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Opinion

ESSA: A Roadmap for Achieving Equity in Education

States are in the drivers seat when it comes to improving their struggling schools. But how can we make sure they're not taking the "path of least resistance" when it comes to this important work, risking the academic prospects for students of color.

Building on the work done by Bellwether Education Partners, which conducted independent peer reviews of all 50 states' and the District of Columbia's ESSA plans that were required to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education for approval, the Collaborative for Student Success analyzed plans to see which states are taking advantage of new-found flexibility regarding equity in education. The new report, *Check State Plans: Promise to Practice*, found that just 17 states met its threshold for even having enough public information to review. The report notes that the results are "sobering" in that "more than 9 million students attend schools that do not meet anyone's standard for what is acceptable." This is particularly acute for students of color and who come from low-income families.

The fact is, achievement gaps between white and black students exist. We see this time and again in the National Assessment of Education



Dr. Elizabeth Primas

Program Manager, NNPA

Progress as well as on individual states' annual assessments. Students who attend inner city public schools tend to fare worse than their peers in suburban public schools. The gaps are even more pronounced when we look at private schools that draw privi-

“ While 36.2 percent of white students completed four years of college in 2015, just 22.5 percent of black students could say the same

leged students away from city institutions. These racial divides segregate communities.

A report from the Young Invincibles examines these divides and developed three main findings: (1) minorities disproportionately enroll in for-profit and community colleges, which can condemn them to a vicious cycle of debt; (2) college costs hit minority students harder than their white peers; and (3) the achievement gap is racially divided. While 36.2 percent of white students completed four years of college in 2015,

just 22.5 percent of black students could say the same, according to the analysis. While that's much better than the 1974 numbers in which just 5.5 percent of black students finished four years of college compared to 14 percent of white students, that progress leaves little cheer.

State education chiefs and their in-state partners at teaching and research institutions plus educators on the front lines have a real chance to make a difference for black students and other minorities. But do they have

the courage to make the necessary changes?

The Collaborative's report is a good starting point, and it provides a roadmap written by education and policy leaders who are displaying the courage necessary to create bold plans that prioritize equity. Low-performing schools must be identified as such and be given real plans with real accountability measures to improve. There have to be consequences for students who don't make the grade, but for too long, our education system as a whole has pun-

ished students by not giving them the tools they need to succeed. We have to look at the institutions and root out systemic problems.

As such, the Promise to Practice reviewers evaluated state plans based on a rubric that included whether the state has a coherent vision for improving student outcomes, whether there is a strategic use of funding and alignment of resources, the use of evidence-based interventions, and how well state leaders engaged stakeholders. That last component is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of ESSA – federal lawmakers required states to gather input from a wide range of groups outside of traditional education. Civic groups, business leaders, parents and community activists were given a seat at the table.

We watched excitedly as several NAACP groups got involved from the very beginning, helping policy and lawmakers understand community and even neighborhood needs for the betterment of students. Still, it disheartening to learn that just 17 states are ready to identify and provide the kinds of supports that low-performing schools require.

Read the rest of this commentary at TheSkanner.com

Will a New CFPB Director Heed the Agency's Mission?

In her first news conference as a Senate-confirmed Director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Kathleen Kraninger's remarks sounded a lot like Mick Mulvaney, her former boss at the Office of Budget and Management (OMB). On December 11, just one day into a five-year term of office, Kraninger told reporters she would continue the business-friendly work begun by Mulvaney.

Days earlier on December 6, Kraninger was confirmed to the position by a 50-49 party line vote. However, a broad and diverse coalition comprised of national and state organizations have pledged to valiantly stand up for consumers and their financial rights.

Labor advocates like the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), as well as civil rights stalwarts NAACP, Unidos US (formerly the National Council of LaRaza) and the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and consumer advocates like Americans for Financial Reform and Center for Responsible Lending are all among the advocates lending their names and influence on the effort.

"She won't answer ques-



Charlene Crowell

NNPA Columnist

tions. She won't release documents. She let industry attend her swearing in but not the public. Now she's forcing

“ Now she's forcing important members of the media out of the room during her first press availability as CFPB director. What is Kathy Kraninger hiding?

important members of the media out of the room during her first press availability as CFPB director. What is Kathy Kraninger hiding?" asked

Karl Frisch, executive director of Allied Progress.

"This is not how a CFPB director committed to transparency and accountability operates. We deserve better," added Frisch.

Kraninger arrives to CFPB's top job with no experience protecting consumers nor in financial regulation. Neither does she bring experience in directing a large government agency. While at OMB, she was considered a mid-level appointee.

Earlier and in a series of replies to questions from the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, one of the questions posed was, "Can you identify any actions he [Mulvaney] has taken that you disagree with and explain why you disagree?"

Kraninger's response was, "I cannot identify any actions that Acting Director Mulvaney has taken with which I disagree."

Under Mulvaney's leadership, the CFPB was transformed from a vigilant consumer advocate into a servant to corporations. Just a few of the anti-consumer actions taken by Mulvaney include a lack of enforcement of the nation's fair lending laws, rollbacks of consumer pro-

tections, and suppression of the CFPB's Student Loan Ombudsman report that found how high fees were charged to college students by major banks.

Most importantly, even in the handful of cases brought under Mulvaney, financial actors who defrauded and abused consumers, next to nothing was paid in restitution – monies that could help make consumers whole financially. Instead of enforcement, many consumer activists would view that lack of action as simply a business-friendly pass.

For the nation's consumers, however, financial fairness – rules that eliminate debt traps including payday loans, as well as restitution from lawsuits that earlier returned nearly \$12 billion to those who had been financially harmed – could seem like CFPB's history but not its current focus.

What happens over the next five years will test the mettle of those who fought to create an agency given the mission to protect consumer finances against profiteers who argue that baseline protections for consumers are an unnecessary burden to business.

Read the rest of this commentary at TheSkanner.com