



Damian Ochoa Obregon: 'I like work being hard' 1:31

Damian Ochoa Obregon and his math teacher at Southern High School in Durham discuss his mistaken exclusion from a more advanced math class.

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5 ways to help bright low-income students to excel

BY JOSEPH NEFF, ANN DOSS HELMS AND DAVID RAYNOR

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DURHAM

For the first three weeks of this semester, ninth-grader Damian Ochoa Obregon sat in a math class he had passed last year.

He didn't understand why – he's a gifted student who earned a C in Math 1, a high-school level course, at Durham County's Neal Middle School. But he figured Southern High School in Durham must have had some reason for putting him in the same class again.

It turns out his counselor had simply scheduled Damian for the math class most students take during their freshman year at this high-poverty school. It was only when his mother, who struggles with English, met with teachers to review his progress that the mistake was revealed. Damian was moved to Math 2, but he'd already missed an opportunity.

“He could have handled a more rigorous course, an honors class, but we caught him too late,” said Raymond Robinson, his Math 2 teacher.

It would be easy to blame Damian's counselor, but that counselor is responsible for 415 freshmen, well above the national recommendation of no more than 250.

Huge caseloads for counselors are one of the reasons high-achieving students from low-income households get overlooked in North Carolina's schools. An investigation by The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer reveals that thousands of low-income children who score at the highest level in end-of-grade tests aren't getting picked for advanced classes – and that they are excluded at a far higher rate than their more affluent classmates who

earn the same scores.

The trend is consistent but defies simple explanation. Experts, educators and parents cite a range of causes: Educators can unwittingly stereotype low-income and minority students as low achievers. School assignments can leave high achievers with few academic peers or advanced classes. Testing and screening consistently favor middle-class, white and Asian students. Overworked faculty must sometimes fill gaps for families that lack ability to advocate for their children. And a range of costly private help is available to affluent families whose children compete for recognition and opportunities.

Opening doors to opportunity will likely require a mix of public spending, private investment and policy change. Here are five possibilities:

* * *

#1 Hire more school counselors

Counselors play a critical role for students, mapping their route through school. This guidance is especially important for students who come from homes where English is not spoken or those whose parents may have only high school diplomas.

Teens, regardless of their family background, can't always be relied on to push for classes that may bring harder work and more risk. Damian Ochoa, for instance, describes himself as lazy but says his favorite teachers have been those who make him work hard.

"If I do too good, they'll put me in hard classes with more homework," he said. "But I think I can do more."

Tracking high achievers in middle and high school requires a juggling act. Schedules are set in spring, before students have taken year-end exams. Ideally, educators say, someone checks again over the summer to see if a top score in the previous grade merits a more advanced course in August.

But the caseload at Southern Durham High isn't a fluke. North Carolina averages almost 400 students per counselor, and the load is much higher at many schools.

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, for instance, elementary schools don't get a second counselor until enrollment tops 725 students. CMS has 38 elementary schools, many with very high poverty levels, that have 500 to 724 students, which means each counselor serves more than 500 students.

North Carolina pays for counselors based on a district's enrollment. When the American School Counselor Association tracked state ratios in 2013-14, North Carolina's level of 391 students per counselor was below the national average of 491 and comparable to the neighboring states of South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee. Only three states fell below the recommended 250, and 11 averaged more than 500 students per counselor.

CMS and Wake County schools have both turned to county commissioners to reduce caseloads further.

Wake is seeking nearly \$10 million this year to start a three-year plan to bring the number of counselors and social workers up to the recommended levels.

CMS is seeking \$4.5 million in 2017-18 to add 42 elementary school counselors, along with 12 social workers and six psychologists. That would allow the district to add a second elementary counselor when enrollment hits 500.

* * *

#2 Fill gifted classes with high achievers

Many school districts have strict cutoffs for entrance into gifted classes, where veteran teachers challenge high-performing students with advanced material. Typically, this requires top-level scores on aptitude and achievement tests and sometimes includes teacher recommendations.

In some schools, there may be a small number of students who meet those requirements. Why not fill empty seats in the classes with high-achieving students who fell just short of the gifted cutoff?

A study of gifted programs in Florida found this delivered big benefits.

Laura Giuliano and David Card studied the Broward County school system to determine who was placed in gifted classes and how. Their most powerful finding was a coattail effect.

Gifted students were selected through IQ tests. The school system required a full classroom even if there was only one child labeled gifted in the grade. Teachers used end-of-grade scores to fill the remaining slots. Those high-achieving students who filled the empty seats benefited greatly from learning among smart students from a highly qualified teacher. Poor and minority students posted the biggest gains in math and reading.

"Their performance went way, way up," said Giuliano, an economist at the University of Miami. "If there were 20 students in the class, we found huge effects for the kids ranked 15 to 20."

This could be most useful in high-poverty schools with few students at the gifted threshold and many who fall just short, said Linda Robinson, a gifted teacher in Wake County and past president of the N.C. Association for the Gifted and Talented.

"There are students who need something above the standard instruction in our school," Robinson said. "They need to be pushed by others."

* * *

#3 Hire more teachers of color

When James Ford was a history teacher at Charlotte's Garinger High, he started by telling his students the game was rigged against them. While some of them were brilliant, almost all were black, brown and poor.

Their families' poverty was shaped by a history of systemic racism, he told them. And their skin color meant even the best-intentioned educators and employers might overlook their potential.

