

**U.S. Department of Education
Office of Communications & Outreach, Press Office
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202**

**Contact: Press Office
(202) 401-1576 or press@ed.gov**

**Excerpts of Prepared Remarks to be Delivered by Education Secretary John B. King Jr. on
April 14, 2016, on the Value of a Well-Rounded Education
at the Las Vegas Academy of the Arts**

[...]

When I was a high school social studies teacher in Boston, I had a student named Ricardo. I guarantee you every teacher has had a student like him – brilliant, fascinating, but disengaged and just barely skating by. In my 11th-grade class, he was passing by the thinnest margin possible. But when we did a unit on the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, he got excited about the topic. He came to care deeply about a paper he was writing about Marcus Garvey because he had his own ideas to share. He must have written six or seven drafts of the paper, but he was not going to stop until it captured his thoughts exactly. He said that paper changed his perspective about academics, and made him wish he had known as a 9th-grader what he now understood about what it took to succeed in school. That's a huge insight, and finding his passion changed his whole approach to being a student.

For other students, it was a meaningful service and research project that put them at the center of their own learning and deepened their relationships with school. My seniors did extended projects tied to actual challenges our city was facing. One group of kids got involved with an organization called the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, supporting their work to stop garbage dumping in their neighborhood, developing an urban agriculture project, and building affordable housing. Those experiences did so much to show them what their knowledge and skills could accomplish in the real world.

The power of a wide variety of offerings and engaging curricula changed my life too.

[...]

For me, for so many students, a wide range of possible subjects in school, powerfully and creatively taught, can be exactly what it takes to make the difference between disengagement and a lifelong passion for learning. But today, that's not happening enough.

I hear frequently and passionately from educators and families who feel that key elements of what makes up a well-rounded education have been neglected in favor of too tight a focus on math and reading.

Sometimes, that's because of constraints on resources, time, and money. Often, teachers and

administrators have told me, it's because math and English Language Arts were focused on so intensely by some districts and schools under *No Child Left Behind* that other subjects were under-attended to or even ignored. The consequence for teachers in some places became daily choices between the well-rounded education their students needed and deserved, and too narrow a definition of accountability.

I've been clear, as have the president and my predecessor Arne Duncan, that in many places in this country, testing became excessive, redundant, and overemphasized, and our Department is serious about helping states and districts to change that. That's why I'm headed to Tulsa, Oklahoma, tomorrow, to see the good work folks there are doing to clear away unneeded assessments and focus on the most useful ones.

Done well and thoughtfully, assessments provide vital information to educators and families, and identify the gaps that must be addressed to ensure equity. But, in some places, an exclusive emphasis on the tested subjects drove a narrowing of what was taught and learned – and, worse, test prep and narrowly defined “time on task” sometimes came to replace a diversity of classes.

I want to be really clear that I do not believe the situation that created such painful choices was intended by the architects of *No Child Left Behind*. There's pretty wide agreement that too many kids in this country are left out of the kind of success we all want for our kids – and for many of them, struggles with fundamental literacy and numeracy create challenges everywhere in their education. Ideals of justice and civil rights underlie the expectation that every kid in this country will have those crucial skills, and that we as adults will hold ourselves accountable for that expectation. I believe in that.

The evidence doesn't show a vast, nationwide abandonment of subjects outside of math and English Language Arts, but there is a lot of reason to believe that students are not getting the instruction in science, social studies, the arts, and world languages that they need. For example, one survey found that in the elementary school years, [students are spending 21 minutes a day or less on social studies](#) and [not much more on science](#). I count myself among those who worry that the balance has shifted too much away from subjects outside of math and English that can be the spark to a child's interest and excitement, are actually essential to success in reading, and are critical to a child's future.

Strong literacy and math skills are surely necessary for success in college, careers, and life – but they just as surely are not sufficient. Being a well-educated person and passionate about learning isn't just about reading and computing well. It's about being skilled and knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects, expert and passionate about a few, and confident in the quest for more knowledge.

The good news here is that, with the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* – the welcome replacement for the *No Child Left Behind* law – the opportunity to widen how we understand educational excellence is suddenly ripe. It's a great chance to right the balance in places where the learning focus has become too narrow – and to do so in ways that expand, not dilute, civil rights.

Because the simple fact is, every kid in this country needs and deserves access to the subjects that go into being a well-educated person. Music and art; world languages; physics, chemistry, and biology; social studies, civics, geography, and government; physical education and health; coding and computer science – these aren't luxuries that are nice to have. They're what it means to be ready for today's world.

[...]

And the research is clear that a well-rounded education matters.

