
Creating Equity by Closing the Learner Experience Gap

Dr. Kent Scribner, Superintendent Juan Cabrera, and Shannon K. Buerk



engage2learn

Abstract:

Why is it important that learners acquire “soft skills?” How are their classroom experiences in public schools nationwide addressing the issue of equity? Pervasive gaps for students of poverty are manifested as lower academic achievement at best and in what has been termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” at worst; yet, these two, urban districts work toward equity of experience to ensure mastery of Life Ready Skills. They are committed to ensuring that every learner in every classroom has these experiences, and their results are profound.

What could equity look like?

Recently, El Paso ISD and Fort Worth ISD each hosted an event where educators, policy-makers, and business leaders from across the nation walked through classrooms to see equity in action. In urban zip codes where a high percentage of students are challenged by economic hardship, these professionals saw learners, who are typically relegated to worksheets and test-prep, actively solving problems, communicating effectively, leading, researching, making choices, and collaborating with their peers. In an age where “soft skills” reign supreme, these learners are clearly gaining access to the keys to success. As one Kindergarten learner articulated it, “It kind of helps you get prepared for when you get older. Like with the collaboration, the creativity, and especially the critical thinking. I’ve learned how to think better and stuff like that...think outside the box!”

Why is it important that these learners are getting access to these skills? How is that experience in the classroom addressing equity? Why have these two districts committed to ensuring that every learner in every classroom has these experiences rather than just those who attend choice campuses or qualify for gifted services or get to do enrichment activities?

3 Pervasive Gaps for Children of Poverty

The research on the gaps for children of poverty entering school is clear and compelling. In the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, for example, 75 percent of moderate or high income children were deemed ready for school while only 48 percent of poor children were deemed ready for school (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002, p. 381). These children will enter Kindergarten with three increasingly critical gaps: (1) 30,000 fewer words than their more affluent peers (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), (2) significant gaps in cognitive skills (Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood, Elliott, 2009), and (3) more often exhibited maladaptive social functioning (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). The results of these gaps are manifested as lower academic achievement at best and in what has been termed the “school-to-prison pipeline” at worst, where 250 pre-school children as young as three are being suspended or expelled daily in the United States (Clay, 2018).

In contrast, thought leadership and employer surveys about thriving in the 21st century converges on just this set of critical skills: (1) communication skills, (2) cognitive agility skills, and (3) social, emotional skills. The new emphasis on these skills in the age of innovation and technology moves beyond beneficial to necessary. Tony Wagner calls them survival skills, which he defines as: adaptability and agility, leading by influence and collaboration across networks, critical thinking and problem solving, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, curiosity and imagination, initiative, and entrepreneurship (Wagner, 2010). Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind*, suggests that abilities we once thought frivolous “increasingly will determine who flourishes and who flounders.” (Pink, 2006, p.3). Howard Gardner (2011), Sir Ken Robinson (2011), and Yong Zhao (2012) all argue persuasively for a

similar set of ethical, creative, social, and entrepreneurial skills as a foundation for individual success and societal viability.

Career readiness reports echo these thought leaders, including the 2018 [10 Skills Employers Will Want the Most in 2020](#) report which outlines the top 10 skills most desired by employers as: cognitive flexibility, negotiation skills, service orientation, judgement and decision making, emotional intelligence, coordinating with others, people management, creativity, critical thinking, and complex problem-solving. Higher education has taken note and integrated these higher-order skills into collegiate curriculum (Curtin, 2018). For example, The [Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board](#) recently approved six core curriculum objectives: critical thinking skills, communication skills, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, social responsibility, and personal responsibility (THECB, 2014).

If we want to close the equity gap for our learners, we have to give all of them experiences every day that guarantee and accelerate their opportunities to acquire these critical skill sets. That is the way we can close the gap.

Equity of Experience = Life Ready Skills

Consider the following three scenarios as a way of illustrating a necessary approach to equity in this generation.

