

Professional Opinion

Unleashing the grip of poverty

How we provide a high-quality education for all students

By Mark D. Benigni
Miguel A. Cardona



We are educators and we are not making excuses. We are facing a significant challenge in education—assuring that it is still the great equalizer. While a daunting task, we know we can and must keep that promise. Our children and our nation are depending on us.

We were born in Meriden, Connecticut, a struggling medium-sized former manufacturing city. Meriden is a city searching for a new identity as citizens wallow in the loss of silver manufacturers, lamp producers, military product development, and automotive component assembly plants. It is a city in search of the downtown energy that once galvanized this community and lifted generations of Meridenites from the perils of poverty. Meriden is a city proud of its schools, respectful of its history, and supportive of its diversity. We were born to parents who had little more than each other and a dream for their children. We were poor. We were the statistic. Yet, we were unleashed from the grip of poverty and so too can millions of other children. We chose education as a profession because we wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. For us, there is more at stake—our children. Yet, in the greatest nation in the world, your zip code and color of skin still factor as better determinants of your success than many other factors. The data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly referred to as the Nation’s Report Card, shows that as far as 25 years back there have been gaps in achievement between Black/Latino/and poor children and their majority counterparts that have gone relatively unchanged.

Address the poverty dilemma

Over the last ten years, under the No Child Left Behind era in education, we saw a tremendous narrowing of curriculum to those things that were assessed. Worse, we saw too many teaching and classroom activities mirror the format of the tests. Unfortunately, teachers in high-need districts had to prepare students for tests in ways that limited their ability to shape instruction based on student need. This shift to the common core gives us an opportunity to hit the reset button on ten years of practices that were partly ineffective. It allows us to rethink the skill and drill practice and the overemphasis on test-prep that have stunted the growth of our students and narrowed the creativity and autonomy our teachers require to meet the needs of their learners. Adopting a curriculum that is based on thinking and problem solving, one that prepares our children for a world that looks different than the one we live in today, and one that helps reverse the achievement disparities in our nation is what we need. It makes sense for our kids; it makes sense for our economy. Nobel Prize-winning economist, James Heckman, states, “Focused, personal attention paid to the young children of poor families isn’t some warm, fuzzy notion. It’s a hard-nosed investment that pays off in lower social welfare cost, decreased crime rates, and increased tax revenue.” Even Heckman, an economist by profession understands that, “Poor families should have guaranteed access to education for their 3- and 4-year olds.”

There is only one thing we can guarantee about these shifts in curriculum and focus in education. We will not get it right the first time. Success is not linear. The path from where we are to where we need to be will not be perfect. Change, uncertainty, and adjustments along the way are prerequisites for progress. Our path to assuring that education is the pathway to ending poverty will have bumps in the road, detours, compromises, negotiations, and mistakes that will foster authentic collaboration. Instead of halting progress, we ask that we come together in support of strategies that are not Democratic or Republican, traditional or reform, urban or suburban. We have confidence that today’s educational leaders can help shape a new way that takes into account the needs of the diverse learners that we have chosen to educate. As our nation’s achievement data suggests, our kids can’t wait.

While very few can argue with the need for an improvement in the achievement disparities that plague our state and country, little consensus exists as to how. We offer a perspective here that combines our experience as former teachers, school leaders, and district leaders, but more importantly, two children who grew up on the wrong side of the achievement gap.

Strategies inside the schoolhouse

Unleashing the grip of poverty and its negative effect on achievement will require us to view this issue through two

distinct lenses: one—inside the schoolhouse and two—outside the schoolhouse. Inside the schoolhouse strategies include: retaining highly-effective teachers and administrators; a focus on a clear mission; data-driven decision making; proven curriculum for all; culturally competent classes; on-going professional development; high expectations for students and staff, and additional learning time and opportunities.

In Meriden, our roadway to student-centered learning began with collapsing academic levels to ensure college and career pathways for all students. Then we adjusted the growth mindset, established no-zero grading practices, and opened student access in all college preparatory classes. With the equity foundation in place, we launched our K-12 BYOD guidelines and increased district- provided mobile devices from zero in 2010-2011 to over 3,000 today, almost one for every three enrolled students, with both high schools operating one to one. Next, competency-based learning and personalized learning experiences provided students with voice and choice. For learners of diverse backgrounds, this leveled the playing field significantly. With technology as a tool for learning, and options on areas of learning, student engagement increased significantly. Finally, our supportive Board of Education revised district policy to support student-centered learning approaches and approved plans to build two state-of-the-art high schools at a total investment of over \$250 million.

