

WE MUST STRIP AWAY LAYERS OF INEQUALITY

A leading voice in education policy addresses the present and future of U.S. schools



Linda Darling-Hammond

Linda Darling-Hammond is a leading voice on the relationship between federal policy and what happens in districts and classrooms. As advisor to newly elected President Barack Obama, both during his campaign and into his administration, she is helping to shape the future of federal policy in education. Darling-Hammond was a keynote speaker at NSDC's 40th Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., in December 2008. During her keynote, she introduced preliminary findings from the first year of a three-year study she is leading on the state of professional learning in the U.S. You can read more about the study on pp. 42-50. After her speech, Darling-Hammond answered several questions from conference participants. A selection of questions and answers is included here.

EQUITY AND ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Q: What has President-Elect Obama proposed to address equity and the achievement gap? We have inequalities — “savage inequalities,” to quote Jonathan Kozol — in housing, in income, in health care. How are we going to tran-

scend those inequalities to realize a more equitable classroom?

Darling-Hammond: President-Elect Obama has a very holistic vision about all the pieces that need to be in place for communities to be healthy, for families to be healthy, for children to be healthy. By healthy, I mean not

just physically, but mentally and psychologically and developmentally. So while the education policy team is talking about education, there are people on other teams working on employment, health care, housing, reducing poverty, how to create more integrated, wraparound services for

children and families in communities. We're talking about how to build "promise neighborhoods" like the Harlem Children's Zone and how to do that in 20 other cities where you can integrate preschool and health care and all of the supports that kids need all the way through from birth through college to enable them to succeed, to enable their families to be able to support them so that they can be successful in school.

MEETING OUR OWN STANDARDS

Q: What can each school do when our students are behind multiple years in math and reading? How can we possibly meet our own standards for academic growth?

Darling-Hammond: What we do is what many of us and many of you in the field have been doing. There are many strategies, and we know what some of the key building blocks are, even though different schools may approach them differently.

One thing is that schools have to recruit teachers who both understand and are willing to learn to understand the kids they teach and their families. They have to be willing to be in partnership with families and have the knowledge base about how to teach diverse students and how to continue to build that knowledge base. Schools have to make sure the kids are well-known, whether through looping over multiple years in elementary school, which raises achievement significantly over what it might have been in the absence of that longer-term relationship, or whether through having teams of teachers working with a shared group of students over multiple years of the high school, which is what we do in this high school where I work.

Then you have to work on the curriculum. How we get the standards conceptualized in a way that is leaner, as other countries do, so we can teach deeply, using a project-based curriculum organized around those standards?

In the low-income schools in which I work, our experience with our kids is that they aren't going to sit there and just do worksheets and test prep because it's not meaningful. They aren't motivated by extrinsic rewards and sanctions. They know how to fail, so if you say, "Do this, or you'll fail," they'll say, "I know how to fail, I can do that." We have to transform the curriculum so they really care about it, so it's meaningful to them, so they're doing the kind of exhibitions and demonstrations of learning that motivate them. That doesn't mean that you ignore the requirements that may exist in the policy environment you live in, but we often have to live double lives in schools around whatever the policy environment requires and then whatever has to happen for kids to succeed.

Interestingly, some of the high-achieving countries — for example,

but this range of strategies — and others — are what we have to keep doing.

HOW TO HELP TEACHERS

Q: How can we help teachers do more than focus on just test prep?

Darling-Hammond: That's challenging. It's logical to think that the way you're going to raise test scores is by teaching to the test, even when we have evidence that a fuller and richer curriculum will actually end up raising test scores more effectively. It's sensible to think that if we teach to the test, scores on that test will improve. It is also realistic to think that kids have to understand what the testing mechanism is, so that they're not freaked out by it and they have some familiarity with it.

Here's one of the things we can help teachers with in terms of professional learning. Often if the standards

Schools have to recruit teachers who both understand and are willing to learn to understand the kids they teach and their families. They have to be willing to be in partnership with families and have the knowledge base about how to teach diverse students and how to continue to build that knowledge base."

Finland and Sweden — completely eliminated tracking in the 1970s nationwide. They trained teachers deeply to work with all students, and that was the beginning of their climb to the top. In the school that I work in, we've also eliminated tracking. But then that means we have other problems to solve.

We have to train teachers to work well and be successful in those heterogeneous classrooms.

We have to have kids who are taking algebra but are behind in their skills also take an extra math course to build up their math skills. We have to do all kinds of tutoring. So the answer to what we must do is: "All of the above." There are no simple answers,

or textbooks portray a bunch of facts that you think kids are going to need to learn, the temptation for teachers is to just start running through them one by one. In fact, we know that people learn in relation to a schema. If students actually have the big picture that shows the big ideas and how they relate to one another, then those facts have a place to rest and lodge — they'll be learned more effectively. So we can help teachers analyze the standards, analyze what kids are going to be expected to know, think about what the big schema is and actually teach that to kids. Let's help them figure out how to wrap the teaching of information around some big goalposts that they're working on deeply.