Scenario 1: Inequity

Students who are behind academically are placed in courses where the primary goal is to increase their scores on standardized tests, and the primary method utilized to that end is to practice answering multiple-choice questions that mimic the tests. Students who are “on grade level” or above take courses or attend schools of choice where they have problem-solving and collaboration opportunities. Equal Opportunity Schools suggests that “low-income students and students of color are consistently and systematically under-enrolled in the most academically intense high school courses,” (Equal Opportunities Schools, n.d.). In fact, nearly 450,000 low-income students are not currently enrolled in AP “who would participate if enrolled at the same rate as their peers,” according to The Education Trust (Theokas & Saaris, 2013, p.4).

Scenario 2: Equality

Every learner is given a device, the same instructional resources, and equal access to updated facilities and quality staff. This is a great start since a digital divide persists, according to the Federal Communication Commission, which reports that “seven in 10 teachers now assign homework that requires web access. Yet one-third of kindergartners through 12th graders in the United States, from low-income and rural households are unable to go online from home,” (Kang, 2016). However, devices and access alone will not “close the gap” in terms of skills and can be inequitable in terms of experience just like Scenario 1.

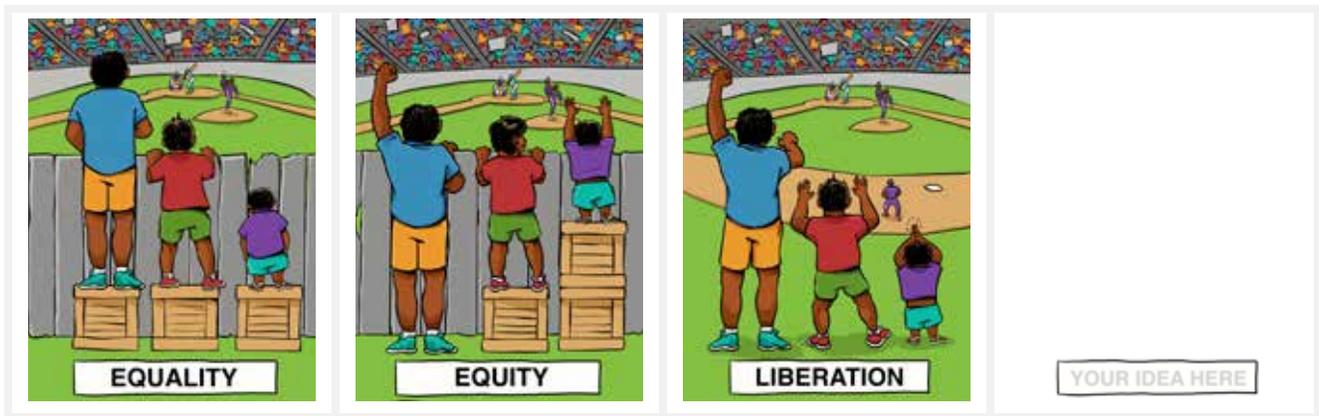
Scenario 3: Equity (of Resources)

Every learner is given a device and access to quality staff, and software is purchased so that learning can become “personalized.” Students who are behind academically are able to practice and “catch up” using software that adapts to their academic needs. This scenario offers the opportunity to catch up in terms of content gaps, but it still does not offer the opportunity to close the life ready skills/social-emotional skills gap.

Scenario 4: Equity of Experience (“Liberation” in the illustration below)

Every learner is given tools to solve challenges that include problem-solving, communication and conflict resolution opportunities, differentiated practice and small group instruction workshops, expectations to use technology to research and create, and collaborative interactions with peers and adults that include protocols to learn social skills.

There is a popular illustration of this idea online that invites people to contribute to the 4th box or 4th scenario. Developed by the Interaction Institute for Social Change, this image was recently made interactive by the Center for Story-Based Strategy, whereby participants are invited to develop this notion further (Barriner & Coates-Connor, 2016).

