



From behind the numbers, the stories of students ...

## THE WRITING ON THE HALL

By Brooke Haycock

Down the hallway, just beyond the metal detectors, where students wait, heads down, belts and keys in hand, the words on the graying cinderblock wall read, “Free your mind.” The irony, like the faded quote, goes unnoticed. Welcome to the American high school.

In 12 years talking with students and educators in high-poverty high schools across the country, I’ve walked countless fluorescent-lit hallways stenciled with words like those on that cinderblock wall — words about knowledge, freedom, and power, images of their speakers with names like Marshall, King, and Chavez cast in peeling paint. Listening to students, I am constantly reminded of the power of educator words in communicating messages to young people about their potential and their worth. And these well-meaning quotes on walls, painted with care over lockers and doorways, are clearly intended to convey to students all the positive messages adults want to convey — about hope, hard work, dignity, and perseverance.

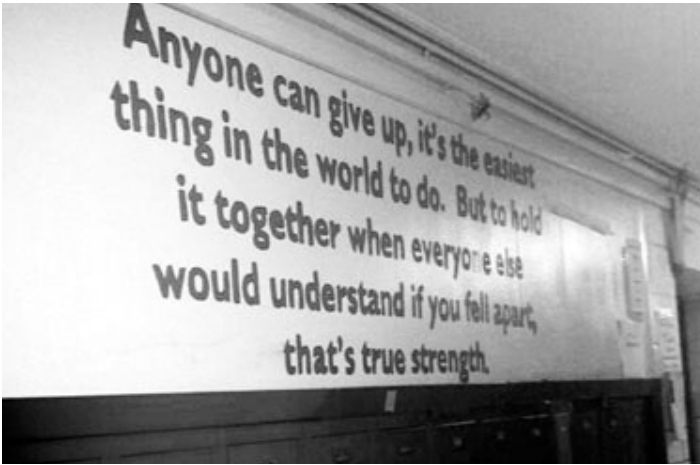
But as the late U.S. judge and judicial philosopher Learned Hand observed, “Words are chameleons, which reflect the color of their environment.” And those same powerful quotes on a school’s walls are made a mockery when the other signals educators send students — unintended as they may be — convey a very different set of messages about what students can do, what they can be, and what the world will demand of them.

## TEACHING STUDENTS TO TAKE THE EASY WAY

**“IF THERE IS NO STRUGGLE, THERE IS NO PROGRESS.”**

— Frederick Douglass

While we in education pay regular lip-service to rigor and student effort, I hear versions of the same well-intentioned sentiments whispered from the lips of caring educators all the time: “You don’t want students to fail.” Despite a growing body of research in the social science and psychology fields about building grit in youth by encouraging them to do things that are hard, educators continue to cradle too many students, shielding them from real intellectual stretch and the possibility of failure and woefully underestimating their abilities to tolerate — and even thrive with — challenge.



Washed down with smiley faces on worksheets and eroded jargon like “relevance,” “applied learning,” and “differentiation,” low expectations for certain students, communicated through everything schools do — the courses they place them in, the assignments they give them, and the level of thinking they trust them with, send debilitating messages about what we believe they’re capable of and what the outside world will expect of them.

Whatever the reasons, whether a product of beliefs about what students can (or can’t) do or well-meaning desires to make students feel good, the message students receive is the same: You can’t do very much, but don’t worry, nobody will expect more of you.

Students like Isaiah hear this message loud and clear.

I met Isaiah, a Latino 11th-grader, in the back of an English classroom at a suburban high school just outside of Washington, D.C. While the class down the hall read *Macbeth*, Isaiah and his classmates — at least those still awake — sat hunched over a Xeroxed reading passage about a squirrel. Exasperated, Isaiah fumed, “Why do we have to do all this stupid stuff? A squirrel’s not gonna help me in my life!” According to Isaiah, he is regularly kicked out of class for these observations. This occasion was no exception.

