

EDUCATION JUSTICE

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Oppportunity to Learn refers to conditions in schools and classrooms – and outside of school – that enable students to learn so they can become capable citizens and workers. Millions of children in America’s schools receive the **Opportunity To Learn (OTL)**. But, millions of others – mostly low-income or minority children – do not.

For example, students must pass a laboratory science course to graduate from high school in New York State, but 31 high schools in New York City have no science labs. Also, many high schools in California’s low-wealth and minority communities do not offer the curriculum students must take just to *apply* to the state’s public university system – a fine university system for those who have access.

And, in many rural, mostly minority, school districts in South Carolina, teacher turnover exceeds 20% annually. Schools can succeed only with reasonably stable and experienced teachers. These facts emerged in state court [litigations](#) seeking better opportunity for students who are denied basic school resources.

Unfortunately, most states have similarly unjust systems for allocating key education resources, such as good school facilities – like science labs – access to college prep curriculum, and a stable, experienced teaching staff. Underlying these opportunity gaps are state school funding systems that often provide well-to-do school districts with three times as much funding as low-wealth districts.¹ These state systems also allow school districts to spend less in the schools educating more disadvantaged students within the district. Indeed, in recent years school resource disparities and segregation have grown in many states, and both of these factors limit achievement.²

Over the past 20 years, all 50 states adopted higher academic goals for students and schools. However, the states did not align school resources with the learning goals, creating enormous opportunity gaps. Raising achievement standards without similar **Opportunity To Learn** standards, “school delivery standards,” thwarts efforts to close achievement gaps. Students must have access to high quality education in order to meet high standards.³

A Better Path

Opportunity To Learn offers a better path, leading to more equality and better education.⁴ The elements of an **Opportunity To Learn** can vary, but there is broad agreement that OTL includes, at least:

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- [High quality pre-K](#)
- Qualified teachers
- Decent facilities, and
- A curriculum and programs that prepare students for their future roles as citizens and workers.⁵

Additional key school-related opportunities include afterschool programs, summer school, and programs for students with disabilities and those learning English. Out-of-school **OTL** includes access to health and dental care, safe and healthy housing, and family or community support for children.⁶ **OTL** also means the absence of barriers that hamper learning, such as overcrowding and concentrated poverty.

Opportunity To Learn Index

An **Opportunity To Learn Index** is a way of measuring and reporting whether schools and children have what's needed to achieve. An **OTL Index** would report on teacher and school leader qualifications, available courses, class sizes, counselor ratios, libraries and computers, and facilities, to name a few of the items critical to learning. It is crucial that states disaggregate this information and align and compare achievement results with the present and missing **OTL** resources.⁷

The more **OTL** features in a school or district, the more capacity it has to help students reach learning standards and get a quality education. Typically, the low-achievement schools and districts lack **OTL** while high-achievement schools and districts are rich in **OTL** resources. The **OTL Index** can help parents, communities, school officials, and states confront missing resources and track progress in closing opportunity gaps.

Federal Opportunity To Learn Fund

The [Center on Education Policy](#) (CEP) recently recommended that the federal government include **Opportunity To Learn** and an **OTL Fund** in its reauthorization of [ESEA](#) (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). CEP's "[Better Federal Policies Leading to Better Schools](#)" urges the federal government to seek "resource equity" by ensuring that all students have the opportunity to learn "by encouraging an equitable distribution of state and local resources for education." The report offers specific recommendations to achieve this goal.

Roughly \$40 billion in "stabilization" aid to the states temporarily saved the jobs of K-12 teachers and other education staff in 2009-10. "Better Federal Policies" recommends retaining this general aid to education and limiting eligibility to the states that adopt stronger requirements for their own funding to be sufficient and fair. CEP suggests requiring states to:

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1) maintain or increase the percentage of total revenues dedicated to K-12 education at or above the 2008 level; 2) adopt policies that will lead to equitable funding *between* school districts, as demonstrated by progress in reducing funding disparities among districts based on local property wealth or income wealth; and 3) adopt policies that lead to equitable funding *within* school districts

In “Better Federal Policies,” CEP explains that

It simply does not make sense to expect all students to do better in school when some school districts have substantially more funding than others, especially when lower-spending districts often have high concentrations of low-income students and other students who need more services to succeed. . . . money does make a difference. If we want all students to do better, then we should level the playing field so that all students have an equitable chance at a good education.

While **Opportunity To Learn** is not just about money, providing real opportunity to all children requires sufficient funding. Funds can be targeted to make sure they provide the programs that work best and are most cost-efficient. The cost of building basic resources into historically under-funded schools would be large, due to long-term neglect and growing enrollment. The price of not educating children is far higher, however, as each student who does not graduate from high school costs society thousands of dollars per year for a lifetime.⁸

Conclusion

Learning standards and progress towards them are important parts of the current educational picture. Measuring the necessary **Opportunity To Learn** brings the picture into clearer focus and makes it more complete. Only when opportunity gaps are closed do the learning goals become attainable, and education justice come into sight.⁹

Prepared by Molly A. Hunter, March 2010

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Resources

Schott Foundation for Public Education's [federal Opportunity To Learn recommendations](#) explain the challenges and propose solutions.

Forum on Educational Accountability's "[Empowering Schools and Improving Learning](#)," recommendations for OTL monitoring and improvements, especially pages 3-4.

"Next Phase of ESEA Reauthorization: Closing the Opportunity Gap," Arnold F. Fege, Director of Public Engagement and Advocacy, Public Education Network.

"Opportunity to Learn, Forum on Educational Accountability, and the Forum's Recommendations for OTL in ESEA Reauthorization," Molly A. Hunter, Director, Education Justice.

"Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be Closed," National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy.

Also, see sources in footnotes.

¹ Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The Flat World and Education* (7-8). New York: Teachers College Press.

² Orfield, G. & Lee, C. (2007). *Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies*. Civil Rights Project.

³ National Council on Education Standards and Testing (1992). *Raising standards for American Education. A report to Congress, the Secretary of Education, the National Education Goals Panel, and the American people* (Education Department Publication No. ED 338721). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Schwartz, W. (1995). Opportunity To Learn Standards: Their Impact on Urban Students. *Eric Digest*. OTL standards were proposed, but political opposition scuttled them.

⁴ Darling-Hammond, *supra* note 1, at 309-10; Jeannie Oakes (1989). What educational indicators? The case for assessing the school context. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11 (2), 181-199.

⁵ See, e.g., Schott Foundation for Public Education (2009). *National Opportunity to Learn Campaign: Federal Recommendations* (8-9).

⁶ Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and Schools* (135-39). Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.

⁷ Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence, *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1). While no state currently has what it calls an "OTL Index," some states measure and report on the school resources listed in this paragraph, albeit not disaggregated or compared to achievement measures.

⁸ Belfield, C. & Levin, H. (2007). *The Price We Pay* (101, 157-58). Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

⁹ Elmore, R. F., & Fuhrman, S. H. (1995). Opportunity-to-learn standards and the state role in education. *Teachers College Record*, 96(3), 433-458.; Guiton, G., & Oakes, J. (1995) Opportunity to learn and conceptions of educational equality. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 17(3), 323-336.