

**On February 14 and 15, 2017, ESE held its 2017 Instructional Support Convening. The theme was "Ensuring Every Student Succeeds: Setting Ambitious Expectations." On the first day of the convening, Michelle Ryan, a social studies teacher at Randolph High School and the 2015 Massachusetts Milken Educator, gave the following keynote address.**

Good morning everyone and Happy Valentine's Day! I would like to thank Commissioner Chester and all the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's staff for inviting me here today.

This morning, I would like you to travel back in time with me to three weeks ago to the setting of a very interesting experience. It was the third time I participated in an activity like the one I will describe, but this time was different.

So, there I was in a session with about eight other accomplished educators from various backgrounds. The facilitator asked us to get up and stand in a straight line. Standing tall shoulder to shoulder with my peers, we were equally in a line. I was ready, or at least I thought I was. She began to explain the instructions for the activity:

"Listen carefully to the statement I will read. For each statement, you will either take a step forward, a step back, or remain in place until the next statement is read."

Since I'd done this activity before, I felt like I would be exempt from any emotional triggering. My colleagues were anxiously waiting for each statement. Me? I felt relaxed. Mentally prepared. I knew where this was going.

"If you are a white male, take one step forward. If your parents both finished college take one step forward. If you have been a victim of discrimination based on your gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation, take one step back. If you went on family vacations as a child, take one step forward. If you ever felt passed over for employment based on your race, gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation, take one step back. If you are a citizen of the United States, take one step forward. If you took out loans for your education, take one step backward. If you have ever attended private school, take one step forward." And so she continued with statement after statement.

One step forward. One step back. Until in the end, I found myself in the back ALONE with a wide range of people ahead of me. After all my education, accomplishments, successes, how is it that I STILL found myself – a woman of color – in the back? These statements regarded things I could not control. I didn't like where I stood, how I felt, and most importantly, I didn't like the GAP between my peers and me.

Since this was professional development for educators, I started to see the point: Inequity and inequality are real. Achievement gaps exist and affect real lives. Privilege exists. And, while we may all start on the same playing field, it definitely does not always remain that way.

Standing alone at the back, I felt somewhat exposed and uncomfortable. Nonetheless, I knocked myself back into reality and quickly remembered that this was just an activity. I am highly qualified and we are all accomplished educators. It was emotional to think that after all these years there was still a gap, but

I was relieved to know that there were still factors that I *can* control – skills, education, passion, talent, work ethic. My education had prepared me to navigate across the gap and to succeed on an equal playing field – whether granted, earned, or a struggled for (or, maybe I am just one of the “lucky ones”).

While standing alone in the back after all I have worked hard for, I immediately began to think about my students. I thought about the achievement gaps in my school, throughout education, and within our communities! What hope exists or them? Do they even have a chance? The students in poverty, students of color, those with disabilities, English language learners, and the list goes on and on. What becomes of them when they are standing so far in the back of the line? I needed answers. I NEED solutions. After some time in education, I’ve discovered that one cause of the achievement gap includes this fact: *Somewhere along the line someone made a decision, a judgment, created a practice, policy, or lowered expectations that resulted in the position of those students in the back.*

Thinking back to the activity, the facilitator’s statements were not about my hopes and dreams – things I could control in my life. They were about my lifestyle, circumstances, things done to me, and things outside of my childlike control. I was *ready* to step forward, but things beyond my control – my family background, skin color, societal perceptions, travel experience, lack of opportunity – were seemingly held against me and holding me back.

As educators, imagine this: You are that facilitator. With each practice, decision, action (and inaction), belief, policy, we are either allowing students to take steps forward or take steps backward. There is no in between. Let’s think about the gravity of that responsibility: Are our practices widening or reducing the gap for our students? Have we given the students the skills, education, support, and advocacy necessary to succeed on the same playing field as the rest of the world? How many hurdles have we directly or indirectly created for those students in the “back” as they try to “take one step forward, take one step forward?” But just as important is this question: How willing are we to toil in order to remove these barriers, whether we are personally responsible for creating them or not? This is love in action. This is the call of our jobs.

Last year, my modern U.S. history class consisted of 28 students, 75 percent students of color, two ELL students, and six students on IEPs. Over the summer, I began the first step of equitable education for all – planning high quality curriculum and differentiated strategies with a whole lot of energy, passion, and belief in students’ ability to succeed. I had penned a well-rounded curriculum plan – or at least I thought I did. THEN the students arrived, took their Common Core aligned pre-assessment only for me to discover that the group as a whole was further behind in skills than my well-organized plan was ready for. Every day was a new challenge or adjustment to find a new instructional strategy to help my students reach proficiency and experience academic growth in critical reading, writing, and thinking. As a department we developed bi-weekly common assessments to create shared ground to discuss student learning, as well as to gather meaningful data. Over time I observed growth in various standards. However, it became very clear that anything equivalent to a year’s worth of growth or more would have to be the result of my gutsy expectations, and even more, strategic planning. I tried a *VARIETY* of things to support my student’s growth:

- Station learning
- Guided questions with varying levels of critical thinking
- Sentence starters
- Structured group collaboration
- Visuals
- Simulations
- Graphic organizers
- Multiple versions of primary and secondary sources
- Embedded vocabulary instruction
- Modeling
- Flipping the classroom model
- UDL strategies
- Keys to literacy comprehension routines
- The I-We-You model

....and A LOT of inspiring and motivating.

There were many puzzling times as I tried to figure out how I was going to do everything possible to support my students. As the kids would say, “the struggle was real.”

I know that closing the gap for all my students was and is an ambitious goal. I might fail, but the new realities of this world demand that I do more than try. I knew that my teaching would either provide equitable access to the curriculum (“taking one step forward”) OR translate into a series of “take one step back, take one step back, take one step back.”

This journey toward equitable education for all is not an easy journey. I have found, however, that inclusive practice and setting ambitious expectations for our students lie in the power of the pen. Right now, my pen is curriculum. Your pen might be policy, programs, procedures, or the development of resources. *We* create the factors that either widen or close the achievement gap. *We* write the conditions in which our students take one step forward or one step backward.

Now thinking about this: Should we ask our students to be critical thinkers, risk takers, and problem solvers if we are not willing to demand the same of ourselves? Equity, closing the gap, penning the right conditions for students to succeed is not easy. In some areas, we are still struggling to find the right answers, strategies, and solutions to create equitable practices that yield equal opportunity for *all* children. Yet, we still *have* to find the answers.

At the end of the day, we are impacting lives here. Education *nurtures life*, or at least it’s supposed to. *We don’t build* their dream, but *we decide* whether we will *grant* them the instruments necessary to paint whatever dream and goals they aspire for their own lives. Let’s give them a brush (or brushes), some different colors of paint, a canvas, and space to create their own masterpiece. Let’s give them the tools and skills to take a sustainable step forward.

Educational equity is more than the latest educational buzzword. It is a belief, a mindset, a mode of operation, a conviction, a commitment, a practice. If educational equity and helping those students in the back is our goal, then it should be **revealed** through our core values, **established** by our actions, and **evidenced** by the success of **every** child passing through our care. Students may not see or understand every bit of energy, stress, struggle, challenge, or action that goes into creating the conditions in which they can thrive. However, they *will* remember the childhood they had, all the positive conditions and rich opportunities *you* created, the gaps between peers that they remember gradually beginning to close. They will remember the success we allowed them to experience because we – the educators – held our pens, labored in love, and accepted the call of our job to write the policies, curriculum, expectations, standards, programs, resources, and initiatives that allow every student (*every child*) to “take one step forward, take one step forward, take one step forward.”