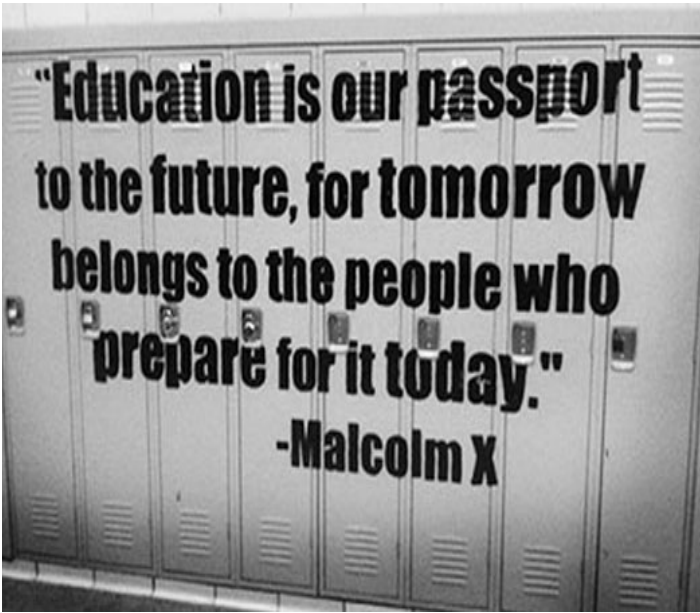
Some students, like Isaiah, get outraged enough to let adults know that they’re not getting the rigor they need or are capable of. But for every Isaiah, there are scores of silent others who gradually absorb the low expectations educators swaddle them in year after year, until they believe that’s all they’re capable of. And by the time they arrive at high school, the eroded products of our practices, their self-protective behaviors reinforce in educators the very perceptions that conditioned those behaviors.

The long-term effects on students are crushing: Students leave school under-skilled for college and career, without anywhere near the knowledge they’ll need — and they leave under-prepared for life, without the critical competencies and grit gained from being confronted with real cognitive challenge.

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LESS

**“EDUCATION IS THE PASSPORT TO THE FUTURE, FOR TOMORROW BELONGS TO THOSE WHO PREPARE FOR IT TODAY.”** — Malcolm X.

Expectations don’t just speak volumes about what adults think students can do; they also speak to what students can be. Nowhere is that so clearly evident as in how schools counsel students to



prepare for college and career.

Counseling offices and libraries may be plastered from floor to ceiling with posters about the importance of preparation and reaching for high goals, but the hesitance to encourage — if not require — all students to take the full college preparatory curriculum, broadly understood as the foundation for both college and career, conveys a very different message: either that we don't think they'll ever make it there or that any level of preparation will suffice.

I often think about Deja.

The first time I met Deja, the high-achieving Michigan senior proudly shared her goals. "I told my counselor I was going to college so she put me in all the classes I needed." Deja went on to tell me that she'd taken "all" the science classes, "through biology," and that she took geometry her junior year. "My counselor," she assured me, "said I can get into A LOT of colleges."

The first time I met Deja, the high-achieving

What no one bothered to tell Deja is that these aren't even close to the full set of college prep courses required for entry into most four-year colleges — nor even, frankly, into credit-bearing two-year college coursework.<sup>1</sup> This raises the question of what exactly her counselor and others thought she would do.

And Deja isn't the only one left in the dark. Many high school students I meet — particularly those who would be first-generation college-goers and who rely most on educators for information — don't have a solid grasp of which classes they need to take to prepare for college. And so they rely on interest and guesswork or simply trust that the classes their counselors place them in are the right ones.

