



An Interview with Dr. John H. Jackson, Ed.D. J.D.

- \* Written By: Michael F. Shaughnessy Senior Columnist EducationNews.org
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Michael F. Shaughnessy - May 28, 2009  
Senior Columnist EducationNews.org  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Portales, New Mexico

John H. Jackson is President and CEO of The Schott Foundation for Public Education. In this interview he responds to questions about Lost Opportunity: a 50 state Report on the Opportunity to Learn in America.

1) John, how did you first get involved in this 50 state report?

For years now, the education community has talked about the concept of an opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, that rhetoric has resulted in little in terms of action and results. Last month's release of the NAEP long-term data shows that the achievement gap in this country is the same as it was a decade ago, and the same as it was two decades ago. Despite all of the promises, we are not making sufficient progress addressing the academic needs of minority and low-income students. They are miles behind their White, well-resourced peers. If our students are going to compete on equal footing for college slots and jobs, we have to close the achievement gap. And we cannot close the achievement gap without first addressing the growing opportunity gap.

In the Schott Foundation's work on opportunity to learn issues, we often hear that opportunity and access are difficult issues to quantify. Lost Opportunity was designed to provide policymakers and educators such quantification. At Schott, we know from our equity work in the Campaign for Fiscal Equity in New York and our early education work in Massachusetts, as well as the work from parents and advocates in over 40 states that have filed equity and adequacy suits, that a lack of access to a quality education is one of the most significant barriers to both student achievement and to hope. In far too many states, students are being denied access to the resources that provide a meaningful opportunity to learn. A quality education should be a right held by all students, not just a privilege enjoyed by some.

We developed this 50-state report to provide decision makers a fresh look at the data that has troubled many of us for far too long. By looking at both NAEP and NCES data, we are able to see how the states stack up when it comes to providing students opportunities to learn through access to moderately proficient education systems. And we are able to see that there is much work ahead of us if we are to provide this American dream to all, particularly to minority and low-income students.

## 2) What states are doing well and why?

We found that Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Virginia are providing their students a moderately proficient, high-access public education. Students in these states “particularly Black, Latino, Native American and low-income students “have a greater chance of attending a top high school and have a greater chance of achieving on national assessments. Only 16 percent of our states are providing the quality and access we both seek and require.

It is important to note, though, that these states score in the top, comparatively. States fall within the moderate proficiency parameters if a third to 40% of their students are scoring proficient or better on the NAEP 8th grade reading exam. No state scores higher than 43% on NAEP 8th grade reading. It is hardly worth celebrating that quality in the United States means that fewer than half of 14-year-olds are able to read at an eighth grade level.

Similarly, those states that score in the high-access category do so because they provide a better than 50% chance at access to a good high school. Providing a minority or low-income student a 50% or 75% chance of attending a good high school is not the bar our states should be aspiring to. But we need to start somewhere. We need to understand where our states rank when it comes to both achievement and equity. That’s why these NAEP and NCES measures were utilized.

At the end of the day, no state should be declaring “mission accomplished” here. Every state has work to do with regard to both quality and access. No state should be setting a goal of 40% proficiency and 55% access so they are designated a moderately proficient, high-access state. Our goal should be 100% proficiency and 100% access, regardless of race, income, or zip code.

## 3) Which states are not doing so well and what do you attribute this to?

Based on NAEP and NCES data, Missouri, Texas, Rhode Island, Illinois, Michigan, Arkansas, Arizona, Nevada, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia are providing their students a low-proficiency, low-access public education. These states are our national laggards, and are the ones requiring the most work to provide all students a high-quality education.

Often, when we talk about student achievement and equity, the discussion usually comes back to resources and dollars. The data shows that money alone does not solve the problem, though. The District of Columbia has one of the highest per-pupil expenditure rates in the nation. Yet, DC scored last both in terms of student proficiency and student access. Neither is acceptable, particularly in our nation’s capital. It isn’t just about dollars; it is also about what we do with those dollars. For those states at the bottom of the list in particular, we can see that they struggle to provide their students a high-quality early childhood education, access to effective teachers, well-funded instructional materials, and a college preparatory curriculum. If we expect our students to perform, we must provide them the teachers and learning resources needed to support it.

4) Let me play devil's advocate here and pick on Alaska. That particular state faces some real challenges in terms of ice, snow, weather, and the extreme land mass. Is it really fair to compare Alaska to say Rhode Island?

Alaska actually fares well when it comes to the access issue. Across the state, a historically disadvantaged student has a 93 percent chance of attending a top high school, compared with White, non-Latino peers. Where Alaska struggles is with regard to student reading proficiency. Quality is not an issue that knows geographic or meteorological boundaries. Alaska is already compared to other states when it comes to NAEP. That is why we used The Nation's Report Card. And one can't ignore the fact that only 27 percent of Alaska's eighth graders score proficient or better when it comes to reading.