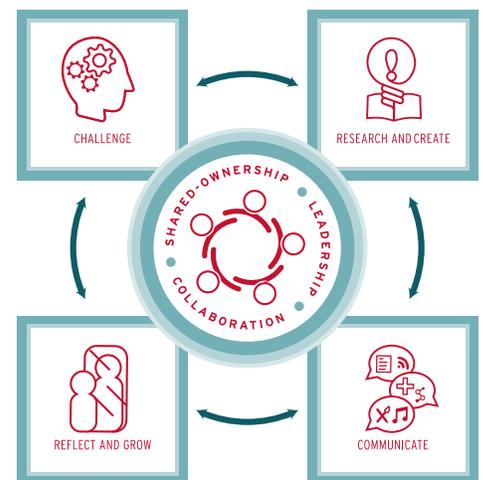


How do we achieve equity of experience?

Achieving true equity means overcoming the deficits of (1) language, (2) cognitive, and (3) social skills through experiences where learners can acquire these necessary skills to be ready for life. In El Paso ISD and Fort Worth ISD-, this has been the focus of the last three years and will be the focus of the next several years. The results are encouraging and provide a model for other urban districts who want to provide equity of experience for all learners. In both of these districts, the basis of the equity of experience is a learning framework or a locally-designed, shared vision for learning that provides guidance for teachers to design the learning experience for all learners to acquire these skills daily.

In Fort Worth ISD (FWISD), an urban district with 87,000 students, it has been a long journey to equity. The district demographics include 76.7 percent of students classified as Economically Disadvantaged with African American students accounting for 23 percent of the population and Hispanic students making up 62.3 percent. It was only 29 years ago that the district desegregation case was lifted in acknowledgement that FWISD had successfully eradicated segregated schools. After taking a gradual approach to desegregation, however, the district is becoming a frontrunner in the ongoing work to strive for true equity.

Three years ago, the Board of Trustees and district leadership decided to use a unique strategy for a long-range master facilities planning process that would impact equity in the district. They hired an education service provider to oversee the process and ensure



the plan aligned to a shared vision for learning based on the outcomes that would ensure ALL learners were prepared for college, career, and community leadership. The committee developed a learning framework, the Fort Worth ISD Learning Model, which is the desired experience in every classroom every day, to ensure all learners can acquire life ready skills to be prepared for their futures. The FWISD Learning Model has four stages that define the learner experience:

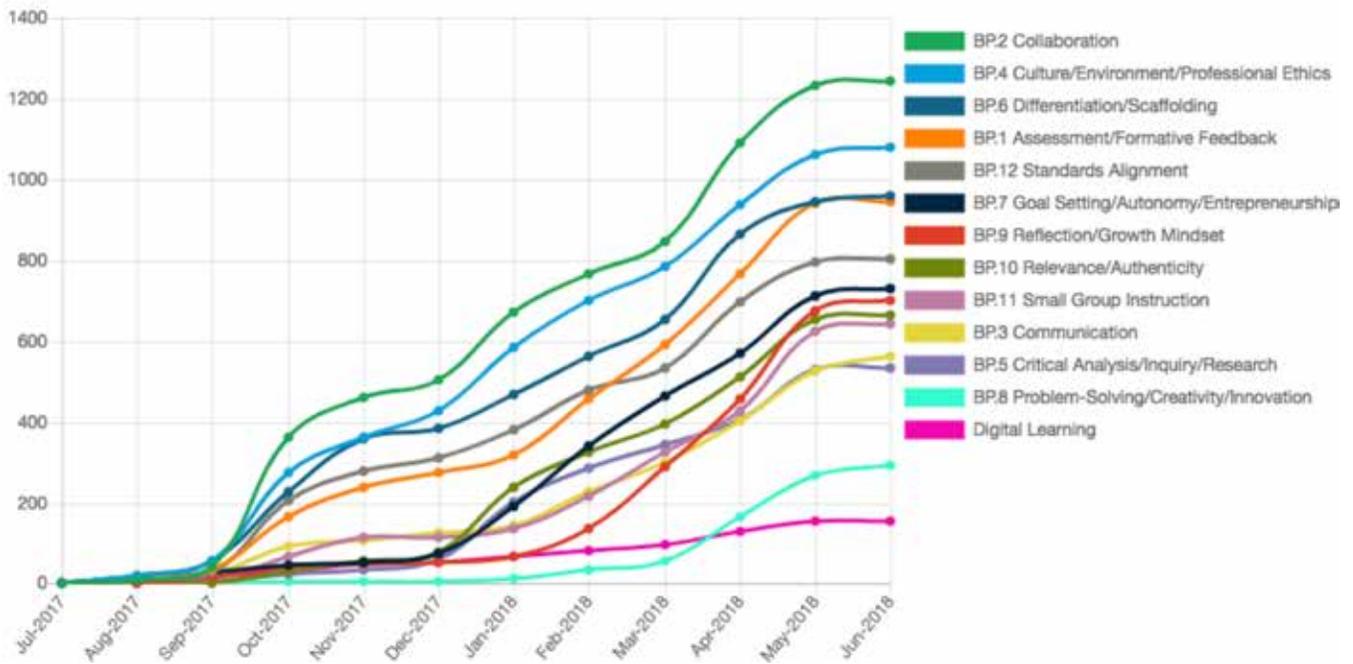
1. **Challenge:** presents learners with a challenge to solve that promotes “doing” work within the discipline(s) and student growth through co-creative processes, reflection, and self-discovery.
2. **Research and Create:** involves focused investigations where learners are engaged in structured interactions with content using a variety of sources. Learners generate a product responding to the Challenge connected to the planned learning outcomes.
3. **Communicate:** involves the exchange and articulation of thoughts and ideas (verbal, nonverbal, written, digital, etc.) to speak and listen effectively to construct meaning in order to demonstrate progress towards the learning objectives.
4. **Reflect and Grow:** incorporates strategies to enable learners to analyze progress towards the learning objective, celebrate growth, and find opportunities to improve.

To create that learning experience in every classroom, the district launched a five-year responsible rollout starting with a pilot year based on volunteer teachers and subsequent years based on volunteer campuses until every teacher and leader has received training and a full year of job-embedded coaching to modernize practice and implement the model. The results from the pilot year of implementation showed lead indicators of growth in the best practices leading to life ready skills for the adults in the system. Year 2 and beyond will prove out the impact for learners. This work is challenging and ongoing as the district works to enhance student achievement and life ready skills in an equitable way. Superintendent Kent Scribner stated, “Preparing students to lead in the 21st century is our responsibility. We believe the FWISD Learning Model is what our students need and deserve. It is what learning should look like in every classroom.”

FORT WORTH ISD 6 YEAR PLAN

YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5	YEAR 6
28 Total Campuses—up to 500 teachers	23 Total Campuses—up to 450 teachers				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 HS @ 36 each = 144 • 5 MS @ 24 each = 120 • 19 ES @ 12 each = 228 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 HS @ 36 each = 144 • 5 MS @ 24 each = 120 • 19 ES @ 12 each = 228 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 HS @ 36 each = 144 • 5 MS @ 24 each = 120 • 19 ES @ 12 each = 228 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 HS @ 36 each = 144 • 5 MS @ 24 each = 120 • 19 ES @ 12 each = 228 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 HS @ 36 each = 144 • 3 MS @ 24 each = 72 • 16 ES @ 12 each = 192 	
Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches				
Up to 30 Campus Principals	Up to 30 Campus Principals				
	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches (from Year 1)	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches (from Year 2)	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches (from Year 3)	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches (from Year 4)	Up to 35 Campus/District Coaches (from Year 5)

Fort Worth Independent School District Professional Learning Graph 2017 - 2018 Growth in e2L Curated Best Practices