Retaining highly effective leaders and administrators is a major lever in our school improvement efforts and our mission to close learning gaps for all students. Our Talent Development Program consists of a robust teacher induction program, executive coaching, peer coaching, leadership academy, in-district college partnerships, and numerous staff development opportunities. Our latest initiative, the Meriden Teacher Sharing Success ("MTSS") team places tenured Meriden Public School teachers who have excelled in multiple measures, including student growth and evaluation performance, at the disposal of other educators who are looking for support. All of these efforts are collaborative, innovative, supportive, and student-centered. By tracking sub-group performance and analyzing student results, we are on our way to addressing the disparities that too many of our students face every day.

Strategies outside the schoolhouse

In addition to having the will to address the issues inside the schoolhouse, efforts to address factors that affect students' readiness for learning must take place. Outside the schoolhouse factors that impact a child's schooling and learning include, but are not limited to, poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, institutional barriers, such as limited communication in native language, and limited early care. We believe efforts to close the achievement gaps must start at birth and must incorporate efforts that positively influence students' and families' lives outside of school. An intergenerational approach to this complex issue would increase the likelihood that the strategies take root in the families and communities in which they are introduced.

Several outside the schoolhouse strategies in Meriden include the Family School Liaison Team, partnerships with municipal and private agencies, and extending our influence with early childhood and adult learning.

In a community that is 60% Hispanic, many of whom speak English as a second language or are monolingual Spanish, it was important to take proactive steps to help create partnerships with our parents. The Family School Liaison (FSL) team was developed to serve as ambassadors to the school system in our community. In addition to communicating to parents how to maintain partnerships with their child's teachers, the liaisons help parents access whatever they needed to help their child be successful, whether it be tutoring, college planning advice, immunization information, or afterschool activities. The five bilingual/bicultural liaisons have roots in the community and are able to make connections with parents both inside the school and in the greater community.

Positively influencing factors outside of the schoolhouse also requires that we have strong partnerships with non-education service providers in Meriden. Partnerships with the local Community Health Center, Meriden Health Department, and the Department of Children and Families ensure that our students get access to mental, dental, and medical health within our school buildings. Doing this prevents students from missing school because they lack basic necessities. In essence, it removes the obstacles of not having transportation, language barriers, or inability to pay. In addition to the medical needs, partnerships extend to other agencies to allow for our students to experience extracurricular enrichment, Saturday learning, and for some, even three hot meals in our schools. While the Meriden Public Schools does not have the resources or staff to provide these important services directly to our kids, our partnerships with municipal and private agencies, and our strong belief that schools are the hub of the community, allow us to eliminate these barriers to learning.

Knowing that our efforts as a school system must start early and must touch multiple generations, we are active members of the Early Childhood Cabinet at the local and State level. We have community-partner led early childhood programs within our schools, as well as adult learning programs, such as ESL classes, for our parents and grandparents. We know that our efforts to help our students must start long before they take their first steps in our schools. Focusing on early childhood, as well as programming for parents and caregivers, is a great way to accomplish this. What some may consider obstacles, we consider opportunities for partnerships that enhance our student experience and accelerate our community's effort to unleash the grip of poverty.

The Courage to Lead

Together, we can unleash the grip of poverty and assure that our students and the American public education system continues to be the best vehicle to lift families out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Stop passing the blame! Stop setting low expectations! Stop operating in silos! Start putting our students first! In the Meriden Public Schools, we put students at the center, and we have seen some of the highest scores in district history on state examinations and internal district assessments. Meriden has also seen improving school climates. Since 2010-2011, the Meriden Public Schools has experienced the following positive reductions: suspensions down 58%; expulsions down 88%; and arrests down 77%.

Are we willing to truly put our students at the center of our work? Do we recognize that great educational systems must engage with partners in their greater communities? Our students, our nation, and the most inclusive educational system in the world are depending on all of us. Do we have the courage to lead?

Mark D. Benigni is the Superintendent of Meriden Public Schools in Connecticut.

Miguel A. Cardona is the Performance and Evaluation Specialist in the Meriden Public Schools.