We are now in an era where we are focusing on national education standards and student achievement on national and international measures such as NAEP, TIMSS, and PISA. So comparing our states is not only fair, it should be required. In *Lost Opportunity*, we looked at both student proficiency and equal access to a high-quality school. Those states at the bottom of the list, including Rhode Island, failed to provide either. Geography, high-minority populations, high-poverty populations, and public perceptions are not excuses for providing a poor education. This study shows that every state has work to do when it comes to providing a high-quality, high-equity public education.

Every state has an equal obligation to provide all of its students regardless of race or socioeconomic status with access to a high-quality, high-equity education. No exceptions. Students in Vermont, New York, Georgia, and every other state take the same NAEP exam, so those comparisons are quite valid. In terms of access, each state was measured on their ability to provide minority and low-income students access to the top quartile of high schools in the state. There, responsibility rests entirely with the state. Hopefully, these numbers show states like New York and Massachusetts the true gaps in access between the haves and the have-nots.

5) What exactly is the Schott Foundation for Public Education? What is your involvement with them?

The Schott Foundation for Public Education was created in 1991 with the goal of building a more inclusive and representative education system that delivers a high-quality public education to every child. As a foundation, our work is focused on ensuring that all children graduate from high-performing, well-resourced public schools, regardless of race, gender, class, or native language. As part of this mission, the Schott Foundation supports an Opportunity to Learn frame on education policy, which focuses on ensuring that resources are provided for all students to have an equitable opportunity learn and produce high achievement outcomes. *Lost Opportunity* is part of our Opportunity to Learn commitment. I am President and CEO of The Schott Foundation.

6) What kinds of criteria did you look at in terms of evaluating the 50 states?

The *Lost Opportunity* report looks at two criteria for evaluating whether a state is providing its students a fair and substantive Opportunity to Learn. The first is access, which is measured by looking at NCES data regarding the chances that a historically disadvantaged student (minority and low income) will attend a high school ranked in the top quartile in the state. As a way to measure how substantive the access is, the second criteria is quality, which is measured by looking at the percentage of students scoring proficient or better on the 8th grade NAEP exam.

By looking at both the NAEP and NCES data, we determined the Opportunity to Learn for each state, ranking each state by its ability to provide all students a high quality, high-equity public education.

7) Now, graduation rates- why do you see this factor as an important variable?

President Obama has established, as a national goal, that the United States is to have the highest percentage of college graduates in the world by the year 2020. We have heard from the U.S. Department of Education for years now that most of the new jobs that will be created in the coming years will require some form of postsecondary education. A high school diploma is now a non-negotiable when it comes to the future success of our kids.

Dropping out is no longer a viable option, yet so many of our historically disadvantaged students are on a path to attend our nation's dropout factories, where half or more of all students will end their educational careers without earning a diploma. We can't expect our kids to succeed, both in career and in life, without a proper education. A high school diploma is a key piece of that education.

Last month, McKinsey & Company showed us the economic impact of the current achievement gap in this country "costing us more than half a trillion dollars in GDP. When we look at access to a high-quality high school and a student's true opportunity to learn, we see that the opportunity gap costs us more than \$59 billion annually. By improving access to a high-quality education, we can yield a 250-percent return on every dollar invested in school improvement efforts.

8) If schools lowered standards and diversified the curriculum, could we not raise graduation rates?

If anything, we need to raise our standards. We should all be offended that a high-quality public education in the United States is measured by whether one-third of eighth graders can score proficient or better on the 8th grade NAEP reading exam. Instead of congratulating ourselves for those 32 percent of students, we need to be focusing our efforts on how we equip the two-thirds of students who are struggling readers with the skills needed to achieve in both school and career.

Likewise, we should not be satisfied with providing historically disadvantaged students with a 50 percent or 60 percent chance at attending a top-quartile high school. Our goal should be to transform every high school into a high-performing high school, destroying each and every dropout factory at their very foundations.

Our primary goal should not be raising graduation rates. Improved graduation rates are an outcome of improving both student proficiency and access to resources. That is why student achievement cannot be our sole measure of school effectiveness. Access and equity are just as important. If we show every student that they have the chance of attending a good public high school and can access a path to success, more will take advantage of it.

Much of the work on improving graduation rates starts in the middle grades. Lost Opportunity provides us a clear measure of where our states stand in ensuring that every student entering high school is proficient and has an opportunity to attend a good high school. Without those two components, we can't expect to see any measurable increases in high school graduation rates.

9) John, what about states with a great many racial, ethnic and minority groups. Is it fair to compare them to more homogeneous states such as Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma?