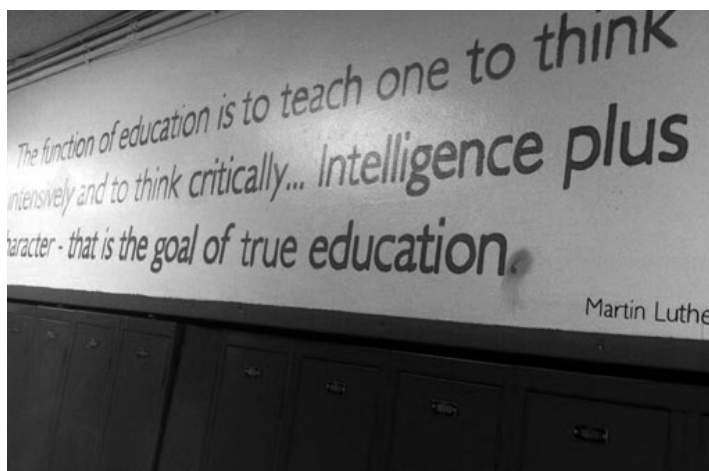
The results should not come as a surprise. While research indicates that the vast majority (76 percent) of high school sophomores want to at least go to a four-year college, findings from the Educational Longitudinal Study reveal that only 27 percent of public high school graduates even take an academically focused curriculum that would prepare them well for college.<sup>2</sup>

Students later find that what they didn't learn does hurt them. I caught up with Deja a year after her graduation. Working as a temp at a community college and saving money to enroll in the remedial classes she had tested into, she shared the painful realization of her under-preparation: "It's like you do everything everyone tells you to do in school, and you work so hard to get there. And then you learn it's not enough — because, in the end, you didn't even have the classes and skills you needed."

Deja's regret echoes in the national data: 72 percent of high school graduates not in college report wishing they'd taken more challenging classes.<sup>3</sup> We might be quick to dismiss all this as the error of student choice — "We told them to take those classes, they just didn't listen." If that's true, that it really is all about poor student choices, it raises the question of why we even let them choose.

## MISGUIDING STUDENTS BEYOND GRADUATION

**"ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD."** —William Shakespeare



It's not just how educators guide students through high school that sends signals to students about their potential and chances for success, but also how educators guide them beyond high school.

Just ask Tre.

When I met Tre, the gregarious African American high school senior had his eyes set on college in his home state of Louisiana. His high school counselor, though, thinking community college a "better fit,"

steered him away from four-year programs. The local two-year college, she advised him, would offer him a better chance at success and a good job.

What the counselor didn't tell him — and perhaps didn't even know — is that the local two-year boasted a three-year graduation rate of just 14 percent and a loan default rate double the national average of 13.4 percent. Nor did she explain that among students who test into remedial coursework (a full 63 percent of freshmen at two-year institutions in the state), already low graduation rates plummet even lower — to just 3 percent.

Tre, following his counselor's advice, arrived on the community college campus in the fall, diploma in hand and new confidence on display in a practiced college stride. But that stride quickly turned to a stumble as he was shuffled through counseling and the registrars, and then spat out, with an ID number, a bill, and a course load of developmental classes, onto a campus where he would last just a semester-and-a-half before dropping out entirely.

Tre is not simply representative of the few who couldn't "cut it," nor is his particular community college a rare outlier among academic gems. With weak alignment between high schools and colleges, scattershot and meager support programs on campuses, and too little accountability for results, graduation rates at postsecondary institutions — both two-year and four-year — run the spectrum, from impressive to downright abysmal.<sup>4</sup>

The odds facing students are sobering. Nationally, only 1 in 5 community college students graduate in three years with an associate degree.<sup>5</sup> And of those who aspire to a bachelor's degree but

begin at a two-year college, only 14 percent actually make it.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, while students on four-year campuses generally fare better, just 59 percent of those students who step onto a four-year campus will leave in a cap and gown within six years. And these overall rates mask huge differences between very similar institutions. In Tre's state of Louisiana, the difference between graduation rates at the highest performing and lowest performing large public master's institutions is a full 20 percentage points. Same kind of institution, same kind of students, very different chances for success.<sup>7</sup>

Yet students are encouraged to think of every college acceptance letter as a degree waiting to be conferred. "You can make it anywhere," they are assured, "if you just apply yourself."

