THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH

Action Guide: School Leaders and Instructional Leadership Teams

TNTP reimagine teaching

As a school leader, you have the opportunity to create a school culture that demands high-quality academic experiences for every student. In every bright spot school we saw in *The Opportunity Myth*, school leadership teams consistently focused on a small set of academic priorities that represented a high bar for students' success and provided a comprehensive set of supports for teachers so they could reach that bar. Prioritizing grade-appropriate assignments, strong and engaging instruction, and high expectations among all your teachers will give more students opportunities to excel.

Here are some tools to get there, and more. This is not a checklist. Rather, it is a collection of resources to support doable change in your practice, classroom, and school environment as you work to implement *The Opportunity Myth's* recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1:
Ask students and families directly about their goals and school experiences; listen to what they share; and then act on what they tell you.

Shadow a student at least a few times a year. Build empathy for the student experience in school by truly trying to walk in the shoes of a student for one day (and by shadowing students at different grade levels and from diverse backgrounds over time). Ask them about their goals, and consider whether the assignments, instruction, and other interactions create a positive, encouraging experience that will set them up to meet the goals they shared. For younger students or those whose goals may be less formed, learn about their hopes for their future. By taking an immersive deep-dive through shadowing, you'll get a taste of a student's day-to-day reality that will open up new, powerful insights you might miss in a conversation. These materials from K-12 Labs can support you in shadowing a student.

Welcome your families as partners. Send a welcome letter to the school community at the start of the year (translated into any languages spoken by your students' families). Express your commitment to supporting students and meeting their unique emotional and academic needs. Provide examples of how the school will do that, and share dates for any upcoming events. Also include information about how parents and families can reach you easily. (Consider offering open office hours during which parents can call in or stop by, or offering a number where you can be reached within 24 hours.)

Collect data on students' goals and daily academic experiences. What do your students aspire to beyond high school? What do families expect from school? Are you setting your students up to reach those aspirations? Are you providing parents clear, accurate information about students' progress towards those goals? [These tools](#) are a useful place to start.

Check for observable disparities in the data you've collected. When you see gaps in the opportunities you are providing to groups of students (such as students of color, English language learners, or students from low-income families) on a daily basis, address them urgently.

Improve transparency with families about students' progress. Work with parent representatives to pilot new report cards that offer clear information about how students' grades reflect their mastery of grade-level standards, and which illustrate how on-track students are to graduate from high school ready for college and careers of their choice.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Make access to grade-appropriate assignments an urgent priority for all students, no matter what their race, income level, or current performance level.

Assess how your current assignments stack up across schools. Collect at least a week's worth of assignments from a representative subset of your classrooms, compare the assignments you collected to benchmarks for each grade level using tools like our [student work protocol](#) and [student work library](#), and then assess how much time your students are spending on grade-appropriate work. Use this to give your school leaders consistent, actionable feedback about the quality of assignments in their buildings.

Set expectations that teachers use high-quality instructional materials on a daily basis. Use [this guide](#) to assess your instructional materials. If your district has adopted and purchased low-quality instructional materials, opt for aligned educational resources instead. If you are required to use the low-quality materials, modify and improve these materials, using a vetted, strong resource like EdReports or the [Materials Adaptation Project](#).

Support your teachers to plan effectively using those materials. In your grade-level meetings, PLC, or professional development time, work with teachers to internalize the materials and prepare to teach them. Dedicate some of this time to practicing delivery of particularly tricky lessons.

Continue to assess the quality of assignments your students are experiencing on a daily basis. Use our [student work protocol](#) and [student work library](#) to support this process. Again, check for observable disparities in the daily assignment data you've collected. When you see gaps in the opportunities you are providing to groups of students (like students of color, English language learners, or students from low-income backgrounds) on a daily basis, address them urgently by giving your teachers concrete feedback and resources to help them improve.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Give all students, especially those who are behind grade level, access to instruction that asks them to think and engage deeply with challenging material.

Assess who is doing the majority of the thinking and talking in your classrooms. Use our observation protocols or other available tools to gather concrete data about who is doing most of the talking and thinking in your classrooms. Give your teachers consistent, actionable feedback about who is doing the thinking in their classroom.

Ask your students to fill out a brief engagement survey. Use this survey to collect information on students' levels of engagement during lessons every day for a week, then reflect on what that data tells you about how engaged students are in your school. You could also consider joining the PERTS Engagement Project to support your teachers in improving students' engagement in their classes.

Support safe, motivating classroom cultures. Ensure your teachers build motivating classroom cultures where students feel like they belong, have a sense of purpose and relevance, and believe that mistakes are opportunities to learn and grow. Support them to set clear expectations to create a classroom where students are respectful, active, and collaborative. Provide students with tasks and leadership opportunities that encourage them to build connections between content and their own lives and experiences. Additionally, consider supporting your teachers to build productive student mindsets.

Work to build teachers' skills delivering lessons in a way that puts most of the thinking work and cognitive lift on students. Make effective strategies that support students' access of rigorous content a focus of professional development efforts, emphasizing that effective teaching isn't simply doing the hard work for students, nor is it watering down work that could be otherwise rich and challenging. Identify exemplars within your school, then use them to support improvements in other classrooms. Use the strategies in our toolkit to get started.

Support educators to consider students' starting points. Give teachers the tools to support students with unfinished learning from previous grade levels to access grade-level content, by training them in scaffolding strategies that maintain the demands of grade-appropriate content. It's important to acknowledge that as a field, we have struggled to scaffold without gutting rigor. So as you support your teachers to do this work, recognize those failures—it's not all on teachers—and when you find models that work, share them broadly. Use the strategies in our toolkit to get started.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Ensure educators have high expectations for student success by seeing firsthand that students are capable of succeeding with more rigorous material.

Understand expectations in your school. Administer this brief survey to your teachers and instructional staff. Examine the data to consider what supports your teachers will need to hold all students to high expectations, regardless of students' race, ethnicity, or other parts of their identity.

Create professional learning opportunities that showcase what students can achieve when given the chance to access rigorous, grade-appropriate assignments. Following those experiences, provide opportunities for your staff (including teachers and your instructional leaders) to reflect on how they might have different expectations for different groups of students. This professional learning approach can serve as a starting point.

Give all educators sustained and regular opportunities to reflect on the biases they have that might cause them to hold lower expectations for some subgroups of students. While reflecting directly on bias is only one piece of addressing it, it is an important first step. Consider using this toolkit from UnboundED as a starting point.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Conduct an equity audit to identify school and district-level decisions—from the diversity of staff at all levels to which students are enrolled in honors courses—that give some students greater access than others to key resources.

Assess the current state of your educator and school demographics. If your educator workforce is largely white, commit to changing that by setting a concrete and public goal to increase the diversity of your teaching staff. (This certainly matters if your school serves largely students of color, but even if your study body is largely white, research shows that a more diverse teacher workforce benefits students of all races.[1]) Use these questions as a starting point.

Assess who takes honors or advanced courses in your school. Analyze which students in your school are taking advanced or honors courses (or qualify for gifted or magnet programs in younger grades), looking for patterns that are mismatched with your student demographics. For example, are your advanced placement classes disproportionately white compared to your student body? Address practices and barriers that might prevent some groups of students from accessing rigorous course offerings. Use these questions as a starting point.

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[1] Cherng, H. and Halpin, P. (2016). The Importance of Minority Teachers: Student Perceptions of Minority Versus White Teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 45(7), pp 407–420. Retrieved on July 31st, 2018 from http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0013189X16671718.