

'DEEPER LEARNING' IN HIGH SCHOOLS IS CHALLENGING, BUT POSSIBLE

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Focusing on students' achievement undermines their learning.

That's what Pedro Noguera, education professor at New York University, told an audience of educators, parents, students, and non-profit professionals who turned out to Generation All's third community forum at Wells Community Academy High School on April 14.

Instead, kids need complex and engaging projects that they can't master in a single try, he said. "The real learning is in the revision. And the real teaching is in the feedback, not the grade."

But opportunities for that kind of "deep learning" are scarce in American high schools serving low-income students, he said, where lecture and note taking are still the norm and the least experienced teachers serve the least advantaged kids.

"Inequality is more powerful than equity," he asserted. "Everything in our society is moving in the direction towards greater and greater inequality. And anybody who doesn't realize that's an educational issue hasn't been working in Chicago Public Schools."

Equity in education will only come about, he said, when policy makers stop relying on pressure as a strategy to improve schools and start investing in what matters, including professional development for teachers, time for faculty collaboration, and instructional coaches to observe lessons and provide feedback.

Noguera pointed to his recently released book *Excellence Through Equity*, for examples of high schools that did achieve stellar standardized test gains by focusing, not on the test, but on what he calls "deeper learning."

At one school, Hollenbeck Middle School in East Los Angeles, a math teacher set up challenging, small group projects tailored to students' varied instructional levels. "They were so immersed that when the bell rang, they got up like they were disturbed," he reported.

At the Bronx Academy for Language and Technology, a high school with a large number of Latino immigrants, the graduation rate rose to 95% after teachers had agreed to pursue certification to teach English Language Learners, regardless of their subject area, and to work together daily on lesson plans.

"There's not a single lesson delivered to a student that hasn't been planned collectively and vetted before it's used," he noted.

"I asked the kids at this school, 'What makes this school so special. You know what the kids told me? It feels like family. This is where I get support. I want to be here. "

Noguera says he likes to bring educators from schools with similar kids to the Bronx Academy so that they can understand what's possible. "If you can't see it can be done, you start to think the problem is 'those kids.'"

"There are schools out there that we can learn from," he insisted. "We need to make schools places where kids are excited to be."

During a panel discussion afterwards, Noguera, a principal, teacher and two high school students talked about what needed to happen to make deeper learning possible in Chicago's neighborhood high schools.

Principal Maurice Swinney of Tilden Career Community Academy High School called for better professional development for educators and time for teachers to collaborate on designing instruction. "If we want to change how things happen in the classroom, we have to consider how we are educating ourselves."

Students need a voice in lesson design, too, he added.

Teacher Yalil Nieves of Wells High School agreed on all counts. “Students need to be partners in the learning and the goal-setting. We have to convince them that what they’re learning is relevant.”

Student Jesus Velazquez of Kelvyn Park High School said that kids feel more motivated when they do in-depth projects and when they have strong relationships with their teachers. He found those things in elementary school, but only rarely in his large high school, he says. “I remember in 2nd grade, we would do projects, you would have to write the process of how butterflies grow,” but now it’s, “bookwork after bookwork. That’s why I think it’s really boring.”

Student Lin Mei said every student wants to learn but there are schools that aren’t provided with the necessary resources. “We all want to learn something, but we need a lot more collaboration within Chicago and definitely more engagement from staff within the school.”

Noguera said that while neighborhood schools need to do the best they can now with the resources they’ve got, more equitable funding is also essential. He pointed to California, which provides additional funds for high-poverty schools. “It’s the first time in this country’s history where you see that schools serving poor kids getting more resources than schools serving rich kids,” he observed. “It can be done.”