But a wealth of research suggests otherwise: that, when it comes to ensuring student success in college and beyond, the skills and knowledge students enter with, and the track records and supports that colleges meet them with, matter — a lot.

Students need to know that.

## LETTING STUDENTS IN ON WHAT WE KNOW

**"KNOWLEDGE IS POWER."** —Sir Francis Bacon

There are schools across the country where the quotes on the walls resonate in the expectations, words, and actions of the educators. They are schools where educators believe in excellence for all students, where they act on knowledge about college and career readiness, and let students in on what they know:

*That if there is no struggle, there is no progress ...*

There are the academic department chairs at a large high school in New York that serves high proportions of students of color. These leaders demand good work of kids and focus on growing supports, not shrinking expectations. Teachers work together to ratchet up the rigor of assignments and instruction and to provide more and better feedback and supports for students — particularly for those furthest behind — to meet the high expectations.

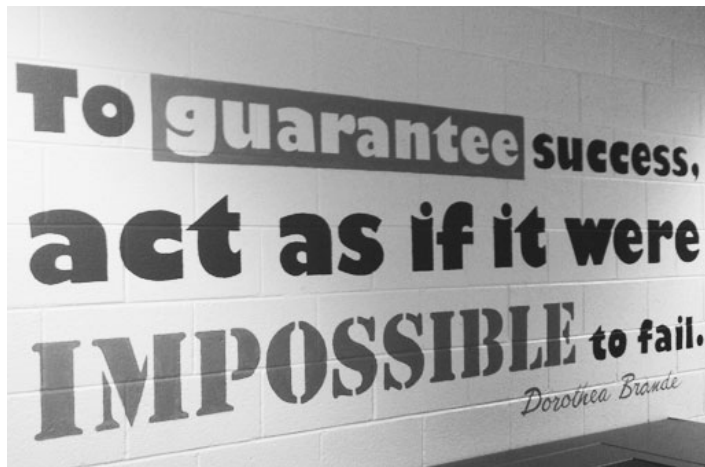
The evidence of their hard work is clear in conversations with students: According to Miguel, a shy Puerto Rican ninth-grader, "The teachers really challenge us to do well and, like, don't give up. The expectations here, they're much higher — but I think that's what makes you want to work harder. Here, you want to challenge yourself."

*That tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today ...*

Then there's the team of high school counselors in Imperial Valley, Calif., who ensure that all of their mostly Mexican American students take the full complement of college prep courses required for admission to the California State University System — even if, as one counselor put it, "they have to fight them all the way." With the majority of their students entering high school behind, the counselors and staff knew that their students needed more academic time and challenge, not less. And they knew they'd have to get honest with students about where their skills

were, and how far they had to go.

They've acted on that knowledge, eclipsing state averages in achievement and graduation. And their success isn't just clear in their data — it's clear in their students, many of whom openly share how the school has changed their beliefs about their potential. According to Paula, a Latina 11th-grade athlete, "Here, everybody really cares about your future. They want you taking all the classes you need to go to college. At my old school, they didn't say 'Hey, you could go to college' — they just said 'pass your class.'"



*And that all that glitters is not gold ...*

And there's the principal and staff of a high-poverty Worcester, Mass., high school who work hard to help students pick the right college and prepare them to succeed. The school's leadership team recognized that while their students' achievement levels were high, their college persistence rates weren't.

They knew they needed to do more to prepare students for independent college-level learning, incorporating more of the type of writing and lecture and expectations they would en-

counter in college. And they needed to help their students pick the right colleges. They researched college outcomes and identified the schools that did best with low-income students and students of color. They even worked to create "posses" of their alumni on campuses to help new alumni acclimate and gain what the former principal calls "the insider knowledge" to navigate a campus — from managing demanding coursework to knowing which professors to avoid.

Their efforts to demystify higher learning and help students make smart college choices are changing the data — and their students' chances for success. College persistence rates among their mostly college-going alumni skyrocketed from 40 percent to 90 percent. Stated one senior named Dante whose mother had transferred him from a lower performing school, "They really get us ready for college, so we know what to expect when we get there."