El Paso ISD Active Learning Framework

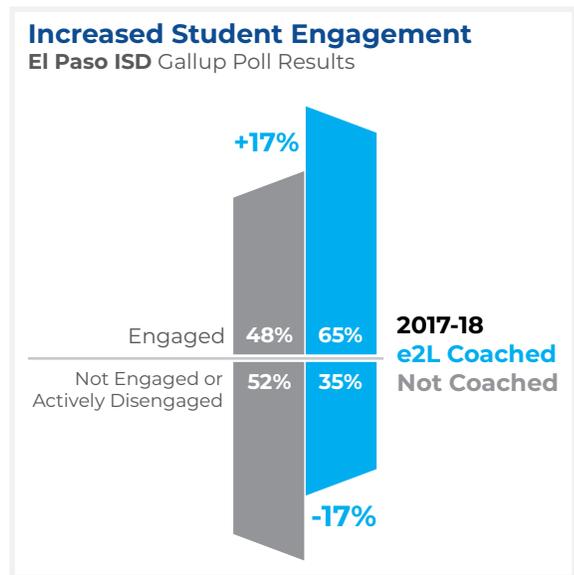
When the state-appointed Board of Managers in El Paso ISD (EPISD), an urban district located on the Texas/Mexico border, which claims the poorest zip code in the US, hired Superintendent Juan Cabrera five years ago, he was facing huge challenges. The district had been in turmoil over the previous superintendent’s indictment for fraud and the cheating scandal which involved several other key leaders. In addition to replacing leaders throughout the organization, rectifying the reputation and integrity of the district, and shifting the culture, Superintendent Cabrera had a vision for every learner to get a meaningful learning experience in every classroom every day to prepare for life after school. “The quality of students’ education should not be determined by their zip code,” Superintendent Cabrera is often heard saying.

The district engaged stakeholders in creating EPISD 2020, which outlined student learning goals including: critical, knowledgeable and creative thinkers, informed problem-solvers, effective bilingual communicators, responsible leaders and productive citizens, and socially, emotionally intelligent individuals. Then, they designed the EPISD Active Learning Framework (ALF) to make sure the learning experience students were immersed in daily would lead to those student outcomes. The now-elected Board of Trustees and district leadership invested in a five-year plan to support teachers and campus leaders in making the transition to the Active Learning Framework through a massive professional learning effort where two feeder patterns of campuses, approximately 1,000 teachers per year, received training and seven sessions of individualized, job-embedded coaching to implement the EPISD ALF as the instructional model in every classroom.



In just Year 3 of this effort, the results have been promising. First, the district has seen 17 percent higher levels of student engagement, based on the Gallup Student Engagement Poll, in schools that have already implemented the ALF as compared to those that have not implemented yet and a 14 percent lower level of active disengagement.

In addition, achievement for the ALF campuses has risen sharply each year and shown significant growth as compared to the campuses who have not yet implemented the framework, showing that this approach is closing the achievement gap. In Algebra 1 End-Of-Course exams, which is the single, clearest indicator of post-secondary degree attainment (Hein et al., 2013), campuses that implemented the ALF had significant growth in “Masters Grade Level” attainment. The three implementing feeder patterns had one-year growth percentage differences from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018 of +8 percent, +9 percent, and +23 percent for a total average percentage difference of +16 percent than students in non-ALF classrooms (TEA, 2018).



Promising Solutions

In the worthwhile struggle for equity in schools, these two urban districts’ commitments to real change that impacts every learner’s experience are showing potential as a model for those who truly want to ensure children entering school with gaps in language, cognitive skills, and social skills can leave school ready for life. The work is in the early stages, but initial results in terms of growth in instructional practice, student engagement, and student achievement are trending positively. In the 16,000+ hours that every learner spends in school, the promise of being life ready and breaking the cycle of poverty can be achieved if districts continue to explore how to best utilize that time and commit to providing a learning experience during that time every day that affords all learners the opportunity to acquire the skills to thrive.