That means being analytic about what the standards request and what the tests are going to require.

MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT

Q: I would like a bit of clarity in the desegregation of scores on the PISA test, where it seemed like you implied that majority of children in the United States were actually competitive when disaggregated and that minority children had disparate achievement. Is that correct? Is there any indication that teaching strategies in Europe and Asia better support minority achievement, or is that examined in those countries in terms of the success of their minority students? [PISA is the Programme for International Student Assessment, administered to thousands of students in more than 50 countries.]

Darling-Hammond: Basically the PISA data indicate that white and Asian students [in the U.S.] were

when they have poverty, support people with basics. I was recently in Singapore, which is a very poor country. Eighty percent of people live in public housing, but everyone has housing, everyone has health care, everyone has the basics. It may not be fancy, but everyone has that. And then they get equitably funded schools. Yet we layer inequality on top of inequality. So when you have equitably funded schools, then right away you're already two steps farther than we are in this country, both from the support for people in their lives and the support for kids in their schools.

Most of these other countries are high-immigration countries. We think we have a lot of immigration. We don't have as much immigration as a lot of countries do now in Europe — from the Middle East, North Africa, from all over the place. However, they have less inequality in the resources the kids get in school. Then in Finland, for example, how teachers

kids. If we did all of those things, I don't think we would have as large an achievement gap, either.

RACIAL DISPARITY

Q: Would you comment on the disparity in academic achievement between Asian and white students and African-American and Hispanic students, primarily in math and science? What role do expectations play in the learning process? How do we begin to look at ways to change the view that some of us, not deliberately, acquire over time about the learning potential of kids who are poor?

Darling-Hammond: Several things are at issue here. We already talked about the layering of unequal resources for schools serving white students and students of color. Those resources include funding, they include expertise, they include curriculum opportunities, and so on. We don't want to ignore those, but I want to go beyond them. Let me just say that from one basket of research, we find that, holding socioeconomic status constant, kids who have equally well-qualified teachers and comparable curriculum experience little disparity in achievement by race. But we have inequitably distributed teachers and inequitably allocated opportunities to engage in a high-standards curriculum with high expectations.

Tracking is one of the ways in which that gets articulated. I've watched over many years, with my own kids and others, where we start tracking in elementary schools, determining who's going to go into the gifted and talented program, who's going to get put in the remedial program. That gets allocated substantially by race and class above and beyond what kids are ready to do and could benefit from.

Now let's go beyond those realities to the fact that teachers are caught in the system where often the least experienced and least prepared teachers are

Let me just say that from one basket of research, we find that, holding socioeconomic status constant, kids who have equally well-qualified teachers and comparable curriculum experience little disparity in achievement by race. But we have inequitably distributed teachers and inequitably allocated opportunities to engage in a high-standards curriculum with high expectations. Tracking is one of the ways in which that gets articulated."

scoring just above the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) average in science in 2003. That doesn't mean they were scoring at the top of the rankings, but they were scoring somewhat above the average.

Here's the thing that's really different about these societies. We have huge amounts of institutionalized disparity in this society. There's a very shredded safety net right now, so when kids are in poverty, they're also not getting housing and health support and so on. Other societies, even

are taught to teach in their three-year graduate-level teacher education program has a huge emphasis on teaching for diversity and how you help kids who learn in different ways be able to achieve the goals. A lot of that focuses on the needs of exceptional learners, special education students, but a lot of it also focuses on the needs of immigrants and non-Finnish speakers and so on. So there's a combination of the preparation for teachers and then there's all that support for students in their daily lives in terms of how societies meet the needs of individual

given the kids with the highest need. They're caught in tracking systems, and they're caught in systems where institutionalized racism and classism are strongly embedded. On top of that, then, teachers bring their own viewpoints, their own perspectives, their own expectations, which we also have to deal with. We have to help people evolve from where they may start when they think about entering teaching.

It's not enough to say we have to change teachers' beliefs and expectations. We also have to change these institutionalized systems. We also have to change their skill levels, because you can believe that all students can learn, but if you don't have the skills to help them learn, you're not going to hold on to that belief for very long. Now it is also true that people see through their own lenses. We have to realize that people come into teaching with all the baggage of having grown up in this society, so that's a starting place. There has to be a process by which people have the opportunity to come to learn, to see children, to connect with them and their families and parents, to see them

as partners and as capable, to understand what the resources are that kids bring with them and what the community offers, to understand that there is not only one way to be in the world.

