated by the double-talk of the American educational system, which speaks elegantly about growth for all while simultaneously focusing almost exclusively on remediation. If we as a society truly believe that everyone can achieve and that everyone should have the opportunity to learn in school, then our practices need to reflect that belief across the full range of student achievement.

We both were attracted to the topic of excellence gaps—and, indeed, to the prospect of writing this book—because this work addresses an important question that both general education and gifted education have often avoided: How well does what we advocate for work, and for whom? Too rarely, educational policy is approached from a general perspective of outcomes, with no consideration of differential outcomes across racial groups, income groups, or groups starting at different levels of readiness. This blind spot in educational policy cannot continue.

WHY THIS BOOK?

In our view, excellence gaps have not received the attention they deserve, from educators, policy makers, or the public at large. We find this especially troubling given how often educational policy makers speak of equality and equal opportunity. To help rectify this oversight, this book has dual purposes: to provide an overview of the problem and to suggest potential interventions. In part 1, we review American education policy and how it has—and has not—addressed the needs of advanced students and educational excellence over the past several decades. We discuss the state of educational excellence and excellence gaps in the United States, both in terms of how students have performed academically and how their needs are traditionally met (or not). In part 2, we review the ways in which American educational institutions and educators have attempted to promote educational excellence, including a discussion of terminology, specifically involving the use of various labels to refer to advanced achievement and advanced learners.

Part 3 provides a close examination of various interventions that policy makers and educators have identified as potential ways to shrink excellence gaps. We examine and evaluate a diverse range of interventions from outside the K–12 spectrum as well as outside the American educational context. There are many examples of institutions setting out to decrease excellence gaps—though often not calling them by this name—but only recently has this topic garnered broader, significant attention in K–12 education.

Finally, in part 4, we bring the lessons learned together and propose a path forward for addressing excellence gaps. Our goal throughout the

book, and especially in this last section, is to provide a clear, frank, and provocative perspective on the relevant issues. In our view, any obfuscation would only serve to divert attention away from the students, families, and communities suffering from excellence gaps, and that has been allowed to occur for far too long.