

"Our Future Depends on Doing Better": Q&A with John B. King Jr.



As a champion for educational equity, John B. King Jr. has had a hand in shaping schools from just about every angle. He's been a

classroom teacher, a middle school principal, a charter school cofounder, the first African American and Puerto Rican to be New York State Education Commissioner, and the 10th U.S. Secretary of Education under President Barack Obama. Now, as president and CEO of The Education Trust, King leads the nonprofit's mission to remove systemic barriers and opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students of color and low-income students.

King, who will be a featured speaker at ASCD's upcoming Conference on Educational Leadership (Nov. 7–10 in National Harbor, Md.), faced barriers of his own during his childhood in New York City. After losing both of his parents to illnesses by age 12, he found solace in the classroom. He credits his teachers for providing a safe and nurturing space when life outside of school felt hopeless and for being the reason he made improving education his life's work. ASCD spoke to King by phone about how educators can teach and lead with equity in mind.

The primary focus of your work is educational equity, especially for low-income students and students of color. What do you think are the biggest barriers students face?

As a country, we give the least to the students who need the most. Students from low-income backgrounds and students of color get less access to quality early-childhood education, less access to well-prepared and well-supported teachers, less access to a well-rounded education that extends beyond English and math, less access to advanced coursework, less access to school counselors, and less access to supports so that they can successfully transition to postsecondary opportunities.

The Education Trust's *Funding Gaps 2018* report found that, as a country, we're spending about \$1,000 less per student in our highest-poverty districts compared with our wealthiest districts. The disparities based on race are even larger: We're

spending about \$1,800 less per student in districts that serve the largest populations of students of color compared with those serving the fewest. These challenges are bound up with our nation's history around issues of race and class, but our future depends on doing better.

"Our job is to make every moment of school as fantastic as possible."

What should schools focus on first when addressing those barriers?

Given the research on the impact of quality early-childhood education experiences, if I had only one additional dollar to spend, I would spend it on early childhood. Separately, in K–12, what's most important is focusing on the people: ensuring that we have well-prepared, well-supported, well-compensated teachers and principals and that we are getting the strongest educators to work with students who need the most support.

As a former secretary, what advice would you pass along to current Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos about running the U.S. Department of Education?

The education department has two core functions: civil rights protection and advancing education equity. The current administration is failing in both respects.

The first piece of advice would be to refocus attention on those two core responsibilities. Second would be to listen to parents', teachers', and students' concerns around equity issues. For example, the administration's awful decision to roll back guidance on protecting the civil rights

of transgender students reflects a decision to ignore what students and educators and families are saying about kids' experiences in school. When I was secretary, I visited Orlando, Fla., after the Pulse nightclub shooting. I met with LGBTQ young people and heard how they'd been bullied—not only by peers but also by adults in school. Students were afraid to use the bathroom because they were harassed.

It's outrageous that this administration would ignore that suffering. My hope remains that the leadership of the department will spend time really listening to the voices of students who have been denied equitable opportunities and that will cause them to change direction.

How would you define resilient leadership?

We must be able to simultaneously understand and hold two truths in our minds. One is that our students can face many obstacles to their success—from living in poverty to growing up homeless or hungry to experiencing domestic violence or substance abuse in their families. As educators, we ought to be loud about the need for society to address those things and think about how we connect kids and families with wraparound services.

The second truth is that our job is to make every moment of school as fantastic as possible, to make instruction engaging and compelling and effective, to create environments that tap into students' strengths and give them opportunities to shine (whether that's through the arts or athletics or in the science lab or in creative writing). I see that as a core element of resilient leadership on the part of teachers and principals. ●

John B. King Jr. (@JohnBKing) was interviewed by Kate Stoltzfus, associate writer for ASCD. Responses lightly edited for length and clarity. Read an extended interview at www.ascd.org/educationupdate.

Learn about and register for the Conference on Educational Leadership at www.ascd.org/cel.

2019 ASCD CONFERENCE ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Seeking Board Candidates

The Nominations Committee is seeking qualified candidates to run for two open positions on the ASCD Board of Directors in 2020. The application process opens August 1, and completed applications are due by September 30. Visit www.ascd.org/governance to apply. If you have questions, contact governance@ascd.org.



Summer Read: Educational Leadership

The July issue of *Educational Leadership* is a free, digital-only version for all readers. Check out more than a dozen articles on "High-Powered Teams," with ideas and solutions for effective teamwork in schools, at www.ascd.org/el.

PRINT THIS NEWSLETTER

For printer-friendly and hyperlinked versions of the articles in this issue, go to www.ascd.org/educationupdate.

OUR TEAM

Laura Verlas
Editorial Manager, Print and Digital Content
Kate Stoltzfus
Associate Writer
Stefani Roth
Publisher
Judith Slezacek
Managing Director of Content
Judith Slezacek
Managing Director, Marketing and Integrated Services
Judi Connolly
Senior Art Director
Donald Ely
Associate Art Director
Mary Beth Nielsen
Manager, Editing and Content Development
Katie Freeman
Senior Associate Editor
Heidi Marshall
Intern Production Manager
Tristan Coffelt
St. Production Specialist
Shajuan Martin
E-Publishing Specialist
Trinity Blake
E-Publishing Specialist
ASCD Executive Staff
Ronn Nozoe
Interim Executive Director
Noah Reskin
Chief Financial Officer
Fara Francis
Chief Information Officer
Hisham Khalid
General Counsel

Readers may make up to 100 copies of a single article from *Educational Update*, provided that each copy includes a full citation of the source. If you wish to copy more than that, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at www.copyright.com, then, your request to 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, or call 1-878-750-8400.

For all other uses of ASCD content, including reprints, please contact permissions@ascd.org, or visit www.ascd.org/permissions.

Subscriptions to this publication are included in ASCD membership, but additional copies may be ordered at the following rates (plus shipping and handling):

1 copy \$4.50 each
2–9 copies \$3.00 each
10–49 copies \$2.70 each
50 or more copies \$2.55 each

To order, call the ASCD Service Center, 1-800-433-7273 or 1-703-576-0000.
Please cite Stock #119061.

The views expressed herein are not necessarily official ASCD positions.

Educational Update is the official newsletter of ASCD, 1703 North Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA. 1-800-433-ASCD (2723) or 1-703-576-0600. www.ascd.org

© 2019 ASCD. All Rights Reserved. *Educational Update* is published 12 times a year. ★ ISSN 1091-2622

ASCD
LEARN. TEACH. LEAD.