That's a very delicate, long process. At Stanford, we work on it in teacher education in a lot of ways, from the very first day of teacher preparation all the way through the end. An explicit part of every course and every assignment is to help teachers figure out how to see their kids and appreciate their kids and learn how to teach the kids who are there.

see the social structure that we often take for granted, that is invisible. That's another part of that hidden curriculum, the way in which people are treated, cultivated, nurtured, encouraged, or not encouraged in schools. We have to have that conversation in everything we do.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Q: In your talk, you outlined a number of features of high-quality professional learning: opportunities to stay focused on content and on the specific work students are doing in the classroom. You also outlined

“It's not enough to say we have to change teachers' beliefs and expectations. We also have to change these institutionalized systems. We also have to change their skill levels, because you can believe that all students can learn, but if you don't have the skills to help them learn, you're not going to hold on to that belief for very long.”

That can't be ignored, or nothing else ends up working. You have to learn to see individual kids and individual families, but you also have to learn to

data that showed that most professional learning opportunities aren't like that. Why do you think that's so, given that there seems to be

some consensus about what good professional learning opportunities ought to be?

Darling-Hammond: I have just a few hypotheses; you might have others. Among my hypotheses are the following. One is that while there's a great consensus in the research world, that consensus has not filtered down to all of the people who are in various positions who have to plan and manage professional development at the school level.

Secondly, it takes a certain amount of infrastructure to have sustained continuous professional development. I remember when I was in New York City in the 1990s, it was a very rich place at that time for professional development. If you wanted to send your teachers to learn how to work on the writing process, every summer you could send a team to Lucy Calkins' writing institute. This was extended,

have to use their expertise. We have a lot of people all dressed up and with no place to go, who have become very expert. They have a lot of knowledge and skills, but they're now not employed in ways that allow them to use that for other teachers. It's going to take much more systemic thinking at the federal, state, and local level to build that capacity and to keep it in place.

GREATEST CHALLENGES

Q: From your vantage point as an educator, what are the three greatest challenges in the public education system in the United States?

Darling-Hammond: There are some fundamental things that you have to get right in the schooling system to be able to meet the needs of all kids. The first one for us is inequality. It is just embedded in our schooling

supported teaching force with strong professional accountability. People come into teaching because they want to be effective with kids. We do not routinely and universally prepare teachers adequately for the challenges they're going to meet. We do not routinely and universally give them the kind of mentoring and coaching that they need. We certainly don't routinely and universally give them ongoing support. But we also don't have enough professional accountability around holding standards at the front end of the career or throughout the career, so that if the teacher is getting all of those supports and if they're not succeeding, then that we need to be sure they're helped to find another profession.

We need an enormous amount of work on the foundation of a teaching profession. We don't have the respect for teachers and teaching profession in this country that some of the high-achieving countries do. The reason professional development has been cut, the reason we don't see these supports routinely and universally in place, is that the political system doesn't hold that understanding and regard for teachers in the way that you would experience if you talked to people in the ministry in Singapore or Hong Kong or Finland or other places.

Third, we have allowed an impoverished view of curriculum and assessment to be more dominant than a rich view that sees the 21st-century skills that kids need to have, that values their ability to find and use information on their own, to research and inquire, to organize their thinking to be critical thinkers. We need to embed that in the way we conceptualize standards, curriculum, assessments, in a teaching and learning system.

If we were able to make advances in those three areas, we would see our kids empowered to have the kind of lives that allow them to succeed in the 21st century. ■

“We don't have the respect for teachers and teaching profession in this country that some of the high-achieving countries do.”

multiple-week training in how to teach writing, followed up with teaching coaches who come to the school. Teachers become involved in teacher leadership activities, as well, and that's there every summer, every year, and, as a principal or teacher leader, you don't have to wonder whether next year you can send three more teachers. The same thing was true for the literacy center at Lehman College and the mathematics work that was going on at Bank Street, and the professional development work that was going on in individual districts. You have to build that infrastructure, and you have to feed it regularly.

Once you've built the capacity of teachers and teacher leaders and principals to do this work, you have to keep them in the system, and you

system, in the way we fund our schools, in the way we distribute resources to our schools, including dollars, teacher resources, curriculum resources, and so on. We have schools in this country that look like they are from Third World countries. There are schools in California with crumbling roofs and no books and no libraries and no music teachers and no art teachers, and virtually no qualified teachers. We have allowed apartheid schools that are 90% or more African-American and Latino, usually, to be left without resources. It's really quite tragic. That is our Achilles' heel — we have a very big job to do around inequality.

The second thing is making a commitment to a highly knowledgeable, highly skilled, professional, well-