

Challenging the Hidden Curriculum of Inequity
Full-Time Students at the Arlington Career Center

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In this paper I will present the segregation of full-time students, overwhelmingly low-income and students of color, into isolated educational programs at the Arlington Career Center (ACC) in Arlington, Virginia, as an example of a hidden curriculum of inequity communicating that the education of students in these programs is not of value. I'll argue this hidden message is made clearer by the stark contrasts between the programs located at ACC and that of H-B Woodlawn, a program serving a much wealthier, whiter student population. I will further argue that this lack of commitment to equity is an unambiguous message of the budget proposal during the last budget cycle to eliminate educational opportunities for more than 250 students currently attending school at Arlington Mill High School.

Lastly, I will briefly discuss the process underway to develop a new alternative high school program at the current Career Center location specializing in applied science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and consider whether a focus on *equity literacy* and the *opportunity gap*, as described in Paul Gorski's *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (2013), could provide a framework for this new program to assure equity and social justice in its implementation.

Full-Time Students at the Arlington Career Center

The Arlington Career Center is located near the Columbia Pike corridor in Arlington, Virginia. Built in the 1970s to house career and technical courses for the school system, the site is currently home to an assortment of career and technical education (CTE), academic, and special needs programs. CTE courses, including programs in animal science, aviation, carpentry, cosmetology, culinary arts, electricity, forensic technology, pharmacy technology, and TV production continue to make up the majority of courses at the site. These courses are primarily attended by students who are bussed to ACC for one-third of their school day from their "home

schools" (Arlington Public Schools, 2013b). Several full-day academic programs and a new high school are also located at the Career Center:

- The HILT Institute for Academic Achievement and Career Education - serving high school English Language Learners (ELLs) (Arlington Public Schools, 2011a).
- The Academic Academy - an alternative high school program for students in grades 10 through 12 (Arlington Public Schools, 2012).
- Teenage Parenting Programs of Arlington Public Schools - providing comprehensive services for pregnant and parenting teenagers (Arlington Public Schools, 2013e).
- Experience Based Career Education program - providing referred special education students in grades 12+ with a combination of academic instruction and job internships (Arlington Public Schools, 2012a).
- Supported Work and Transition program - providing referred special education students with supported work experience, and travel and independent living training (Arlington Public Schools, 2012b).
- Arlington Mill High School (AMHS) - offering students 16 years and older flexibility in scheduling and time frame for earning a high school diploma (Arlington Public Schools, 2013a).

Almost all of the more than sixty students who attend the HILT Institute are latino/a, and all but a few are low-income. The majority of the approximately sixty students at the Academic Academy are students of color, and most are low-income. Ninety-eight percent of the more than 400 students at Arlington Mill High School are minorities, eighty-five percent latino/a, and the overwhelming majority are low-income. County-wide, Arlington is 69% white and over half the households earn more than \$60K (Arlington, VA Demographics, n.d.). This means that a group of low-income, mostly minority students has been disproportionately concentrated at a location,

the Arlington Career Center, remote from the three comprehensive high schools within Arlington.

Many of these full-time students at the Career Center have no access to music or art education, despite solid evidence of the positive effects of these subjects on student performance in almost all other subject areas (Gorski, 2013, pp 32-33). There is a single art class and a single guitar class available to AMHS students, but the guitar class has been cut from the budget next year. Career Center full-time students do not have access to physical education facilities or activities, a situation becoming increasingly common in high-poverty schools, again despite solid evidence that physically fit students do better in school (Gorski, 2013, p. 124). There is currently no clinic or access to a school nurse for full-time students at ACC, despite the need for access to health care for low-income students. Paul Gorski says this is a situation more common in low-income schools than in higher income ones (2013, p. 96).

In stark contrast is another APS alternative program, H-B Woodlawn, which consistently ranks as one of the top schools in the area in terms of number of students taking advanced placement tests and qualifying as National Merit Scholarship semifinalists (H-B Woodlawn Archives - All Around Arlington, n.d.). During the past school year, H-B Woodlawn had a sixty-four percent majority of white students, and only between fifteen and sixteen percent of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch, well below the average for the school system as a whole. The photo of the National Honor Society on the school website at <http://www.apsva.us/domain/1612> clearly suggests that this is a place where well-to-do white folks will feel at home, and reinforces the flip side of the hidden curriculum of inequity from that of the Career Center. The hidden message is that these are students whose education matters, and that it is important to provide students with a rich, multi-disciplinary educational experience. H-B Woodlawn has active fine arts and drama programs with broad student participation (Arlington