Now Ford is program director for the Raleigh-based Public School Forum of North Carolina, which has identified unconscious bias and lack of advanced opportunities for minority and low-income students as some of the biggest challenges facing public education. The forum is pushing for better recruitment of teachers of color, more culturally sensitive lessons and efforts to counteract biases that result in academic and disciplinary disparities.

This year 80 percent of North Carolina's public school teachers are white, compared with only 49 percent of students. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, where white enrollment is only 29 percent, 66 percent of teachers are white. Wake County's teaching force is 82 percent white, compared with a student body that is 48 percent white.

The N&O/Observer investigation focused on low-income students, rather than race. But some of the same trends show up for black and Hispanic students – and African American parents say their children face stereotypes even if they're from middle-class homes.

In Charlotte, a group of leaders that spent the last two years studying opportunity and upward mobility has tapped Ford to lead the next step, which includes confronting the role of race in education.

Shelagh Gallagher, a Charlotte-based expert in gifted education, says recruiting more teachers of color to teach the brightest students would open doors to students who are currently overlooked or not being challenged.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has sent all top administrators and some of its teachers through cultural competency training, designed to help them understand the hidden race and class biases that can hinder all educators from seeing and developing the best in their students. The CMS Foundation is seeking grants and donations to pay for all teachers to complete that training.

* * *

#4 Pay for extra opportunities when parents can't

For middle-class and wealthy students, learning doesn't stop when school is out. For kids whose parents can't afford summer camps and after-school programs, philanthropists, businesses and nonprofit groups often step in.

For instance, the Charlotte-based nonprofit Digi-Bridge uses corporate donations to provide Saturday science, math and technology sessions at no cost to students in two high-poverty CMS schools and one community center. Those sessions, which cost \$25 for paying students, provide extra enrichment for high-scoring students at schools such as Ashley Park, which has to focus most of its efforts on helping low-scoring students catch up.

Principal Meaghan Loftus says this year's STEAM Saturday enrichment for eighth-graders, paid for with a \$50,000 grant from the OrthoCarolina Foundation, provided "a next critical step in our work."

In Raleigh, the nonprofit Daniel Center provides summer and after-school math, science and technology enrichment for low-income students.

High-priced summer programs often offer financial aid. Duke University's Talent Identification Program, for instance, offers income-based aid for three-week camps that cost more than \$4,000. But financial aid alone isn't sufficient, said Matthew Makel, TIP's research director. The program has been evaluating the effectiveness of supporting students by email, online mentoring or face-to-face contact.

"Providing opportunities is not enough," Makel said. "We need to establish a relationship and trust with the families so they can make the most opportunity out of this."

* * *

#5 Make better use of student data

For 25 years, Janet Johnson has dissected educational data in North Carolina. An analyst at Edstar Analytics, a Durham consulting firm, she has been hired by school districts, the state and private foundations to analyze and interpret education data.

She's not getting close to working herself out of a job.

That's because, for the most part, educators can't access data to make their own decisions: "The data is not available in a way to make it easy for people to use," Johnson said.

Data is collected at the local level and flows up, from the school to the district headquarters, from there to state offices in Raleigh. For the most part, the data does not flow back down to teachers and administrators at the local level, Johnson said.

There are exceptions, such as the state's annual report cards, Johnson said, but those provide only basic statistics. The state's PowerSchool program allows parents, teachers and principals to track an individual student's progress.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Superintendent Ann Clark says the key is individual tracking. In high schools, for instance, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools now has counselors reviewing each student's transcript every year to make sure the student is getting appropriate classes to meet his or her goals, whether that's earning a diploma or building up advanced credits to be competitive for a top university.

But even in a district like Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which has long prided itself on being data-driven, there are gaps. Brian Schultz, the district's chief academic officer, said he was surprised to see the N&O/Charlotte Observer data showing that the district had placed just over 500 students who had scored a 4 or 5 in eighth grade math into a lower-level class in ninth grade in 2014. He had believed such placements were rare.

Schultz and Frank Barnes, the data chief for CMS, said a breakdown can occur because ninth-grade schedules are made before students take their end-of-grade exams. Foundation classes, which prepare students to take Math 1, don't count for a math credit, but they may be appropriate for grade-level students who need extra time and teaching to ensure they'll pass the crucial Math 1, Schultz said. But CMS asked all high school principals to review the results of eighth-grade math exams to make sure their freshman math assignments are appropriate.

Johnson, the Edstar analyst, said the most useful data tool available to teachers is the assessment system EVAAS, a computer program owned by SAS, the Cary-based software and analytic giant. For 10 years, the state has hired SAS to provide EVAAS to every teacher and principal.

Principals and administrators can use EVAAS to measure the effect of a new program or intervention on groups of students, she said.

Teachers can use EVAAS to help decide when a student is ready to take a Math 1, the first high school math class, and whether a student needs extra support to succeed. Johnson believes EVAAS is underused: she said she has conducted several training sessions in the past two years where she found administrators and teachers who had never logged into the program.

There is a hunger for more data-based analysis.

When The N&O and the Observer showed the results of their data analysis to teachers, principals, elected officials and administrators around the state, a common question popped up: Where did you get this data and who did the analysis?

The Department of Public Instruction gave the data to The N&O, where database editor David Raynor performed the analysis.

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So happy this is finally getting some attention. You might want to investigate the level of healthcare those children on Medicaid get as well.

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