Reorienting Public Education to Meet the Needs of Our Youth

Lessons Learned from the Adolescent Learning and Development Project in Mississippi

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Public education holds great promise as a way to increase social and economic mobility and improve the functioning and integrity of government. Successful public schools can foster an engaged democratic citizenry and drive substantial and inclusive economic growth.

In today’s deeply polarized political environment, it is a success that public investments in early childhood are not a hot-button partisan issue. This is a testament to the shared work, over many years, of researchers, advocates, policymakers, childcare sector leaders, and voters. It bears remembering, however, that the bulk of youth in our public education system are not, in fact, early learners. They are adolescents - young people roughly between the 5th grade and 12th grade.

Emerging principles of neurobiological development in adolescence are delivering new opportunities to make big and needed changes to the way public education is designed, practiced, and supported.

Adolescence begins with puberty and ends socio-culturally. According to the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) this corresponds roughly with the ages of 10-25. There is still much work to be done to align education policies and practices with the developmental and learning needs of adolescents.

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Beyond the benefits of this “alignment,” however, is the simple fact that early learners grow into adolescents. The positive impacts of investments in early childhood are actively undermined by the failure to continue these investments into adolescence.

This presents public education leaders at all levels with a largely unmet challenge and significant opportunities for improvement.

The goal of the Adolescent Learning and Development Project (ALDP) is to use science to advance impactful, reliable, sustainable changes within the education system. To achieve this, there must be coordinated efforts among education leaders, families, and policymakers, grounded in science. The ALDP centers equity—both at the individual and system levels—by connecting efforts to improve local practices with efforts to advance policy changes. The project is in one sense place-based, prioritizing partnerships with school districts and local communities. It is also national in that it connects statewide policy and advocacy organizations and leaders across states to advance a shared agenda and help inform national conversations.

For a decade, the Opportunity Institute (OI) has been collaborating with Southern Echo, an educational equity-focused advocacy organization that uses community organizing, leadership development and deep engagement with local community members and practitioners to advance a practical vision of educational equity and racial justice and to improve local and statewide policy.

The collaboration focuses on “whole-child equity,” a practice-policy effort to support a more holistic system of learning for adolescents through better-informed and more impactful decision-making.
Lessons Learned

The work to date has generated the following key lessons about what it takes to build stronger middle and high school programs for improved effectiveness and efficiency, through better alignment with scientific principles of adolescent development.

1. Work with school and district leaders must be complemented by local and statewide policy efforts rooted in shared principles of science and equity.

2. To advance equity, funding and programs must be dedicated to high-impact activities and focused on implementation in context.

3. Political and system-level leaders must be knowledgeable about education issues affecting underserved groups and willing to do the demanding work that is necessary to advance equity.

4. Impact and sustainability require the deep involvement of students, families, and a broad range of local and state stakeholders.
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**Our Approach: Engagement among School Districts, Communities, and State Leaders**

Recognizing the importance of informed and engaged school communities, the ALDP’s work in Mississippi began in earnest with listening and learning sessions with education leaders, families, and community members. In a series of sessions, a diverse group of community leaders expressed a shared desire to help young people learn and thrive. They expressed a greater need to provide more positive environments and to support holistic learning and development for each learner. These are good starting points.

The ALDP entered into agreements with Greenville Public Schools, Moss Point Public Schools, and Sunflower County Consolidated School District. Each of these districts serves primarily low-income and under-resourced populations of color. Initial conversations with education leaders in all locations uncovered a strong shared appetite for learning, an intense interest in science-based principles of learning and development, and a shared interest in developing a broader understanding of what equity looks like from both a practice perspective and a larger statewide policy perspective. Ongoing efforts have helped to establish a more broadly shared base of knowledge of the educational experiences of students and ways leaders might strengthen communication and collaboration to address major problems of practice and improve outcomes for the least served. In each setting, our partners have identified urgently needed short-term changes while developing a vision for longer-term systems-level change.

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**The Challenge: The Mismatch Between How We “School” and How Adolescents Learn**

Together, the majority of public school students are students of color, students from low-income and low-wealth households, English learners, students with disabilities, and students from other underserved populations. From state to state and school to school, these students tend to be under-resourced and tend to “underperform” in comparison to wealthier peers with greater access to high-quality resources, supports, and opportunities.

