

# Education is Liberation

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Research<sup>1</sup> shows that the best way to improve the education of low-income youth is to engage their families in the academic process. Many educators and administrators prefer that low-income parents leave their school-aged children at the school door, stay far away (unless summoned), and let them as professionals do the work of educating their children.

In schools across this country, low-income children have consistently been denied the quality of education needed to provide them with the skills to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems successfully. Despite receiving trillions of federal Title I dollars since 1964<sup>2</sup>, many states and districts failed in their responsibility to better educate low-income students who are "most at-risk of failing." According to the U.S. Department of Education<sup>3</sup>, the purpose of Title I funds, "is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments."

The Education Equality Index<sup>4</sup> confirms that Pennsylvania has a massive academic achievement gap between low-income students and their wealthier peers. During 2015

(the last year when data was available), no school in Pennsylvania made significant reductions in its academic achievement gap. The national data shows that only two in 10 students from low-income families residing in major U.S. cities attended a school with a small or non-existing achievement gap. Moreover, more than nine in 10 students from low-income families in the largest 100 U.S. cities attend a school with an achievement gap. Considering that schools with more impoverished students have teachers who are less experienced, it is highly unlikely that the elimination of academic achievement gaps will happen any time soon.

Like the way politicians choose to treat opiate addicts, yet incarcerate crack addicts; Pennsylvanians have witnessed disparate treatment in how so-called education advocates support the academic success of poor urban children. In 2014, when resources in some higher performing, public schools plummeted to an all-time low, some "education advocates" filed a lawsuit against the P.A. Department of Education<sup>5</sup>. Prior to then, children in poorer neighborhood schools had been denied adequate resources for years without any intervention from these same "education advocates."

As a result, the intent of this article is to call attention to the top 10 things that education administrators, advocates, and policymakers should focus on for the 2018-19 school year.

1. **Students:** When we really care about educating students, we spend more time focused on what really matters in children's learning. All students must be taught that failure is an option that does not have to be chosen and those students needing trauma-informed care must be diagnosed and treated. Adults (especially smart ones) must be willing to listen to, learn from, and lead with students and their families.
2. **Poverty:** If we are serious about eliminating poverty<sup>6</sup>, we must find specific, innovative, and sustained ways to educate children whose families entrust educators to do the job for which they are paid.
3. **Accountability (for all adults):** District administrators, school-based staff, faith- and community-based agencies, family members, community police officers, and policymakers need to build coherence and understand that it is everyone's responsibility to engage low-income children and their families in learning. We already know that parents are their children's first teachers. We must have compassion for those parents who are sending their children to the same schools that failed them. In addition, we must recognize and map the community assets currently serving as positive resources.
4. **Modeling Success:** Albert Einstein is quoted as saying, "doing the same thing and expecting different results is the definition of insanity." Schools of all types have shown success in closing the academic achievement gaps between poor and wealthy

students. Rather than continue the barrage of attacks against each other, staff in chronically underperforming schools (regardless of type) should learn about and model evidence-based improvements. If not, families of students in any chronically, underperforming school should receive immediate notification of the option to have their child transferred into a higher performing school. No more excuses!

5. **Family Education and Empowerment:** The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)<sup>7</sup> mandates the active engagement and consultation of families in district and state education plans. Title I funds can be used to educate families about their right to offer input on the creation of state report cards, provide professional development about understanding data, and/or offer creative ways to help families reinforce learning at home. States and districts should help families pay attention to the states' focus areas and progress<sup>8</sup> on reaching goals that were sent to the U.S. Department of Education.
6. **Challenging Academic Standards:** There is so much diversity in culture, language, and learning styles that students must be held to high academic standards at schools to rise above the plethora of mediocrity that shrouds low-income communities.
7. **Data:** School and district administrators should make time weekly to review the data to identify efficiency. Through analysis, it may be determined that

something or someone is not working...act to get rid of it.

8. **Establishing Goals:** School and district leaders must clearly articulate goals and expectations. All academic accomplishments should be celebrated and shared internally (school staff and families) and externally (community and peers). This celebration should be focused on how great the students are doing (not the adults).
9. **Shared Learning:** Both students and teachers learn better when learning is shared. Teachers working together can focus on areas where students need improvements and develop strategies to strengthen weaknesses. "No one of us is as smart as all of us." (Japanese Proverb)
10. **Family and Community:** School-based staff and administrators must understand that they are part of a larger community and when they consider themselves as outsiders (by their ways and actions), they will be treated as such. Many low-income family and community members want what is best for their children yet, they do not know how best to advocate for what they want. Professional development can be used to bring educators, family, and community members together to build better bonds, generate support, and encourage collaboration in school-based decision making.  
It is important for school-based staff and administrators to model the kind of behavior they

want to receive as customers because family and community members are the schools' customers. Therefore, school administrators and teachers must be willing to change their mindsets and become more customer-friendly. Some teachers and administrators may need to be taught the importance of engaging in effective partnership practices with family and community members.

Together, our schools, families, and communities play a very important role in raising low-income students' self-esteem levels, and disproving the stereotype that they cannot and/or will not be academic achievers. If, as stated by Nelson Mandela, "poverty was created by man," then, it can be eradicated by humans who care enough to want what is best for all children. Equal educational opportunity is not only good for some, it is good for all...including those in poverty. We will see the benefits of a better-educated community in increased taxes, added homeowners, and improved neighborhoods, only if we make decisions that will positively affect impoverished children and their families.

## **Author bio**

**Quibila A. Divine, M. Ed.; EE, ECE**, is president of The Educational Advocates Reaching Today's Hardworking Students, Inc. (EARTHS) and also serves as an advisor to PARENT POWER (What Will You Do With Yours?). Born and raised in North Philadelphia, Quibila is an education

advocate who has worked tirelessly to ensure that all children are provided with equal access to high-quality education.

Quibila is a proud Philly resident who chose to purchase a home near her childhood residence to serve as a positive role model. She has more than 20 years of experience educating students, enlightening families, and empowering communities as the founder and president of her nonprofit agency, The Educational Advocates Reaching Today's Hardworking Students, Inc. (EARTHS).

She is an advisor to Pennsylvania Department of Education's Community Improvement Zone grantee, PARENT POWER (What Will You Do With Yours?), and serves on the steering committee of the city's Read by 4th Campaign. She holds a bachelor's degree from Drexel University and two master's degrees from Lincoln University, the country's first, historically Black, degree-granting university.

## **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved May 3, 2018 from <http://flamboyanfoundation.org>

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved May 3, 2018 from <https://www.thenewamerican.com>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved May 4, 2018 from <https://www2.ed.gov>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved May 4, 2018

from <http://www.educationequalityindex.org>

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved May 5, 2018 from <https://www.usnews.com>

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved May 5, 2018 from <https://www.usnews.com>

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved May 4, 2018 from <https://www.ed.gov/ESSA>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved May 5, 2018 from <https://www.understood.org>