Public Schools, n.d.). As a computer science teacher who has worked with many H-B Woodlawn students over the years, I have often been struck by the number of these aspiring computer programmers who were active participants in school plays. The school has a gym and a large grassy area surrounding its building. H-B Woodlawn students were state champions this past year in ultimate frisbee (H-B Woodlawn teams win Ultimate Frisbee state championships, n.d.). A search of the staff directory reveals that H-B Woodlawn has both a school nurse and a nurse's aid (Arlington Public Schools, 2011c). One of the things that defines H-B Woodlawn and makes it special is its practice of participatory democracy. Town meeting is the governing body of the school. Students, staff, parents, and alumni can all vote to determine school policies and practices (Arlington Public Schools, 2011d). There is no such permanent body at the Career Center, not even a school planning council.

It is not a coincidence that the practice of participatory democracy is part of the H-B Woodlawn program and is not available to students at the Career Center. It forms part of the hidden curriculum expressing assumptions about what students can and should be permitted to decide regarding their education. The *hidden curriculum* refers to "lessons which are learned but not openly intended such as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and the social environment" (Hidden curriculum, 2014, June 6). The wide gap in educational opportunities between low-income and higher-income students within Arlington Public Schools who attend school at the Career Center and H-B Woodlawn respectively constitutes a hidden curriculum that teaches the lesson that the education of low-income and higher-income students is not valued equally. It sends a clear yet unstated message as to which student's education is important to the system. Higher-income students are believed to benefit from and deserve fine arts, drama, music, access to health services, physical education, and the experience of participatory democracy. Low-income students, by contrast, are "more likely to

attend resource-poor schools, tracked away from academic programs that lead to college, and placed in vocational programs" (Patton, L. D., McEwen, M., Rendón, L., & Howard-Hamilton, M. F., 2007, p. 44), a description that closely fits the full-time Career Center programs, and sends the exact opposite message regarding what is expected of and deserved by these students.

What makes this contrast between the educational programs and the hidden curriculum of inequity it posits particularly egregious is the fact that we are not talking about two schools in two separate school districts, one poor and one wealthy, with all the broader inequities and injustices implied that could be argued are beyond the control of the local school district. Both ACC students and those at H-B Woodlawn attend school within the very same, well-funded district. The glaring contrasts between educational opportunities provided to the low-income and higher-income students is clear evidence of a hidden curriculum of inequity operating within the school system.

Proposal to Eliminate Educational Opportunity for AMHS Students

If the stark contrast between the educational opportunities of low-income students attending the Arlington Career Center with those of wealthier students from the same system attending H-B Woodlawn did not send the message of the hidden curriculum of inequity loudly enough, the proposal to eliminate educational opportunity altogether for students attending Arlington Mill High School who are 22 years of age and older raises the hidden curriculum of inequity to an inescapable conclusion.

Arlington Mill High School (AMHS) grew out of the high school continuation program which has existed in Arlington since 1929. It provides students 16 years and older flexibility in scheduling and time frame for earning a high school diploma by offering semester-long classes both during the day and in the evening. Students can enroll in the number of classes and times

that fit their work schedule. Students 22 years and older pay a fee of \$50 per class to attend. Classes are taught by experienced, certified public school teachers, and thanks to a partnership between Arlington Mill High School and Northern Virginia Community College, some offer college credit. In December 2012, AMHS became a diploma-granting alternative high school. At the start of the 2013-14 school year it moved from its previous location to the Career Center building (Arlington Public Schools, 2013a), the latest in a series of moves over the the last twenty years.

Arlington Mill High School provides benefits beyond the direct education of the low-income adult students who attend it. Many of the AMHS students have children of their own in our school system, and they can better support their children's learning thanks to AMHS. Despite these benefits, the AMHS adult program has come under recent attack. The alarm bell sounded at the end of January 2014, when the APS Budget Survey appeared online soliciting feedback from the community on which programs to prioritize and which to cut. It included the innocuous sounding option to "Move adult students to Adult Ed," which came with a whopping savings of 1.6 million dollars. In truth, this was a proposal to eliminate the low-cost educational opportunity for the students over 22 years old who attend AMHS. The students who would have been affected are 98% low-income immigrant students for whom English is a second language. They work full-time and are trying to get an education in their off hours, often while running a household and caring for family members. Moving them to Adult Ed meant nothing more than kicking them out of AMHS. The "Adult Ed" program to which they would be "moved" referred to more costly G.E.D. and ELL programs already in existence which are generally not taught by certified teachers and which offer neither high school nor college credit.

It is true that APS faced budget constraints in the last fiscal year, and it is undeniable that some choices had to be made among competing budget priorities. The unmistakable message of

the proposal to "Move adult students to Adult Ed" is that the education of low-income students is at the bottom of the priority list. It is a clear example of the hidden curriculum teaching the lesson about which students matter and which do not.

