

June 26, 2015

To Jonathan Lowe and the JCPS Board policy and pedagogy committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the new JCPS five-year plan, Vision 2020. These suggestions reflect the views of both Louisville FOR and the Ky Alliance. The current system at JCPS is not broken; it was set up that way. We can shift it to produce more equitable outcomes.

1. The Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Kentucky Alliance against Racist and Political Repression urge inclusion in Vision 2020 of measureable, achievable learning gap reduction target(s) to drive and monitor progress toward equity in educational outcomes between advantaged white students and the “gap” student groups.

Today, well over 60% of JCPS students come from families with low incomes. Just over 50% are people of color. While the system-wide percentage of students ranked proficient in math and reading has climbed to 45%, only one out of three students from families with low incomes are rated proficient. For Hispanic students, the rate is only 40%. For every 100 African American students, only 28 have reached that mark—half the rate for all white students (56%). Students who have special educational needs or who are English language learners scored even lower.

The gaps are clearly real. The question from these students and their parents to JCPS leaders, though, is simple: Overall, is the current mix of JCPS school programs reducing or widening the achievement/learning gaps among our children?

Right now, JCPS administrators don't know... and aren't held accountable for the answer.

Vision 2015—the current strategic guidebook of JCPS--has no measureable goals around reducing actual learning gaps based on race, family income, English language ability, or special needs. Don't allow that lack of accountability to continue in the new five-year plan, Vision 2020.

To put more of our tax dollars into the right budget buckets, JCPS needs to collect and act on hard evidence—local and national--of individual program effectiveness in moving these “gap” children forward faster.

2. We believe the vision and/or mission statements need to be fundamentally changed. It must clearly state that the task of a great urban public school district includes reducing the learning gaps attributable primarily to the circumstances into which the students were born.

“We spend more--even in the public schools-- on the children of the rich than we do for the poor. We are transmitting advantages and disadvantages across generations, and that is the most important factor in creating this inequality of opportunity.”

--Nobel-prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz

JCPS programs and resource allocations should reduce the learning and skills gaps compared with advantaged students. They must create a more level competitive field as its students graduate and enter college or the job market.

Race and socio-economic status of students are unrelated to the student's innate potential, but are still strong predictors of student achievement today. KY Department of Education data for JCPS in school years 2012-2014 shows that while math and reading proficiency for every demographic group—race/ethnicity, low income, English language learners, special needs – showed improvement, the generally more-advantaged white student group rose by more percentage points than any of the so-called “gap” groups.

That means those learning gaps are increasing, and therefore that JCPS is still a part of institutionalizing the inequity that persists in our society and community.

The Seattle Public Schools (SPS) system is addressing the same challenge. Their Policy #0030, passed 8/15/2012 (attached) addresses Ensuring Educational and Racial Equity. It says, concisely and elegantly, that

“...Seattle Public Schools will: Raise the achievement of all students while narrowing the gaps between the lowest and highest performing students; ...”

SPS is finding that narrowing the gaps in learning does not mean giving up improvements for higher performing students. Both should be the mission of any diverse, public school system. It is a matter of rebalancing budget, resources and programs—and adding new resources when and where necessary—to close the disparities.

JCPS needs this kind of clear statement of over-arching, guiding principles regarding equity.

3. JCPS should have an alternative measure for gap reduction

Using the intense, once-a-year state testing to measure progress may be a state requirement currently imposed on JCPS, but it is probably not the best way to measure and compare student progress and learning gap reduction.

The No Child Left Behind Act is up for renewal right now. Students and their parents in several states have organized test day walk-outs against these stressful, distracting, high-stakes, multiple choice tests. It makes no sense to rely on—to enshrine-- these measures as the basis for seeing what best helps our students over the next five years.

JCPS leadership must research available alternatives for broader, measurable indicators of demonstrated student progress in gap reduction and overall learning. Not only would these be more useful to classroom teachers' ongoing, real-time adjustments for student learning, they would be less likely to be “gamed” for short-term improvements in district- and school-wide results. Right now for example, the focus on attaining the “proficiency” rating encourages extra focus on students who just missed reaching that level—so-called bubble students—so they reach proficiency. Ask any teacher. This leads to short-term improvements in the overall achievement results, but the extra instruction/mentoring disproportionately focuses on the higher-performing

half of students—where you find fewer gap students. We want to accelerate progress by the lower-performing students as well.

4. JCPS should develop a concrete process for systematic evaluation of equity issues in programmatic and budget decisions

A measurable learning gap target would be a critical annual metric for assessing progress against learning gaps. However, the Board and JCPS management team would be well-served to require and develop a rigorous, consistent process for evaluating equity issues in new and existing programs throughout the year. It would be a new driver, a new lens for every evaluation and decision. It would require presentation of hard evidence about what works and what doesn't, and doubling down on those that close the gap. The Seattle schools have created an Equity Analysis process (attached) to help provide this consistency in their evidence-based decision-making. It might provide a starting point for our own version.

Here are some issues considered by JCPS this year (you can think of more) where such a tool might have made a difference in direction:

- School construction vs rehabilitation;
- hiring of minority teachers;
- magnets, without academic thresholds for acceptance;
- student/teacher ratios;
- intensive, extended pre-K development programs;
- rollout of programs for pre-emptive assessment of-- and resources for--behavioral concerns instead of suspensions

...the possibilities are endless.

5. Lastly, we urge the Board not to finalize Vision 2020 until after the 2014-2015 data is released and evaluated. Those results will be a key indicator of whether the current Vision and mix of resources and programs is equitable to disadvantaged students.

To be on target with current goals, JCPS overall gap group math and reading proficiencies would have to rise from last year's 34% to 51.2% . Those numbers are released in October 2015, weeks after the Board is scheduled to approve the new Vision 2020. Is it likely that there will be a 50% increase in the number of proficient-rated gap students in one year?

We see lots of hard work being done to help JCPS students. Thanks for your work on involving the public in guiding the District.

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for the Louisville Chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and
for the Kentucky Alliance against Racist and Political Repression