All states were measured based on their NAEP score and their ability to provide equal access to high-quality high schools to historically disadvantaged students. Historically disadvantaged students, including low-income students, are present in each and every state in the union.

Kansas and Nebraska may have a more homogeneous population, but they still struggle to provide minority and low-income students with access to a top high school. A state like Oklahoma lags when it comes to the NAEP.

Each state is measured by how well they provide minority and low-income students access to a high-quality high school, compared to White, non-Latino students in that state. The data here is clear. Regardless of how diverse or homogeneous a population a state may have, each and every state has much work to do to improve quality and equity in its public schools. We should not be satisfied when only eight states are able to demonstrate moderate proficiency and access. And we should not be making excuses for those states that fail to meet proficiency goals, access requirements, or both.

10) What does Arne Duncan have to do if he reads your report and takes it seriously?

First off, we have a lot of work ahead of us. The federal government must view its primary role in Education as guaranteeing and protecting all children's fundamental right to a high quality education. In 84 percent of our states, students simply do not have a fair and equitable opportunity to learn, despite all of the rhetoric and activity taken over the past several decades. Lost Opportunity provides Secretary Duncan, along with our governors, state legislatures, chief state school officers, and other policymakers with a great deal of information and guidance. First, we can't measure our success based solely on student achievement. If we do that now, the grading curve makes 43 percent an A-plus. No student in even our worst of schools would expect to get an A for a 50 percent.

The Secretary of Education should lead the federal government's effort to develop an Opportunity to Learn Resource Accountability system to monitor and support state's efforts to improve all students' access to at least four high quality core educational resources: 1. early childhood education, 2. Highly effective teachers; 3. College preparatory curricula; and 4. Equitable instructional resources.

Secretary Duncan has made clear that one of our top priorities, as a nation, is to turn around chronically underperforming educational systems and schools. Secretary Duncan should require each state receiving ARRA funds to develop five-year Opportunity to Learn state plans with economic forecast beyond the two-years of the ARRA funds. The plans should outline the states' strategy to improve access to high quality education systems across the state for all children. Lost Opportunity shows that in far too many states, our educational systems and schools underperforming both on student achievement and student access. Both components must be considered, addressed, and resolved if we are to truly improve public education for all and close the achievement gap.

Lost Opportunity now provides us all a clear benchmark, a starting point for our education improvement efforts. We must seize advantage of this benchmark and use it to shape policy, direct funding, and build public will for the changes and improvements necessary to increase proficiency and access for all students.

In the immediate term, I hope the U.S. Department of Education uses the data found in Lost Opportunity to ensure four key principles. First, federal early childhood education dollars should be committed to improving access to high-quality programs aligned with learning and social development goals. Second, we must use newly available dollars to ensure that at-risk and hard-to-staff schools have access to qualified and effective teachers and that those teachers are incentivized to improve opportunities to learn. Third, we need to prioritize the implementation of a college preparatory curriculum for all students, improving secondary and postsecondary opportunities for all students. And finally, we need to ensure that dollars are getting to those districts and schools that have long been at an instructional disadvantage, providing the educational resources necessary to transform poorly resourced schools and bring them up to par, in terms of both dollars and access to quality programs, with high-performing schools.

11) John, how do I get a copy of this report?

The Lost Opportunity report, along with the individual reports for each state, can be found at [www.otlstatereport.org](http://www.otlstatereport.org).

12) What have I neglected to ask?

Lost Opportunity is not merely a report; it's a platform for change. A galvanizing call for philanthropic partners, our grantees, and grassroots, grassstops and netroots advocates to organize to build a public will movement to strengthen our democracy, economy, communities and become better global citizens by guaranteeing that all students have a fair and substantive opportunity to learn.

In 2008, *Given Half a Chance: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, revealed that nationally, only 47 percent of America's Black males were graduating from high school. As the Schott Foundation moved beyond the surface level outcome data, we discovered even larger resource disparities that, in many respects, explained the large outcome disparities. These inequities extended far beyond just dollars; the students were also less likely to have access to highly effective teachers, early childhood education, and college preparatory curriculum.

In the states where Black males were more likely to have access to those critical resources, they performed better. Likewise, in the places where White males were denied access to these same key resources, like in Detroit and Indianapolis, their outcomes also suffered severely. Simply put, what we witness today in the achievement gap is the silhouette of a larger opportunity gap that is identifiable both by race and socio-economic status. The achievement gap is merely one of many symptoms of a larger systemic illness. *Lost Opportunity: A 50 State Report on the Opportunity to Learn in America* not only helps us better diagnose the illness plaguing far too many schools, it begins to point us toward a prescription and cure.