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 ninth grader what it takes to succeed in school. That's a huge insight: Finding his passion changed his whole approach to being a student.

For so many students, a wide range of possibilities 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 a well-rounded education have been neglected in favor of too tight a focus on math and reading—and they are right.

Decades of research illustrate that students with broad knowledge are actually stronger readers.

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.

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; worse, test prep and narrowly defined “time on task” sometimes came to replace a diversity of classes.

The evidence doesn’t show a vast, nationwide abandonment of subjects outside of math and English language arts, but there is plenty 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\(^1\) found that in the elementary years, students are spending 21 minutes a day or less on social studies, and another study\(^2\) found 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 essential to success in reading,\(^3\) and are critical to a child’s future. Being a well-educated person means being skilled and knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects, expert and passionate about a few, and confident in the quest for learning more.

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; history, 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.

A well-rounded education can help erase the either-or choice between academic and career-focused education in ways that enhance readiness for college rather than steering away from it. Just ask the kids at Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet in Los Angeles, where 83 percent are enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses—and get to do hands-on work at USC’s Keck School of Medicine.

A well-rounded education starts in the early years, with high-quality preschool that makes time for play, exploration, and discussions. It encompasses skills we don’t traditionally think of as academic, but that can be cultivated through rigorous academic work, such as grit, persistence, and patience.

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 school, and how differently that sets them up for success. Decades of findings from researchers 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 science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). 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.

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.

That’s why we—states, districts, schools, and my own Department—need to act to change the current reality.

States must commit to providing all of their districts with the resources they need to provide a high-quality, well-rounded education to all students regardless of race or zip code. Arts instruction, science labs, and school counselors—just to cite a few examples—are not luxuries or extras that should be dependent on fundraising from parents or foundations; they are essential.

Districts have to support their school leaders in providing teachers with the resources, professional development, and most importantly, time to develop and implement a well-rounded curriculum.

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.

Every day, I also see schools through the experiences of my daughters, who are enrolled in public schools in Maryland. My daughters attend the kind of schools that should be the norm for every child in America—schools with good resources that pull together kids whose families differ in race and income and that provide an education that’s stronger because of that diversity.

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 an aquarium, and tracked data to see how they changed over time—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.

My daughters’ education will shape the people who 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 will become 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 worlds 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.

This paper is adapted from “What School Can Be,” a speech Secretary King gave on April 14, 2016, at the Las Vegas Academy of the Arts in Nevada. To read the full speech, go to www.ed.gov/news/speeches/what-school-can-be.
Endnotes


Photo credit on page 2: Steve Debenport, iStock
Knowledge Matters is a campaign to make building knowledge Job One for American education.

It’s time to restore history, science, geography, art, and music to the education we give to all students, especially those least likely to gain such knowledge outside school. Greater comprehension, critical thinking, curiosity, and equality will be our reward.

Robert Pondiscio
Executive Director
Robert@KnowledgeMattersCampaign.org

Lisa Hansel
Director
Lisa@KnowledgeMattersCampaign.org

© Knowledge Matters 2016

Campaign Steering Committee

Leslye Arsht, Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder of StandardsWork;

Michael Casserly, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools;

Ron Fairchild, Chief Executive Officer of the Smarter Learning Group and Senior Consultant for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading;

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Distinguished Senior Fellow and President Emeritus of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute;

Kati Haycock, President of The Education Trust;

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation;

Joel Klein, Chief Policy and Strategy Officer of Oscar Health Insurance and former Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education;

Robert Pondiscio, Senior Fellow and Vice President for External Affairs of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute;

Ralph Smith, Senior Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Managing Director for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading; and

David Steiner, Executive Director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and former New York State Commissioner of Education.

Campaign Scientific Advisory Board

Marilyn Jager Adams, Visiting Scholar, Brown University;

Donald Compton, Professor of Psychology and Education, and Associate Director, Florida Center for Reading Research, Florida State University;

Anne E. Cunningham, Professor and Head Graduate Adviser, Cognition and Development, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley;

Nell K. Duke, Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture, Combined Program in Education and Psychology, University of Michigan;

Claude Goldenberg, Nomellini & Olivier Professor of Education, Graduate School of Education, Stanford University;

David Klahr, Walter van Dyke Bingham Professor of Cognitive Development and Education Sciences, Department of Psychology, Carnegie Mellon University;

Danielle McNamara, Professor, Department of Psychology, Arizona State University;

Susan Neuman, Professor, Early Childhood and Literacy Development, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University;

Timothy Shanahan, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago; and

Daniel Willingham, Professor of Psychology, University of Virginia.