

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to [news@portlandobserver.com](mailto:news@portlandobserver.com).

# OPINION

## Making Classrooms Work for All Our Students

### Big data meets the 'three Rs'

BY BEN JEALOUS

The most important factor in a student's success is a great teacher. But in the modern classroom, even great teachers face daunting obstacles.



This is a story about what happens when big data meets the "three R's" - reading, writing, and arithmetic. It's a story about the recent revolution in education technology, and how we in EdTech can help make our education system work for all American students.

Kids learn at different speeds and in different ways. A lesson perceived as boring and under stimulating to one student could strike another student as far too complicated to keep up.

According to one study, seven out of 10 middle and high school students require instruction that is specifically targeted to their strengths and weaknesses. This is partly a function of human nature, but it is also a

function of inequality. The first few years of a child's life are crucial for their development, as they learn to recognize words and numbers by sight and sound.

Many children who grow up poor - particularly poor children of color - have fewer books in their homes, less ac-

cess to good libraries and less access to the Internet. As early as kindergarten, children in the highest socioeconomic level already outperform their playmates in the lowest socioeconomic level by 60 percent.

*This creates a challenge for teachers: how do you take a class of 20 or 30 students who all have different home lives, backgrounds and skill sets, and somehow manage to*

*teach them the same material?*

This creates a challenge for teachers: how do you take a class of 20 or 30 students who all have different home lives, backgrounds and skill sets, and somehow manage to

teach them the same material? A new generation of education software is beginning to help teachers answer that question. One of these services is Newsela. Newsela provides teachers with daily news articles from national and local newspapers, written at five different reading levels. The class can discuss the news as

students based on their personal interests - for instance, Harry Potter or Spongebob. The program allows teachers to track students' growth and progress and adapts questions based on what a student gets right or wrong. Like Newsela, it meets students where they are.

On the other side of the academic spectrum is Front Row. Front Row is an online software that generates math exercises for students based on their current skill level. Like Newsela and No Red Ink, it tailors the lesson to students' needs and automatically tracks progress. The program even reads math questions aloud for English as a Second Language (ESL) students - something that's particularly important in light of the fact that by high school, fewer

than one out of 10 students taking AP Computer Science are Latino.

We are entering a new age of Edtech. As Silicon Valley investor Umang Gupta has pointed out, there has never been a "mega-breakout" in the education software space, and only one percent of all education spending right now is on technology. But that is likely to change. Computers and tablets only continue to get cheaper, and broadband access only continues to improve.

In an increasingly diverse nation, we need to use all the tools at our disposal - old-fashioned and new - to ensure that schools work for all of our kids. The era of widespread personalized education is rapidly approaching, and social justice-minded entrepreneurs are starting to break the code on how to teach using tech.

*Ben Jealous is former president and chief executive officer of the NAACP, and Partner at Kapor Capital, a social impact investing firm that invests in EdTech companies including Newsela, No Red Ink and Front Row.*

## Opening Doors to the Global, High-Tech Economy

### Overcoming the crisis in education

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Our nation's high schools are in a state of troubling crisis. Too many of our students are graduating ill-equipped for the academic rigors of college and, ultimately, the challenges and needs of today's global, high-tech economy.



For many of our high school graduates, earning a college degree will be their first step on the path towards the "American Dream" of the job, the house and future economic security. And the data consistently points to this traditionally accepted conclusion: those who earn a college degree are more likely to attain higher-skilled

and better paying jobs than their peers who only have a high school diploma.

But a recent report points to a concerning reality, one where insufficient college readiness is cutting off large numbers of students from a critical conduit of future opportunity and success--and because of historic dis-

*Only 34 percent of black high school graduates tested competent for college-level English courses, and just 14 percent were ready to tackle college-level math.*

parities in education between white students and black and Latino students, students of color are impacted in greater numbers.

The ACT testing company, which administers a popular, nation-wide college admissions and placement test, published a report that showed that one in three students who took the ACT are not ready for college course work.

In fact, just over 6 in 10 students met the test's college-ready benchmarks in English, math, reading and

For white high school students who took the ACT in 2014, 76 percent tested competent for college-level English courses and 52 percent tested competent for math. Only 34 percent of black high school graduates tested competent for college-level English courses, and just 14 percent were ready to tackle college-level math. For Hispanic students,

challenge to prepare all of our students for post-secondary academic success, it must be acknowledged that students of color are feeling the impact of the failure to prepare our students in far greater numbers. This failure not only hurts the individual student by curbing job prospects and higher earning potential, it weakens our nation and our standing as a strong competitor in a global marketplace that values the knowledge and skills that come with schooling and training beyond high school.

*Understanding that time-tested correlation between educational opportunity and future economic empowerment, the National Urban League has developed Project Ready, a signature programming initiative that prepares African-American students and other urban youth for college, work and life.*

As we face a nationwide

47 percent were prepared for college-level English and 29 percent were ready for college-level math courses.