

Focus on High-Achieving Low-Income Students

The Issue

While the United States education system holds the promise of providing every student an equal opportunity to succeed, the current unfortunate reality is that children's socioeconomic status is correlated with their achievement level. For example, among first-grade students performing in the top academic quartile, 28 percent are from families with incomes below the national median. The remaining 72 percent are from families with incomes above the national median. And fewer low-income students are included in this high-achieving quartile as they continue their educational career, culminating in the fact that high-achieving low-income students are less likely than their higher income peers (59 percent versus 77 percent) to graduate from college.

Through federal law and other initiatives, the nation has appropriately focused its attention on ensuring that academically struggling students meet minimum proficiency levels. However, the AFT believes that this must be done concurrently with efforts to promote high academic achievement among students from lower-income families showing great potential.

The Solution

School systems must specifically nurture high-achieving low-income students, and invest in programs that provide this group of students academically challenging coursework and enrichment opportunities that mirror those of higher-income students. Such programs also must provide the supports necessary to identify assistance for these students. Specifically, the AFT recommends the creation or expansion of the following programs.

Advanced Placement opportunities in every high school. Research definitively shows the benefits of access to Advanced

Placement courses in high school. Students are exposed to challenging curriculum and become familiar with the rigors of college-level coursework and exams. Indeed, even if students do not pass the Advanced Placement exam, simply participating in the course is beneficial. Federal and state governments and local school systems should ensure that every high school offers several Advanced Placement classes, that nearly all students are encouraged to enroll in these classes, and that the exam fees be waived for any student who cannot afford them.

Coaching and mentoring programs offer high-achieving low-income students tutoring and academic assistance, help in navigating college and career preparation, and role models for success. Coaching and mentoring programs are inexpensive ways to ensure that low-income students are on track to succeed academically and socially.

In-school opportunities for independent study. Many potentially high-achieving low-income students attend schools where resources and staff attention are focused on academically struggling students. Potentially high-achieving students should be provided opportunities for independent accelerated study and enrichment. These should be tied to the standards for what all students should know and can do, and the work should be supervised by a teacher; however, the content and activities should be flexible enough to allow high-achieving students to explore topics of interest in-depth.

Early college high schools provide students with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma, and an associate's degree or credit toward a bachelor's degree, in a compressed

timeframe. Early college high schools are intended for students for whom the transition to college is currently problematic. One of the benefits of these programs is the fact that the physical transition between high school and college is eliminated along with the need to apply for college and for financial aid during the last year of high school. Also, early college high schools emphasize personalized learning with many academic and social supports.

AFT's Role

For local school districts that want to experiment with ways to foster the academic success of high-achieving low-income students, the AFT welcomes such proposals through its Innovation Fund. Additionally, the AFT can serve as a bridge between the public school systems and the higher education institutions that will provide the early college high schools as well as many of the enrichment and independent study activities.

AFT leaders and members will work to implement Advanced Placement programs in their schools and become certified to teach Advanced Placement classes. These will increase the rigor of a school's curriculum overall. Research indicates that teaching an Advanced Placement class improves a teacher's content knowledge and increases the overall rigor of a school's curriculum.

The AFT will advocate for increased funding for federal programs such as the Advanced Placement Incentive Program, which covers fees associated with Advanced Placement courses, and for GEAR UP programs, which identify and assist promising low-income youth. Additionally, the AFT can advocate for inclusion of programs and services to high-achieving low-income students as part of a reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act.