Producing successful results for underserved youth requires changing the ways we make education policy, allocate resources, and use our human capital. Emerging principles of neurobiological development in adolescents are delivering new opportunities to make big and needed changes to the way public education is designed, practiced, and supported. These changes require more asset-based approaches and more respectful collaboration with all the people and constituencies that have a shared “stake” in the results, particularly young people and their families.

**A Better Understanding of Adolescence Can Create Promising Futures**

As young people move toward adulthood, they undergo a series of neurobiological and social changes that affect the way they learn and understand the world. The period of adolescence, characterized by rapid physical, neurological, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, is a critically important time for learning. Given supportive and appropriately challenging experiences, the adolescent brain becomes increasingly more complex, specialized, and efficient. Because development is jagged, not linear, and no two young people develop at the same pace, it is imperative...
that adults help guide adolescents by scaffolding expectations to help them better manage complex tasks and scenarios.

As adolescent-aged learners try to make sense of the world around them, they exercise their agency by pushing back or rebelling against institutional norms they do not understand or agree with. Adolescent responses and behaviors, often at odds with norms and institutional expectations, can be challenging for the customary functioning of our public systems and the adults within these systems.

While adolescents learn and thrive with positive reinforcement and redirection, adults often react to what they consider “insubordinate” behavior by doling out punitive responses such as isolation from peers and from school—in the form of in-school suspensions, special education behavioral classes, or expulsions. We must not allow “self-direction” and “agency” to become descriptors reserved only for privileged, wealthy, and high-performing children. When one considers the academic and personal harm to students from the current scale and frequency of punitive discipline in schools, not to mention the social and emotional harm suffered by vulnerable young people who challenge institutional norms more generally, it becomes evident that our systems are not functioning in ways that reflect what we know about developmental science.

Adolescents commonly experience increased:

• Sensitivity to social evaluation and a need for strong positive peer and adult relationships, sense of belonging, acceptance, and respect.
• Susceptibility to peer influence and to risk-taking, both positive and negative.
• Ability to take on complex cognitive tasks.
• Risk for mental and behavioral health issues including alcohol and substance use, as well as sexual health issues, physical injuries, and trauma.
• Understanding of their purpose and unique identity.
• Need for greater agency on issues of personal relevance.

By better understanding adolescent reactions to specific changes, opportunities, and challenges, adults can better help young people to learn and thrive in school as well as in the broader context of their own life circumstances. The implications go far beyond the educational sector.

What we know is that academic, economic, civic, and social outcomes for our underserved students have remained flat or gotten worse. This, after decades of efforts to improve funding, change federal and state policies, provide stronger “accountability,” and the backing of reforms by philanthropy and various experts. This is more than a question of simply writing better laws or “getting it right” in a single school or location, hoping a singular success will serve as a beacon for change across the country. The changes we seek at scale will only happen if decision makers meaningfully partner with communities, build upon local assets, develop shared goals, and implement collaboratively.

Upon reflection, it is perhaps not surprising that in community listening sessions, the first issue raised by attendees was the high rate of juvenile violence and youth homicides. Participants identified high school dropout rates and broader student disengagement as possible root causes of the violence, and then turned to symptoms of broader underinvestment, such as the lack of local civic resources like playgrounds and parks, inequitable access to college, gainful employment, and/or career pathways.

Going beyond public education and criminal justice, too many public systems that are meant to engage with young people and their families are under-resourced and under-informed as to the most effective practices for supporting positive development and learning. Persisting with antiquated strategies in our youth-serving systems will not—cannot—meet these urgent and basic needs.

Policies and practices in our public schools should reflect and support what we know about how young people are growing. The changes we seek at scale will only happen if decision makers meaningfully partner with communities, build upon local assets, develop shared goals, and implement collaboratively.
Lesson I: Working with school and district leaders

Educational experience and political direction are connected, and the thriving of communities and the sustainability of equity-minded changes are tied up in both. The path to educational equity goes through educational governance, but also civic engagement, educational leadership, issues-based advocacy and political influence. The key work to be done in education equity goes far beyond providing communities with tools, information, and rationales as to why changes are needed and how they should be undertaken. Of greater urgency is the need to develop a shared understanding of the structures and processes that impact the lives of people in their communities. The work must be focused on both improving the experiences of people in specific places and integrating the voices of families and local communities into a broader policy agenda. Educational experience and political direction are connected, and the thriving of communities and the sustainability of equity-minded changes are tied up in both.

