

Opinions

ERIC J. COOPER

A letter to the new governor about equality

Mr. Governor-elect, Hearty congratulations and good luck as you assemble your administration and prepare to take office. A much harder task awaits: governing. As you address the myriad issues facing Connecticut — especially its academic achievement and opportunity gaps — I hope you will build a more just and equal statewide community, for the sake of our country and all who live here.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the 19th-century historian, would have advised this. He saw the unique in America on his very first visit. "Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me with greater force than the equality of conditions," de Tocqueville wrote in 1835. "I easily perceived the enormous influence that this primary fact exercises on the workings of the society."

Nearly 200 years later, we are still talking about what de Tocqueville saw. Notwithstanding the country's treatment of its slaves and Native Americans at the time, de Tocqueville "recognized opportunity for a wider human harmony, brotherhood and sisterhood in the hope of a nation," according to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, the authors of an important new book about equality and success that deserves to



influence policy in Hartford and state capitals across the country.

Called "The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger," the book focuses on the common factors linking the "... healthiest and happiest societies (to) the degree of equality among their members."

Equality, they found, is what most sustains a healthy and productive society, more than wealth, resources, culture, climate, diet or form of government.

"Further," they write, "more unequal societies are bad for everyone with-

in them — the rich and middle class as well as the poor."

This inequality, the authors suggest, affects social mobility, health, education, employment, security and happiness. The more unequal a community, state and nation, the healthier the economy will be for all of us tomorrow. It also is the just thing to do for our children.

Here are 10 suggestions for you and your transition team to consider as you endeavor to create greater equality in and through education for all.

1. Continue to grow and support good preschool experiences for all students, modeled on the latest research in cognitive neuroscience. Train staff in the use of dynamic assessments and teaching methods, including the role that mirror neurons play in early learning and how caregivers and teachers can model that knowledge.

2. Transform big districts and high schools into several smaller learning communities where students and teachers work in partnership in learning and teaching. Provide incentives for students to major in the interdisciplinary academics of math and science.

3. Increase community and parent involvement in the state's urban schools through creative public

engagement activities that provide clear, accurate and timely information about performance and practical ways of shrinking achievement gaps and raising achievement for all young people.

4. Eliminate the practice of academic tracking. It judges children and puts them into academic programs based on first impressions and assumed abilities, then makes it very difficult for them to move into more rigorous, stimulating classes. Raise the achievement levels for all students by teaching how incessant concentration on increasingly complex content is ultimately more important than the grade they receive.

5. Demand increased accountability and evaluation for high student achievement. Avoid test-driven instruction. It values basic skills over advanced thinking and can create an artificial achievement ceiling for some students.

6. Develop school climates that nurture and reflect an irrefutable belief in the capacity and potential of all students. Teach students how the brain works and how to reduce stereotype threats based on perceived levels of intelligence that affect performance.

7. Treat every teacher and principal as a professional, with provisions for continuing professional development based on deep understanding of subject matter, and strategies developed from culturally responsive and neuroscience research.

8. Institute high standards and curricula based on teaching all students the advanced thinking skills necessary for problem-solving, creativity, critical and reflective processing of information, and collaboration.

9. Create and expand the partnerships between a child's first teachers (parents) and those who follow in preschool and K-12 programs. Identify, reinforce and build on successful programs.

10. Establish after-school and summer programs that do not repeat what has failed for the student during the regular school year. Develop enrichment experiences which are based on high pedagogy, content and standards, and which teach the values and civics of our American democracy.

There is no running from the truth that an unequal society perpetuates injustice. Out of a responsibility to those who have come before and those who will come after, let us set a course that benefits our state and, by extension, the nation. Many stand ready, Mr. Governor-elect, to embrace policies and programs that are framed by social equity, simple fairness and basic justice. We wish you, and Connecticut, the best.

Sincerely,
Eric J. Cooper

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TERRY JONES

An agricultural Christmas