You understand a reading or a lesson better when it touches on knowledge or experiences you've encountered before – which is why students with wider knowledge read and learn more easily. It's the same idea as the [“30-million word gap”](#) -- the difference in the number of words kids from affluent and poor families have encountered by the time they enter preschool, and how differently that sets them up for success. [Decades of research from folks like Daniel Willingham at the University of Virginia illustrate](#) that students with broad knowledge are actually stronger readers.

We see the same principle playing out in the STEM subjects. [Science achievement gaps show up as early as kindergarten](#), and if they aren't addressed, they stick around, at least to the end of eighth grade. Kindergarteners who have been exposed to concepts and vocabulary about the natural world in their early years have an inherent advantage.

And [there's evidence that kids get better at math when they've taken classes that make the connection between STEM and the arts – and that when they've had certain courses in the arts, kids can grow in self-confidence, and in linguistic skills, as well as in creativity](#). And [the benefits of bilingualism for brain development show up as early as seven months old!](#)

The implications for educational justice are profound. Because too often, it's kids from low-income families, and kids of color, who start out on the wrong side of those word gaps. Frequently, they are the ones who may miss out on a wide range of experiences, from museum visits to travel. And too often, they are the ones who lack access to a wide range of challenging courses once they get to school.

The same is true for gender gaps – which, in math, show up in the early grades, and get wider later.

The bottom line is clear: a rich range of course offerings isn't a nicety. It's a vital part of a thorough education and a crucial element of social justice.

[...]

The good news here is that the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* makes the work to provide a well-rounded education to all students easier. Under the new law, states now have the opportunity to broaden their definition of educational excellence, to include providing students strong learning experiences in science, social studies, world languages, and the arts, as well as

AP and International Baccalaureate classes – and even supporting students’ socioemotional development. That’s a huge and welcome change.

And, when students in some schools are falling behind, states now have wider options for the kind of interventions they can put in place – including options like the Turnaround Arts Initiative funded by the Department. I’ve had the opportunity to see struggling schools make real change by infusing the arts into their school models, or launching new high-quality career and technical education programs, or taking a dual language approach.

I take our part of this commitment to change seriously, and we’re putting in place new supports for efforts ranging from social and emotional skill development, to American history programs, to educational technology. We’ve made STEM learning a priority across several of our competitive grant programs, including Investing in Innovation, or i3, which supports great new ideas from educators – with more than 4,000 applications for 157 grants so far.

The president has supported this direction with priorities in his 2017 budget, which would significantly increase the funding available for the arts, STEM, education technology, and safe and supportive school climates – which are such an important part of promoting students’ socioemotional development.

Among the president’s proposals is a huge boost for STEM education: \$4 billion over three years for his Computer Science for All initiative, which focuses particularly on student groups historically underrepresented in STEM fields. And the budget proposes new efforts that would help prepare educators to teach a wider range of offerings, including a new STEM Master Teacher Corps.

I became a teacher and a principal because I wanted to try to do for other kids what my teachers at P.S. 276 and Mark Twain Junior High School in Brooklyn had done for me. I remain focused on that goal as we at the Department seek to advance equity and excellence for the nation’s children.

I also have the opportunity now to see schools through the lens my daughters’ experience, in public schools in Maryland. I feel truly blessed that my daughters attend the kind of schools that should be the norm for every child in America – schools with good resources, schools that pull together kids whose families differ in race and income, and who enjoy an education that’s stronger, not despite that diversity but because of it.

Through their eyes, I see the importance each day of a well-rounded education and the excitement it brings.

My younger daughter’s fourth-grade science class recently explored various ecosystems. They created a terrarium and aquarium, and tracked data to see how they changed over time – their temperature, plant growth, the pH of the water. And thanks to that hands-on study, she came home with a new interest in how the world works and an enduring curiosity about nature.

[...]

The same is true for my older daughter. She's pretty excited about her 7th-grade social studies class, which of course makes me happy. They have been studying the Middle Ages by conducting simulations where they experience events from the perspective of a person who lived in that time. My wife, a former elementary school teacher and developmental psychologist, talks about that kind of perspective-taking as one of the most sophisticated things you can do in a classroom – helping students see the world through someone else's eyes. It not only develops an understanding of social studies, it also helps to develop empathy and an appreciation for diversity.

Their education will shape the people they will become, not just what they will achieve academically. Both of them have studied music, dance, and theater. I don't know if either of them will become a concert pianist or a famous guitarist or a professional ballerina. But I do know that they are developing a kind of aesthetic appreciation that will bring them joy and widen their world for the rest of their lives.

And really, that's what this is about: that inextricable intersection between what our kids learn and who they become. I am who I am because a teacher and a school believed it was worth the time and effort to widen my horizons.

That's what every student in this country deserves. Let's work together to make it possible.

###