## ECHOING THE WRITING ON THE HALL

What sets these schools apart from schools like those attended by Isaiah, Deja, and Tre, ultimately, has a lot to do with beliefs — beliefs about kids and what they need to know for the world that awaits them. And it has a lot to do with actions. Educators in these schools know that, to make good on the writing on the halls, they have to match their practice with their prose. They don't shy away from the tough conversations, the big challenges or hard truths. And they don't let their students shy away either.

But in too many schools, adults continue to substitute truisms for truth.

Watching students file past the metal detectors and out the heavy double doors of a high school

like so many others, my eyes drift to the George Washington Carver quote overhead: “Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.” But the words that ring in my head, instead, are those of Democrat statesman Adlai Stevenson: “The cruelest lies are often told in silence.”

Until we get honest with students about what success really takes, and align practices to reinforce those messages, the rest will just be empty words peeling off the walls.

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## About This Series

Written by playwright-researcher Brooke Haycock, this Ed Trust series, *Echoes From the Gap*, puts front and center the stories of students. These are the young people behind the numbers we look at in our districts, offices, and states, those whose lives are deeply affected by — even determined by — their educational experiences.

We share their stories with respect for their privacy, by changing names and omitting details of place. And, with respect for their words, whenever possible, we let those words speak for themselves. We do, though, attempt to zoom out from individual student experience to students generally, integrating existing national data to draw larger connections to key issues educators and advocates grapple with as they work to improve schools.

Show us what’s on your wall. Send your pictures to [bhaycock@edtrust.org](mailto:bhaycock@edtrust.org)

Learn more about Brooke’s work featuring the stories of students

[www.edtrust.org/dc/resources/catalyst-theater](http://www.edtrust.org/dc/resources/catalyst-theater)

## NOTES

1. An academic concentration or college prep course of study consists in four credits in English, three credits in math (one beyond Algebra II), three credits in science (one beyond biology), three credits in social studies (one U.S. or world history), two credits in a foreign language. Michael Planty, Robert Bozick, and Steven J. Ingels. *Academic Pathways, Preparation, and Performance: A Descriptive Overview of the Transcripts from the High School Graduating Class of 2003-04* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, November 2006), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007316.pdf>.
2. Steven J. Ingels, Laura J. Burns, Stephanie Charleston, Xianaglei Chen, and Emily Forrest Cataldi. *A Profile of the American High School Sophomore in 2002: Initial Results from the Base Year of the Longitudinal Study of 2002* (NCES 2005-5 Quick Stats Fact Sheet 338) (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2005); Michael Planty, Robert Bozick, and Steven J. Ingels. *Academic Pathways, Preparation, and Performance: A Descriptive Overview of the Transcripts from the High School Graduating Class of 2003-04*.
3. P.D. Hart & Research Associates. *Rising to the Challenge: Are high school graduates prepared for college and work? A study of recent high school graduates, college instructors and employers* (Washington, D.C.: Achieve, Inc., 2005), [http://www.achieve.org/files/pollreport\\_0.pdf](http://www.achieve.org/files/pollreport_0.pdf)
4. Achieve, *Closing the Expectations Gap: 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of K-12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers* (Washington, D.C.: 2012), <http://www.achieve.org/files/Achieve201250StateReport.pdf>. This report shows that few states have fully thought through aligning high school requirements with college-level expectations.
5. National Center for Education Statistics, *Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2011; Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2011; and Graduation Rates, Selected Cohorts, 2003–2008 First Look* (Washington D.C.: December 2012), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012174rev.pdf> (22 percent at public two-years and 56 percent at all four-years, not just public).
6. National Center for Education Statistics, Beginning Postsecondary Study of 2009. Education Trust Analysis using Powerstats, <http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/>
7. Visit College Results Online at [collegeresults.org](http://collegeresults.org) to compare graduation rates at similar institutions.