Biographies

Dr. Kent P. Scribner is the superintendent of the Fort Worth Independent School District, where he serves more than 86,000 students and 11,000 employees. The District was cited by the Texas Education Agency as one of the two top urban districts in the state in year-to-year positive growth and is the recipient of the 2018 Council of Urban Boards of Education Annual Award for Urban School Excellent (CUBE) by the National School Board Association (NSBA) for demonstrating excellence in the areas of school board management, academic improvement, educational equity and community engagement.

Superintendent **Juan Cabrera** leads El Paso ISD since 2013, serves on the Commissioner of Education's Superintendents Cabinet, and as founder and immediate past president of the Texas Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents and the Texas Urban Council of Superintendents. Nationally, Mr. Cabrera serves on the Executive Committee of the Council of Great city Schools, which is the nation's leading advocate for large urban school systems and was nominated as one of nine finalists, nationwide, for the Green-Garner Award, which is the organization's highest recognition for urban superintendents.

A teacher and educator for 20 years turned entrepreneur, **Shannon K. Buerk** is the CEO and founder of engage2learn.org and works with communities across the U.S. to design equitable and innovative learning solutions across entire systems. Shannon and her team have implemented scalable, effective coaching processes to modernize instructional practice and the learning experience for 2.6 million learners and counting. In 2017, Shannon was named Most Innovative Woman of the Year for Technology at the Stevie Awards in New York. In 2018, she was recognized as the Woman Executive of the Year for Innovation in Education by the Golden Bridge Awards.

References

- Alexander, M. (2011). *The new jim crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*, New York, NY: The New Press.
- Alismai, H.J. & McGuire, P. (2015). 21st century standards and curriculum: current research and practice. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6 (6), 150-154.
- Alloway, T.P., Gathercole, S.D., Kirkwood, H.J., & Elliott, J.E. (2009). The cognitive and behavioral characteristics of children with low working memory. *Child Development*, 80, 606-621.
- Barriner, L. & Coates-Connor, D. (2016). The 4th box sparks imagination. Interaction Institute for Social Change. Retrieved from: <https://interactioninstitute.org/the-4th-box-sparks-imagination/>
- Bradley, R.H. & Corwyn, R.F. (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 371-399.
- Clay, G. (2018). Panels dissects role of suspensions in school-to-prison pipeline. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, 116450. Retrieved from: <https://diverseeducation.com/article/116450>
- Curtin, M. (2018). 10 skills employers will want the most in 2020. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/10-skills-employers-will-want-the-most-in-2020-2018-1>
- Equal Opportunity Schools. Racial and economic access gaps persist in high schools. Retrieved from: <https://eoschools.org/why/>
- Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hein, V., Smerdon, B., Sambolt, M. & Quill Research Associates, LLC. (2013). Predictors of postsecondary success. *College & Career Readiness & Success Center at American Institute for Research*, Nov 2013, p. 1-16.
- Kang, C. (2016). Bridging a digital divide that leaves schoolchildren behind. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/23/technology/fcc-internet-access-school.html?module=inline>
- Pink, D. H. (2006). *A whole new mind: Why right-brainers will rule the future*. New York, NY: Riverhead.
- Robinson, K. (2011). *Out of our minds: Learning to be creative*. Oxford: Capstone. Texas Education Agency. (2018). Data interaction for texas student assessment. Retrieved from: <https://txreports.emetric.net>
- Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for Academic Quality and Workforce. 2014. Texas core curriculum submission portal and user manual. Retrieved from: <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDR/3082.PDF?CFID=87702504&CFTOKEN=39371919>
- Theorkas, C. & Saaris, R. (2013). Finding america's missing AP and IB students. *The Education Trust*, June 2013, *Shattering Expectations Series*, 1-10.
- Wagner, T. (2008). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need--and what we can do about it*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zhao, Y. (2012). *World class learners: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.