



February 10, 2021

To Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, colleagues, community, and other concerned educators, I thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon about an issue that is near to us all: education of our children and the learning loss that has resulted from this unprecedented public health emergency. My name is Julie Washington. I am a Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine. My clinical training is in Speech and Language Pathology. My life's work and scholarship has focused on improving our understanding of the intersection of cultural language and the development of reading and language skills of African American children growing up in poverty.

Research has found that the gap in achievement between African American children and their peers grows by .10 SD for each year that they are enrolled in school (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Burchinal et al, 2011). If the gap grows with attendance at school, the growth in this gap when children are unable to attend school is, as we know, exponential. For those children who present the greatest challenges to teaching and learning: children enrolled in Special Education, children growing up in poverty, those who present language differences and children growing up in foster care, these losses are potentially immeasurable.

When the pandemic began and children had to receive instruction at home rather than in school we quickly recognized the divide that existed in the access to technology. We rallied as communities, schools and society to bridge this divide, so that we could provide equitable instruction to all of our children, regardless of their circumstances. We were "shocked and appalled" at the gulf that existed between our poorest students and their more resourced peers. They not only had no access to computer hardware but were unlikely to have the Wi-Fi connectivity needed to access school virtually even when the hardware was available. But we responded. We worked together and made sure that every child had the hardware and connectivity that was needed. Our work was done and now the learning could commence.

But we learned quickly that access to technology was necessary but not sufficient for learning to take place. Access had more than one meaning in this virtual world. There is access **to** the virtual classroom and then there is access **within** the classroom. The same struggles that students experienced prior to the pandemic were magnified when the structure of school was removed. Staying home and sheltering in place you see is a privilege. One to which many of our poorest families were not privy. When we removed the structure of school we also removed child care and meals for our younger students, and a safe and productive place to go for our older students. These students were put at both social and educational risk.



In one of the lowest performing schools in an urban district in which I work attendance dropped to 30%, and that was on a good day. Seventy percent or more of students did not show up. I have to note that when they did show up, many were judged for being dressed “inappropriately”, for attending school from bed, for not having an environment that was free from distraction, because we forgot that this was not homeschooling. This was us, showing up in our students’ homes, to provide instruction by necessity. We were guests in their homes, and in the beginning they showed up, but didn’t always get credit for the effort. In the end it was just too hard to sustain for many families and they have fallen off our radar.

So now nearly an academic year and a half later we need to figure out what to do to mitigate the damage created by the changes in educational delivery necessitated by the pandemic. As our most vulnerable students return to the classroom what are we going to do? Extend the day. Extend the year. Push it all in. How do we stop the loss? How do we recover?

1. **We need to accelerate learning, not remediate loss.** The small incremental changes made through remediation are not sufficient, and they never have been. The data from the NAEP demonstrates this every year. These small changes mean that students will improve, but are unlikely to catch up. We have been using this approach for a long time, and our outcomes and research show that they don’t work, but it’s really what we know how to do. How will we take a third grader who was functioning like a second grader, but making progress, when the pandemic started and now after nearly an academic year and a half when she comes back as a fourth or fifth grader who still reads and writes more like a second grader... how will we accelerate learning 2 – 3 whole years in the shortest time possible to get this student on track? Time is of the essence!

We have not been very successful with acceleration in the past. But many small private schools are very good at it. They have learned to accelerate. You can take your child who is two years behind to many of these schools and within two years they are caught up. What do they know that we don’t know? Is it just about the wealth and support of the families? We know these are advantages that many of our public schools do not have. But that is not the whole picture – it’s about the structure of the schools and the focus of the curriculum. If we reimagined our schools as schools that could accelerate learning what would they look like? How would we restructure ourselves?

- i. We would make our classes even smaller still. Can we imagine a class with 15 students or fewer? What would we need to do to make that happen?
- ii. We would focus on depth of learning and not just breadth of content. That depth would be in the areas that our students show the greatest need;
- iii. In order to accomplish this, we might need to re-think the scope and sequence and intensify our focus on core skills; and,



- iv. We would absolutely need to re-think professional development and highlight content to reflect this new way of structuring our days and teaching our students.

We can't just stuff in all the standards by intensifying our efforts and filling our days. Because at the end of it all, are children whose capacity to work year-round and round the clock is limited by other challenges, and by developmental and cognitive resources. Learning theory suggests that structured, scaffolded learning that is dynamic and responsive to childrens' learning needs and current level of functioning both supports and accelerates learning for children who are young and old, and who have special needs.

We used to talk about the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic...the core skills that support and provide the foundation for all other subjects in our curriculum. Where will we put our focus? What approaches and content will give us the most bang for our teaching and learning buck? In order, to accelerate we may in fact need to pull back. Do we dare to innovate? Do we have a choice?

2. **Finally, we need policies that support our efforts with our hardest to reach students.**

Among our children who underperform, are enrolled in Special Education or who have tremendous challenges in their lives that may interfere with learning, we need policies that allow us to meet students where they are and take them to where we know they need to be. We may need to be more flexible and pliable in order to accomplish this.

What can we do to remove the structural barriers to learning that we have created with our district policies? For example, I work with a school for families experiencing homeless that is near and dear to my heart. It has been structured as a private school in order to remove the zoning that dictates what school a child can attend. No matter where you live today or next week you can attend school and the school helps you get there. This simple change has resulted in regular attendance that most schools would consider unheard of for this population. Of particular note, 83% of students who started school in preschool are still enrolled and attending in first grade. This was accomplished simply by removing barriers to attendance that we created.

What can we do to impact our special education policies? We need to focus some effort on getting the IDEA reauthorized. It is a wonderful law, but for our Black, Brown, poor and EL students it has in many instances become a barrier to receiving necessary services. We used to think that these children were overrepresented in Special Education, but thanks to recent reanalyses by my colleagues at Penn State University and the U of California, Irvine we have learned that these students are only overrepresented in the disability categories that provide the least support for academic attainment. In those categories that would provide the greatest access to educational interventions, such as Specific Learning Disabilities and Speech and Language Impairment, these children are



shamefully absent. As Districts and states enact new dyslexia laws, these inequities will be magnified. Don't get me wrong, I am fully in support of these laws that have been supported by the grass roots efforts of parents. But I fear that inattention to the federal laws will widen the gap, and expand the inequities as these policies are enacted. This issue will become more urgent as students return to school and challenge the Special Education system.

Overall, we need flexibility, pliability, nimbleness as we address, hopefully restructure, and meet educational standards. Business as usual is no longer sufficient.

Thank you.