For these efforts to be maximally impactful and sustainable, greater attention is needed at the state level to: (1) provide adequate, dedicated staffing for the practical application of science and equity principles in program creation/development; and (2) create the necessary incentives to support high-quality efforts around policy and program implementation. State authorities must increase funding for the highest-need schools and districts as well as for underserved populations in otherwise well-resourced schools. It is equally important for state leaders to invest in people who have the knowledge and capacity needed to ensure the greatest possible impact. This is reflected, for example, in the Mississippi Department of Education’s investments in literacy coaches for a large number of schools in need of reading support.

After undertaking an extensive and inclusive planning process for the use of federal ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds, a partner school district calculated that the funds needed to complete school renovations would have to come from local sources. In this high-poverty community, getting people to agree to a tax increase posed a real challenge. Through a series of community listening sessions, including with the ALDP, community members came to understand that a proposed school bond would pay not only for renovations but also for new media and science centers for schools. The bond passed by a wide margin.
Lesson II: Funding high-impact activities

Lesson II: To advance equity, funding and programs must be dedicated to high-impact activities and focused on implementation in context.

Schools need adequate funding. On their own, however, mere dollars are insufficient to advance equity and educational excellence. Highly gerrymandered state legislatures and the sharp political divides now seen in many school-board campaigns mean there are not only deeply partisan divides in how, or whether, such funds should be spent, but also large gaps between broadly shared public opinion and elected officials’ loyalty to increasingly narrow constituencies.

In concert with national, regional, and state-based organizations, the U.S. Department of Education and other related federal agencies have an important role to play in influencing program and policy implementation and decision-making around issues of equity. It is unlikely that equity will be a universally understood and shared priority. As states consider what “adequate” funding looks like using their own education funding formulas and definitions of adequacy, decision makers should consider the practical impacts of ongoing inequities. For example, chronic issues in the labor market for teachers, tutors, and support staff, and weaknesses in physical infrastructure—including tainted public water systems and the integrity of bridges, roads, and electrical grids—actively undermine the equitable impact of what might otherwise be adequate funding for schools.

Recent discussions about whether federal ESSER funds should be spent on additional staff positions in high-need schools and school districts bring these issues into focus. Federal authorities have come out in support of states using federal COVID-19 educational rescue funds to cover the costs of new staff hires, but while they can do much to set guidelines for how these funds should be spent, their actual reach into the day-to-day decision-making on these issues is quite short. Many school district and state leaders are worried about sustaining these kinds of staffing commitments. Still, it is hard to envision how supports for youth can be provided at a sufficiently high standard of quality without actual human beings to provide those services.

In January 2021, leaders in a partner school district were facing data that showed some students were up to two grade levels behind. The district decided to increase the school day by 50 minutes for K-8 students to facilitate students’ participation in tutoring in smaller groups. A year later, as district leadership continued to work on reaching agreement around ongoing small-group tutoring, the Mississippi Department of Education announced the launch of a free statewide online tutoring program that bolstered the district’s work. In the recently published Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) results, the partner district met state-level goals for the first time in years.

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Lesson III: Leaders must be knowledgeable about education issues affecting underserved groups and willing to do the demanding work that is necessary to advance equity.

The civic disempowerment of marginalized and underserved communities, including through various forms of voter suppression, has negatively impacted our schools. This is why Southern Echo aims to help community members become the “architects” of policy and avoid being only the “subjects” of policy. Over the years, Southern Echo’s work has shown what can be achieved when a consistent, reliable flow of information is built through political leadership across levels. People informed about issues that affect their own social, economic, and education interests can and should demand that legislators, mayors, school board members, and other state and local policymakers address their concerns.

And yet the work for equity must extend beyond the building of political coalitions. Frequently overlooked is that, even where political allies for educational equity and excellence are in place, many allies are nonetheless likely to be proceeding from incomplete or misinformed understandings of what science and research have shown is necessary to support thriving communities. This is as true for members of Congress as for state legislators and school board members.

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Building a more widely shared base of knowledge can help community members, advocates, and public officials focus more intently on the core issues at the heart of equity and excellence.