The day after the budget survey appeared I posted a community blog entry on the ARLnow.com website titled "*Oppose Institutional Racism in the APS Budget Survey*" (Elkner, 2014). Students, faculty, and community members organized against the proposal over the following two months, and it was defeated at a School Board budget work session in April, when three of the five school board members publicly announced their opposition to it. For the next year at least, this precious educational opportunity for low-income adults within Arlington has been preserved.

What the future holds, however, is far from clear. Despite being at the Career Center location for a full year now, there is still no sign outside the building indicating that Arlington Mill High School is housed within it. This could be yet another lesson in the hidden curriculum of inequity, teaching us that we prefer to keep our low-income students out of sight. Worse yet, it could signify to the students and staff at AMHS that they will not be here long, so there is no point getting too comfortable.

Moving Forward

Changes are in store for the Arlington Career Center. Arlington Public Schools is experiencing explosive growth in its student population, which is projected to grow from 23 thousand to over 30 thousand students within the next decade (Fall 2014 Enrollment Projections, 2013, November 4). This growth will require the addition of another high school, and it will require that all current high schools and high school programs enroll more students until a new

school is built. I am deeply concerned about what the future holds for the low-income students who attend the Career Center.

Efforts have been underway for years to develop a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) program called the Governor's Career and Technical Academy Arlington (Arlington Public Schools, 2013d). This past year a group called The Career Center Parent Advisory Committee released a proposal on July 25, 2013 titled *Arlington Technical and Professional High School Program: Providing Relevant, Hands-On, Responsive Education Leading to College and Career Success*, which calls for a new alternative high school program at the Career Center. The committee consisted of parents and community members. It conducted focus groups with members of the Arlington community, local businesses, and higher education, and met with staff leaders from the Career Center “to redesign our approaches to technical education in Arlington, and to prepare students for college and careers of the future” (p. 3).

I wrote a final paper for CTCH 601 titled "Dual Enrollment in a High School Career and Technical Center as a Strategy to Address the Achievement Gap" (Elkner, 2013) in which I argued that the current plans for a new program at the Career Center failed to address the APS strategic goal to eliminate achievement gaps (Arlington Public Schools, 2011b). The hidden curriculum of inequity strongly suggests that if a high-quality, high-demand program is developed at the Career Center location, the low-income students whose education is not a priority would have to be moved out to make way for a group of wealthier, whiter students to come in their place. I believe the attempt to kick out low-income adult students from Arlington Mill High School is motivated in part by the desire to make room at the site for these more highly valued students.

The Achievement Gap or the Opportunity Gap?

The central question regarding the future of the Arlington Career Center location for anyone troubled by the hidden curriculum of inequity and supporting social justice for students within APS is what can be done to oppose inequity and assure that low-income students of color participate in the benefits of any new high-quality, high-demand programs to at least the same degree that they suffer from their lack of access to such programs now.

Paul Gorski's *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (2013) introduces two concepts which could be of help in addressing this central question - *equity literacy* and the *opportunity gap*. In the context of the future educational programs at ACC, the creators of the equity literacy define a set of interlocking abilities that could directly benefit our efforts to develop a future program at ACC committed to social justice:

1. the ability to recognize biases and inequities in school policies;
2. the ability to respond to these biases and inequities as they crop up;
3. the ability to redress these biases and inequities in the longer term;
4. the ability to create and sustain an equitable learning environment for all students

(Gorski, 2013, p. 21).

A key component of a program of equity literacy applied to the context of APS would be a shift in emphasis from the achievement gap, which implicitly blames the victims of inequity by focusing on their failure to perform, to the opportunity gap, which places focus on the failure of our institutions to provide victims of inequity with a socially just environment in which to learn. Such a shift in focus would also be the most effective way to impact the achievement gap, since it will lead to implementation of educational practices that have a direct positive impact on the lives of low-income students. Without a serious commitment to engage in "courageous conversations" on the equity of our current practices, we risk continuing to adopt practices that negatively impact low-income students. As Paul Gorski says on page 108 of *Reaching and*

Teaching Students in Poverty, "Even as we are sold the virtues of data-driven decision-making, a vast majority of common responses to the economic achievement gap, disproportionate dropout rates, and the like reflect more or less the opposite of what research data has demonstrated for generations about what does work when it comes to academic success for low-income families." By keeping the opportunity gap in constant focus as we work to develop new educational programs at the Arlington Career Center, we can best assure that these new programs will be helpful, rather than harmful, to low-income students.

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