

“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

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