One mayor, recently elected and eager to serve his community, shared his thoughts with the ALDP team about how youth needed to be filled with information. He talked about “family values” and looking to the “older ways” when it came to disciplinary practices and encouraging students to conform. Just a few miles away, another mayor welcomed the chance to discuss the science of learning and adolescent development, including developmentally appropriate and asset-based approaches to public safety. The commitment shared by many political leaders to work hard and make a difference for young people goes only so far without adequate and up-to-date knowledge about how young people develop and thrive.
Lesson IV: Impact requires deep involvement

Lesson IV: Impact and sustainability require the deep involvement of students, families, and a broad range of local and state stakeholders.

One of the clear takeaways from the work done by the ALDP’s partner school districts is that even taking small steps requires a broadly shared, radical willingness to rethink standard practices and assumptions. For example, for all the frequent calls from philanthropists and thought leaders for broad cross-sector collaboration, much of the work in the education sector continues to develop, and to be funded, in a siloed, separate, often redundant fashion. Exemplifying this approach are the many customized programs that, while effective in a given place at a given time, have not produced sustainable changes and replication. Over decades, the challenges faced by vulnerable youth have proven immune to any manner of “one-and-done” solutions, even when these strategies are well-researched. While evidence of these individual successful programs and practices may draw applause in professional conferences, the education sector continues to see very little sustained success for students from the lowest-resourced families. This is as true in rural Mississippi as in any number of demographically similar communities across America.

Fundamentally, more support is needed for a farther-reaching and more broadly shared sense of “ownership” of our public systems and outcomes. In general, the lack of knowledge among “everyday people” about the ways they can have a practical impact on schools has a greater negative impact in communities suffering the cumulative weight of inequities across multiple public sectors.

Simply put, people in underserved communities must be centered in the generation of shared knowledge, the development of shared goals, the co-creation of strategies, and the actual fulfillment of those goals. People in community will always outlast the charismatic political leader, the talented superintendent, and the gifted principal. Support from outside groups must be intentionally built around existing sources of strength and knowledge in these communities, and not require the adoption of artificial frameworks and timelines.

During an intense and engaging town hall meeting, over 40 local leaders in a small rural community discussed various current and historical efforts to improve the lives of youth. It turns out that a federally funded initiative had at one time provided support for related efforts in the area, but funds had dwindled over time and eventually stopped altogether. Funding from outside sources is still critically needed in places like these. To be impactful and result in sustainable changes, outside money must be invested in locally identified needs and in the community members that can leverage key local assets and resources. Community members are ready to work, with outside help, around shared goals and to empower and improve their communities.
To be impactful and sustainable, this work cannot be undertaken primarily from the national level or solely from informational sources such as toolkits, playbooks, and other resources.

What is needed, but too often missing, is specific emphasis and coordination of efforts around practical, on-the-ground implementation with efforts to achieve changes at scale.

Conclusion

The main concept of the Adolescent Learning and Development Project is that improving outcomes for students, particularly those from under-served and under-resourced communities, requires actively connecting principles of science of learning and equity to the hard, practical work of educating youth in public schools and community. To do this, public systems must provide the necessary supports for learning—including adequate funding, physical infrastructure, staffing, and training—and also use lessons learned from on-the-ground experiences to timely inform and refine practices, policies, and regulations.

The ALDP centers equity—both at the individual and system levels—by connecting efforts to improve local practices with efforts to advance policy changes.

We see three essential lines of effort going forward:

1. Dedicated, sustained support to strengthen core activities and eliminate redundancy of efforts.
2. Allocation of funding to support a practice-to-policy model of change that explicitly connects local work with statewide efforts.
3. Co-development of an infrastructure in underserved communities that connects national, state, and local leaders with families, students, and community members, including educational practitioners, political leaders, and advocates.
About the Opportunity Institute

The Opportunity Institute (OI) is a national education policy organization that focuses broadly on cradle-to-career education policy, practice issues, and adjacent areas of social policy. Our work bridges the domains of policy, research, advocacy, and addresses equity in three main areas of work: “Whole Child” equity; resource equity; equity indicators.

About Southern Echo

Southern Echo is a Mississippi-based advocacy and policy organization that works to develop new, accountable grassroots leadership in African American and low-wealth communities throughout the state and the southern region. Our work emphasizes the importance of building strong community organizations as the essential means of empowering the community and influencing policy change that results in equity.